

Existential Identity Crisis and Feelings of Meaninglessness among Repeat University Entrance Examination Candidates: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Consequences of Self-Erosion

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to phenomenologically explain the lived experiences of repeat university entrance examination candidates, focusing on the wish for liberation, fragile academic self-concept, study-related work–family conflict, and existential identity crisis.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study employed an interpretive phenomenological approach. Twenty-one repeat candidates were selected through purposive sampling with maximum variation, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews lasting 40–60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed, and analyzed in ATLAS.ti version 8 through open, axial, theory-guided recoding, and selective coding. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, peer review, and external auditing.

Findings: The analysis identified 13 interrelated theoretical categories organized around the central phenomenon of “structural reproduction of failure and self-erosion.” Four themes captured the deepest layers of participants’ experiences. The wish for liberation functioned as a maladaptive defensive mechanism that temporarily reduced distress while reinforcing avoidance. Fragile academic self-concept reflected extreme dependence of self-worth on examination performance and social comparison. Study-related work–family conflict emerged through simultaneous financial dependence, family expectations, continuous monitoring, restricted autonomy, guilt, and shame. Existential identity crisis represented the most profound outcome, characterized by loss of meaning, uncertainty about personal identity, narrowing of identity to repeated failure, emotional indifference, and inability to imagine a purposeful future.

Conclusion: Repeated failure in the university entrance examination is not merely an educational or motivational problem but a multidimensional process involving psychological exhaustion, erosion of self-worth, relational strain, meaninglessness, and identity disruption. Effective responses should therefore integrate individual,

family-based, educational, and structural interventions, with attention to meaning-centered and identity-focused approaches.

Keywords: *Existential identity crisis; Meaninglessness; Repeat university entrance examination candidates; Fragile academic self-concept; Wish for liberation; Self-erosion*

1. Introduction

The university entrance examination represents one of the most consequential educational transitions in the lives of young people in societies where admission to higher education is highly competitive and concentrated in a single national assessment. In Iran, the National University Entrance Examination, commonly known as the Konkour, extends far beyond its formal function of selecting students for universities. It has become a socially embedded institution through which educational opportunity, future employment, family prestige, social mobility, and personal competence are evaluated. The examination therefore operates simultaneously as an academic assessment, a family project, a social comparison mechanism, and a symbolic threshold between adolescence and adulthood. Success may be interpreted as evidence of intelligence, discipline, and future potential, whereas failure may be experienced as personal inadequacy, delayed development, or loss of social status. Studies examining the Iranian entrance examination have shown that its effects are not confined to students' academic performance but extend to family interactions, emotional well-being, motivation, decision-making, and perceptions of the future (Fathabadi et al., 2017; Fathabadi & Sadeqi, 2017). The broader social conditions surrounding the examination also influence candidates' chances of success, as access to educational resources, socioeconomic support, family capital, school quality, and preparatory opportunities are distributed unequally (Tavakol & Amini, 2020). Consequently, the examination should not be understood merely as a neutral measurement of academic knowledge; rather, it is situated within a complex system of social expectations and structural inequalities that may profoundly shape candidates' psychological experiences.

The psychological burden of the university entrance examination begins long before the test itself. Candidates commonly spend months or years following intensive study schedules, attending preparatory courses, completing repeated practice examinations, restricting social activities, and reorganizing everyday life around a single anticipated outcome. This prolonged preparation can transform ordinary academic stress into a chronic condition characterized by persistent worry, emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbance,

reduced concentration, and heightened sensitivity to failure. Research has demonstrated a meaningful relationship between stress and academic performance among university entrance examination candidates, suggesting that excessive pressure may interfere with the very cognitive and motivational capacities required for success (Mohammadi & Hosseini, 2018). Examination pressure may also undermine mental health by increasing anxiety, emotional dysregulation, psychological fatigue, and vulnerability to more severe forms of distress (Nouri et al., 2020). Similar findings have been reported among students preparing for university entrance examinations in other cultural settings, where elevated anxiety has been associated with demographic, academic, and contextual factors (Yel Kenci, 2013). From this perspective, the entrance examination is not a momentary stressor but a prolonged evaluative environment in which uncertainty, anticipated judgment, and fear of undesirable outcomes are repeatedly activated.

Although examination-related stress affects many candidates, repeat candidates constitute a particularly vulnerable group. These individuals remain within the preparation cycle after one or more unsuccessful attempts and must confront not only the demands of another examination but also the psychological meaning of previous failures. For first-time candidates, the future may still be characterized by openness, possibility, and optimism. For repeat candidates, however, each new preparation period is shaped by memories of disappointment, awareness of elapsed time, comparison with peers who have progressed to university or employment, and uncertainty about whether continued effort will produce a different result. The repeated candidate may therefore experience the examination not as a new opportunity but as a continuation of an unresolved crisis. International qualitative evidence has shown that senior high school students view university entrance examinations as highly influential events that affect their emotions, educational choices, daily routines, and expectations regarding the future (Cirak, 2016). When this influential event is repeated across several years, its psychological effects may accumulate. Repeated participation may progressively narrow the individual's life around examination preparation, postpone occupational and relational development, and create a subjective sense of

being suspended between the educational system and adult social roles.

The motivation to continue preparing for the examination is also affected by the interaction between personal goals and the evaluative structure of the testing system. High-stakes examinations may initially stimulate effort by providing a clear objective, but sustained exposure to competitive evaluation can gradually shift motivation from curiosity, mastery, and self-development toward fear of failure, social approval, and avoidance of shame. Research on gifted Iranian high school students has indicated that the entrance examination may significantly influence academic motivation and alter students' engagement with learning (Kazemi & Sayyadi, 2014). In such circumstances, studying may cease to be experienced as a meaningful educational activity and become an obligation whose value is determined exclusively by rank and admission. The candidate's attention may become concentrated on performance indicators, practice-test percentages, and comparisons with others, while broader interests and personal capacities receive progressively less attention. When motivation is externally regulated in this manner, unsuccessful results can threaten not only the candidate's educational plans but also the perceived legitimacy of continued effort. The individual may begin to question whether studying is worthwhile, whether success remains attainable, and whether years of sacrifice have produced any meaningful development.

Cognitive and metacognitive capacities are important in shaping how candidates respond to examination demands. Effective learning strategies can strengthen self-directed learning, reduce maladaptive academic behaviors, and help students maintain greater control over their preparation. Evidence indicates that teaching cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies can reduce academic self-handicapping and improve self-directed learning among pre-university examination students (Soleimani et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the difficulties experienced by repeat candidates cannot be reduced to ineffective study methods alone. A candidate may possess adequate learning strategies while simultaneously struggling with shame, depleted hope, family conflict, identity uncertainty, or a sense that life has been indefinitely postponed. When repeated failure is interpreted as evidence of personal deficiency, even technically effective strategies may lose their motivational force. The problem then shifts from how the candidate studies to how the candidate understands the self, failure, and the future. This distinction is particularly important because educational interventions frequently emphasize

time management, test-taking techniques, and content mastery without sufficiently addressing the deeper emotional and identity-related consequences of prolonged failure.

Perfectionism may intensify this vulnerability by connecting self-worth to unrealistically high standards and by transforming ordinary academic setbacks into global judgments of inadequacy. Candidates with perfectionistic tendencies may believe that only admission to a prestigious university or highly valued field of study can validate their effort and personal value. Under such conditions, partial achievement, improvement, or alternative educational pathways may be dismissed as unacceptable. Research involving female university entrance examination candidates with test anxiety has shown that perfectionism is a clinically relevant construct and that schema-focused intervention may be effective in reducing maladaptive perfectionistic patterns (Abazari, 2023). This finding is particularly relevant to repeat candidates because repeated exposure to unmet standards may gradually destabilize academic self-concept. The individual may alternate between brief periods of confidence after favorable practice-test results and severe self-criticism after poor performance. Rather than viewing performance as variable and responsive to specific conditions, candidates may define themselves categorically as either successful or unsuccessful, intelligent or incapable, worthy or worthless. Such conditional self-evaluation creates a fragile academic self-concept that is highly dependent on external feedback and vulnerable to collapse.

The emotional consequences of repeated failure may extend from anxiety and self-criticism to hopelessness and depression. Hopelessness emerges when individuals no longer perceive realistic pathways toward desired goals or doubt their ability to influence future outcomes. Among university entrance examination candidates, factors associated with hopelessness and depression include prolonged pressure, repeated disappointment, perceived inadequacy, uncertainty, and reduced confidence in the possibility of success (Fathi et al., 2019). For repeat candidates, hopelessness may have a paradoxical structure. They may continue studying and registering for the examination while simultaneously believing that success is increasingly unlikely. Outward persistence may therefore coexist with internal resignation. This condition can produce mechanical studying, emotional detachment, avoidance, or recurrent fantasies about escaping from the examination altogether. The candidate may imagine migration, beginning

life again in an unfamiliar environment, abandoning all expectations, or simply reaching the end of the examination period regardless of the result. Although such fantasies may temporarily reduce distress, they may also function as avoidant coping when they replace realistic problem-solving or active exploration of alternative futures.

Family relationships constitute another central dimension of the entrance examination experience. In many families, preparation is treated as a collective project involving substantial financial expenditure, emotional investment, practical support, and expectations regarding future success. Family encouragement can strengthen resilience and provide essential resources, but excessive involvement may also increase pressure and reduce candidates' autonomy. Research has emphasized the significant role of the family in shaping students' entrance examination experiences and subsequent academic futures (Badfar et al., 2023). Parents may pay for preparatory classes, educational counseling, books, transportation, and repeated examination registration, while also monitoring study schedules and test performance. Candidates can consequently feel indebted to their families and responsible for compensating for these sacrifices through success. Repeated failure may intensify guilt because the candidate perceives that family resources have been consumed without producing the expected outcome. Statements expressing parental sacrifice or linking family happiness to admission may be intended as encouragement but experienced as emotional burden.

The impact of the examination on families is reciprocal. Candidates are affected by parental expectations, while parents themselves may experience anxiety, rumination, uncertainty, and difficulty adapting to the prolonged preparation process. Research comparing interventions for mothers of university entrance examination candidates has demonstrated that having a child preparing for the examination can affect parenting adaptability, parenting orientation, and parental rumination (Mirzaei et al., 2025). This finding indicates that examination pressure circulates within the family system rather than remaining confined to the candidate. Parental anxiety may increase monitoring and control, which may then heighten the candidate's stress, concealment, defensiveness, or sense of inadequacy. The candidate may feel compelled to display constant effort, avoid rest, and suppress doubts about continuing the examination path. In this context, boundaries between educational preparation and family life become increasingly blurred. Meals, conversations, leisure activities, financial decisions, and interpersonal relationships may all become

organized around examination performance. The family simultaneously functions as a source of support, an audience for performance, and a reminder of the perceived consequences of failure.

This pattern can be conceptualized as a form of study-related work-family conflict. Although work-family conflict traditionally refers to incompatible demands between occupational and family roles, repeat candidates experience a comparable tension between prolonged educational labor, family expectations, financial dependence, and emerging adult responsibilities. Many are at an age when peers are entering university, forming relationships, gaining employment, or achieving greater independence. Repeat candidates may instead remain economically dependent and socially defined as students, even when they no longer occupy a conventional school role. The examination thus delays not only university admission but also the transition to adulthood. Family expectations may require candidates to devote nearly all available time to studying, while economic realities may create pressure to work or contribute financially. Attempts to pursue employment can be interpreted as reduced commitment to the examination, whereas continued full-time preparation prolongs dependence. These incompatible demands can produce chronic guilt, shame, resentment, and reduced autonomy. Previous examinations of the entrance test's influence on Iranian students and families support the view that the consequences of the Konkour extend across psychological, relational, and cultural domains (Fathabadi et al., 2017; Fathabadi & Sadeqi, 2017).

The social meaning of failure further amplifies these pressures. Candidates do not evaluate their progress in isolation; they compare themselves with classmates, relatives, siblings, and peers whose lives appear to advance. Social comparison becomes particularly painful when peers enter university, begin employment, or gain independence while the repeat candidate remains in preparation. The individual may withdraw from social gatherings to avoid questions about examination results, educational status, or future plans. This withdrawal can reduce access to emotional support and reinforce the belief that one's life has stopped. Social determinants of examination success, including differences in economic resources, educational opportunities, family support, and access to preparatory services, complicate these comparisons because candidates may interpret structurally unequal outcomes as purely personal failures (Tavakol & Amini, 2020). The examination system therefore individualizes success and failure while

obscuring the unequal contexts in which candidates compete. A candidate who repeatedly fails may conclude that the outcome reflects lack of intelligence or effort, even when broader educational and socioeconomic factors have substantially shaped the result.

Over time, these interacting pressures may produce a process of self-erosion. Self-erosion refers to the gradual weakening of a coherent, multidimensional, and future-oriented sense of self under conditions of repeated failure and chronic evaluation. At the beginning of the preparation process, candidates may understand themselves through multiple roles and qualities, including friendships, talents, interests, family relationships, moral values, and occupational aspirations. As the examination becomes increasingly dominant, these dimensions may recede. Identity is progressively reduced to a single question: whether the candidate will be admitted. Every practice-test score becomes a verdict on ability, every family comment becomes an evaluation of effort, and every peer's success becomes evidence of personal delay. Mental health challenges associated with entrance examination pressure suggest that sustained exposure to such conditions can affect emotional stability, confidence, and adaptive functioning (Nouri et al., 2020). Stress-related impairment may further reduce academic performance, thereby creating a circular process in which pressure contributes to poor functioning, poor outcomes intensify self-criticism, and self-criticism generates additional pressure (Mohammadi & Hosseini, 2018).

At its deepest level, self-erosion may develop into existential meaninglessness and identity crisis. In this condition, the candidate's concern shifts from whether success is possible to whether the goal itself remains meaningful. Questions such as "Why should I continue?", "Who have I become?", and "What happens even if I succeed?" reflect a disruption in the relationship between effort, identity, and future purpose. The examination may have organized life for so long that the individual can no longer imagine a coherent identity outside it. At the same time, repeated disappointment may undermine belief in the examination as a pathway to a desirable future. The candidate is therefore caught between an inability to abandon the goal and an inability to experience it as meaningful. Anxiety documented among examination candidates (Yel Kenci, 2013), the motivational consequences of high-stakes testing (Kazemi & Sayyadi, 2014), the risk of hopelessness and depression (Fathi et al., 2019), perfectionistic vulnerability (Abazari, 2023), and

family-related pressure (Badfar et al., 2023; Mirzaei et al., 2025) collectively suggest that repeated examination preparation may generate a multidimensional crisis that exceeds the conventional boundaries of educational psychology.

Despite the available literature, most studies have focused on measurable outcomes such as anxiety, stress, motivation, academic performance, learning strategies, perfectionism, hopelessness, or family influence. These studies have made important contributions by identifying the psychological and educational correlates of examination pressure, yet they provide limited insight into how repeat candidates interpret prolonged failure within the broader narrative of their lives. Quantitative measures can indicate that a candidate is anxious, depressed, perfectionistic, or academically self-handicapping, but they cannot fully explain how repeated failure alters the candidate's sense of personal continuity, moral indebtedness to the family, relationship with the future, or perception of life's meaning. Likewise, interventions that strengthen learning strategies or reduce anxiety may be beneficial (Soleimani et al., 2021), but they may be insufficient when the central problem has shifted from academic regulation to identity fragmentation and existential uncertainty. A phenomenological approach is therefore necessary to explore how candidates experience these processes from within and how apparently separate difficulties become integrated into a self-reinforcing cycle of failure and self-erosion.

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to provide an interpretive phenomenological explanation of the lived experiences of repeat university entrance examination candidates, with particular emphasis on the wish for liberation as a maladaptive defensive mechanism, fragile academic self-concept, study-related work-family conflict, and feelings of meaninglessness and existential identity crisis.

2. Methods and Materials

This qualitative study was conducted using an interpretive phenomenological design to explore and interpret the lived experiences of repeat candidates for the Iranian national university entrance examination. Interpretive phenomenology was selected because the psychological consequences of repeated examination failure, including existential meaninglessness, identity disruption, diminished academic self-concept, and the wish to escape from persistent pressure, are complex experiences

that cannot be adequately understood through quantitative measurement alone. This approach enabled the researchers to move beyond the explicit descriptions provided by the participants and examine the deeper personal, relational, and existential meanings embedded in their accounts. The study focused specifically on candidates who had experienced repeated participation in the university entrance examination and continued to prepare actively for another attempt. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, using a maximum-variation strategy to capture a broad range of experiences with respect to age, gender, number of examination attempts, duration of preparation, family circumstances, and perceived educational and psychological challenges. The inclusion criteria were willingness to participate voluntarily in the study, active preparation for the university entrance examination at the time of data collection, and direct experience of psychological or educational difficulties associated with repeated examination participation. Individuals who were unwilling to discuss their experiences in depth or who withdrew their consent during the research process were excluded. Data collection continued until theoretical and interpretive saturation was achieved, meaning that subsequent interviews no longer produced substantially new concepts, dimensions, or relationships relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Saturation was reached after interviews with 21 participants. Before each interview, the purpose and procedures of the study were explained to the participants, and written informed consent was obtained. Participants were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary, that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any stage, and that withdrawal would have no adverse consequences. Confidentiality was maintained by removing identifying information from the transcripts and replacing participants' names with anonymous codes. All audio recordings, transcripts, and analytical documents were securely stored and made available only to the research team.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which constituted the primary data collection instrument in this study. The semi-structured format allowed the researchers to maintain consistency across interviews while providing sufficient flexibility to explore the individual meanings, emotional reactions, and contextual circumstances expressed by each participant. The interview guide was developed in accordance with the study objectives and the theoretical concepts underlying academic identity, existential meaning, academic self-concept, coping mechanisms, and family-related pressures. The interview

began with general questions intended to establish rapport and obtain background information, including the participant's age, current circumstances, number of years spent preparing for the examination, and previous examination experiences. Participants were then asked open-ended questions such as how they would describe the university entrance examination preparation period, what emotions or thoughts arose when they reflected on repeated attempts, what psychological challenges they had experienced, how their family members and significant others had influenced their experience, and what they imagined or desired for their lives after the examination period ended. Additional probing questions were used whenever necessary to clarify the participants' statements, encourage elaboration, identify the meanings attributed to particular events, and explore contradictions or emotionally significant experiences. Examples of probes included requests to describe a specific situation, explain how an experience affected their sense of self, clarify what they meant by freedom or failure, and discuss how their perceptions had changed across successive examination attempts. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a private and psychologically safe setting. With the participants' written permission, all interviews were digitally audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation of their narratives. The recordings were transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after each interview, and the transcripts were reviewed while listening to the recordings to correct errors and preserve the intended meaning of the participants' statements. Field notes were also recorded during and immediately after the interviews to document nonverbal expressions, emotional reactions, contextual observations, interruptions, and the researcher's initial interpretive reflections. Data collection and preliminary analysis occurred concurrently, allowing emerging concepts to inform subsequent interviews and enabling the researchers to explore newly identified dimensions in greater depth. The interview process continued until the research team determined that the data were sufficiently rich and that no conceptually distinct themes were emerging from the later interviews.

The interview data were organized and analyzed using ATLAS.ti version 8. Analysis was conducted through a systematic multistage coding process that combined inductive interpretation of the participants' lived experiences with theory-informed conceptual integration. In the initial open-coding stage, each transcript was read several times to develop familiarity with the data and obtain

a holistic understanding of each participant's experience. The texts were then examined line by line, and meaningful statements, experiences, emotional reactions, perceived pressures, coping responses, and identity-related interpretations were assigned preliminary conceptual codes. This stage produced 352 initial codes, of which 182 were primarily related to educational experiences and 170 were associated with psychological experiences. During the initial axial-coding stage, codes with conceptual or semantic similarities were compared, merged, differentiated, and organized into broader categories. Through constant comparison within and across interviews, the initial codes were classified into 22 categories, including 11 categories representing educational dimensions and 11 categories reflecting psychological dimensions. In the next stage, the data were recoded through an integrative and theoretically informed process. The emerging categories were examined in relation to established conceptual perspectives on identity development, existential meaninglessness, contingent self-worth, academic self-concept, hope, maladaptive daydreaming, family-role conflict, stress, and coping. This process did not involve imposing predetermined categories on the data; rather, theoretical concepts were used as interpretive resources to deepen the understanding of patterns that had already emerged from the participants' narratives. The codes and initial categories were subsequently consolidated into 13 core meaning units and reorganized as 13 explanatory axial categories. During selective coding, the researchers examined the causal, contextual, interactive, and consequential relationships among these categories and identified the overarching central category of "structural reproduction of failure and self-erosion." This central phenomenon represented a self-reinforcing cycle in which repeated failure, chronic institutional pressure, psychological and physical exhaustion, diminished social resources, maladaptive coping, fragile academic self-concept, family-related conflict, and existential identity disruption progressively intensified one another. Particular analytical attention was devoted to four conceptually significant categories: the wish for liberation as a maladaptive defensive mechanism, fragile academic self-concept, study-related work-family conflict, and feelings of meaninglessness and existential identity crisis. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted by presenting selected interpretations or summaries to participants and asking whether they accurately reflected their experiences. Peer review was used

to examine the appropriateness of the coding decisions, category boundaries, and thematic interpretations. An external audit was also undertaken through systematic documentation of the research process, including interview procedures, coding revisions, category development, analytical memos, and decisions concerning the final conceptual model. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout data collection and analysis to increase awareness of the researchers' assumptions and reduce the possibility that prior expectations would unduly shape the findings. These procedures contributed to the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and interpretive consistency of the qualitative analysis.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 21 repeat candidates who were actively preparing for the Iranian national university entrance examination. Participants were selected through purposive maximum-variation sampling to ensure diversity in gender, age, duration of examination preparation, number of previous attempts, family circumstances, economic pressures, and perceived psychological and educational difficulties. The documented participant profiles included both women and men, and the interview cases represented in the dataset ranged from 19 to 24 years of age and from one to four years of preparation for the examination. Although the participants differed in their personal and family backgrounds, they shared the experience of prolonged involvement in the examination preparation process and exposure to repeated academic evaluation. For some participants, the examination had become the central organizing principle of daily life, family relationships, future planning, and self-evaluation. Several participants described spending most of their time studying, attending preparatory courses, taking practice examinations, or attempting to demonstrate to family members that they were making sufficient effort. Others reported difficulty maintaining social relationships, engaging in leisure activities, obtaining employment, or pursuing alternative educational and occupational pathways because their lives remained suspended around the possibility of future examination success. Data collection continued until interpretive saturation was reached, meaning that the later interviews repeated previously identified experiences and did not contribute substantially new conceptual dimensions.

The analysis of the 21 interviews generated 352 initial conceptual codes. Of these, 182 codes were primarily related

to educational experiences, while 170 codes reflected psychological, emotional, relational, and existential experiences. During initial axial coding, the codes were organized into 22 preliminary categories, including 11 educational categories and 11 psychological categories. Through theory-informed recoding and interpretive integration, these categories were consolidated into 13 core meaning units and reorganized as 13 explanatory categories. Selective coding demonstrated that the categories were not independent experiences but interconnected components of

a circular and self-reinforcing process. The central phenomenon that integrated the findings was identified as the “structural reproduction of failure and self-erosion.” Within this overarching process, four categories represented the most conceptually distinctive and psychologically profound dimensions of the participants’ experiences: the wish for liberation as a maladaptive defensive mechanism, fragile academic self-concept, study-related work–family conflict, and feelings of meaninglessness accompanied by existential identity crisis.

Table 1

Core Phenomenological Categories Identified in the Lived Experiences of Repeat University Entrance Examination Candidates

Core category	Conceptual meaning	Principal dimensions	Position within the process of self-erosion
Wish for liberation as a maladaptive defensive mechanism	Recurrent mental escape from the current examination situation through fantasies of freedom, migration, disappearance of pressure, or beginning life again in another context	Escape from pressure, desire for the examination period to end, imagined migration, starting over, freedom from social judgment, release from family monitoring, and termination of suffering	Functions as a temporary form of emotional relief but reduces active engagement with present problems and reinforces avoidance
Fragile academic self-concept	An unstable perception of academic competence and personal worth that changes rapidly according to examination scores, practice-test results, and comparison with successful peers	Conditional self-worth, score-dependent identity, all-or-nothing self-evaluation, negative social comparison, perceived incompetence, and fluctuating hope	Transforms individual examination outcomes into judgments about the person’s overall intelligence, value, and future potential
Study-related work–family conflict	Conflict produced by the simultaneous demands of examination preparation, economic dependence, family expectations, pressure to succeed, and restricted personal autonomy	Financial dependence, perceived indebtedness, parental expectations, continuous monitoring, limited independence, guilt, shame, and responsibility for family happiness	Intensifies emotional pressure and turns the family from a potential source of support into an additional field of performance evaluation
Feelings of meaninglessness and existential identity crisis	A profound disruption in the person’s sense of purpose, continuity, identity, and future direction in which the examination is no longer only an educational goal but a challenge to the meaning of life	Philosophical questioning, identity confusion, reduction of identity to repeated failure, loss of future perspective, emotional indifference, emptiness, and uncertainty about the value of continued effort	Represents the deepest consequence of the cycle, where repeated academic failure becomes integrated into the person’s definition of self and life

As shown in Table 1, the four central categories reflected progressively deeper layers of experience. The wish for liberation was most commonly expressed as an immediate psychological response to sustained pressure. Participants imagined a future in which the examination had ended, family expectations no longer existed, or they had moved to a place where their previous failures were unknown. These images offered short-term relief but did not necessarily provide realistic pathways toward change. Fragile academic self-concept represented a deeper level of self-evaluation in which participants’ beliefs about intelligence, ability, and personal worth depended almost entirely on examination performance. A favorable practice-test result temporarily restored hope, whereas a poor result could rapidly produce a global sense of incompetence. Study-related work–family conflict added a relational and economic dimension to this process. Participants frequently perceived themselves as

financially dependent on their families while simultaneously carrying the burden of fulfilling family aspirations. The deepest category was existential identity crisis, in which participants questioned not merely whether they would pass the examination but why they were continuing, whether success would actually produce a meaningful life, and who they had become after years of repeated preparation. The relationship among these categories indicated that prolonged examination failure progressively shifted from an educational challenge to an identity-based and existential crisis.

The wish for liberation appeared repeatedly in the participants’ narratives and was characterized by persistent fantasies about the end of the examination period, escape from family and social expectations, migration, beginning life again, or entering an environment in which no one knew about their previous failures. These fantasies were not

described merely as ordinary future plans. Instead, they functioned as psychologically organized spaces into which participants withdrew when the pressure of the present became difficult to tolerate. One participant explained that the desired outcome was no longer necessarily examination success but simply the termination of pressure: "Even if I do not achieve a result, at least this pressure will end." Another participant repeatedly imagined migration to a place where no one knew him and no expectations existed. Such accounts demonstrated that freedom was defined less as the achievement of a positive goal and more as the absence of evaluation, surveillance, comparison, and disappointment.

The wish for liberation had an ambivalent function. On the one hand, imagining life after the examination temporarily helped participants tolerate distress and maintain psychological distance from overwhelming circumstances. On the other hand, repeated mental escape could reduce engagement with immediate problems, delay decision-making, and prevent the exploration of realistic alternative pathways. In this respect, the wish for liberation differed from constructive hope. Constructive hope is generally associated with a sense of agency and the identification of practical routes toward valued goals. By

contrast, the participants' imagined liberation frequently lacked a clear plan, realistic pathway, or confidence in their ability to act. The fantasy therefore provided emotional relief without necessarily increasing effective action.

Fragile academic self-concept was closely associated with the wish for liberation. Participants described a self-image that changed in response to every practice-test score, comparison with peers, parental comment, or perceived failure. Their sense of competence was not supported by a stable internal evaluation of their abilities, efforts, or development. Instead, it depended on external indicators, particularly rankings and test percentages. One participant stated, "If I do not pass the examination, I feel that I have no value." Another explained that a low practice-test score created the feeling that everything previously learned had been forgotten, whereas a good score briefly restored the belief that success might still be possible. These accounts indicated that performance feedback was interpreted globally rather than specifically. A poor result was not viewed as evidence of weakness in a particular subject or study strategy; it was interpreted as proof that the participant was unintelligent, incapable, or fundamentally unsuccessful.

Table 2

Dimensions of the Wish for Liberation and Fragile Academic Self-Concept

Main theme	Constituent dimension	Description of the lived experience	Representative statement
Wish for liberation	Escape from pressure	Desire for the stressful examination period to end, even without achieving the desired academic result	"Even if I do not achieve a result, at least this pressure will end."
Wish for liberation	Starting life again	Imagining a new life in another city, country, educational pathway, or social context in which previous failures are unknown	"I imagine myself in another country, starting again from zero."
Wish for liberation	Freedom from observation	Desire to escape the gaze, questioning, comparison, and judgment of relatives, peers, teachers, and family members	"I want to be somewhere where no one expects anything from me."
Wish for liberation	Termination of suffering	Desire to stop psychological and physical exhaustion, even if stopping requires abandoning the original goal	"I just want this period to be over."
Wish for liberation	Passive future orientation	Repeated focus on an imagined future without developing a realistic and actionable pathway toward it	"I keep imagining the days after the examination and tell myself to endure."
Fragile academic self-concept	Conditional self-worth	Dependence of personal value on examination acceptance, rank, and external academic approval	"If I do not pass, I feel that I have no value."
Fragile academic self-concept	Score-dependent identity	Rapid changes in perceived intelligence and competence according to practice-test results	"With every score, I move myself up or down."
Fragile academic self-concept	Negative social comparison	Evaluation of the self through comparison with peers who have already entered university or achieved higher scores	"When I see others being accepted while I am still in the same place, I feel untalented."
Fragile academic self-concept	All-or-nothing evaluation	Classification of the self as either completely successful or completely unsuccessful, with little recognition of partial progress	"It feels as though I know nothing."
Fragile academic self-concept	Instability of hope	Temporary restoration of confidence after favorable results and rapid collapse of hope after setbacks	"When I perform well, I think that perhaps I can succeed."
Fragile academic self-concept	Identity reduction	Narrowing of the broader identity to the single role of an examination candidate	"I feel that I am only someone who studies and fails."

Table 2 demonstrates that the wish for liberation and fragile academic self-concept were linked through a common experience of reduced personal agency. Participants who believed that their value depended entirely on examination success were especially vulnerable to using imagined escape as a response to poor performance. When a participant interpreted a low score as evidence of global personal failure, remaining in the examination process became psychologically threatening. Fantasies of migration, disappearance, or beginning again then offered an imagined context in which the damaged academic identity could be abandoned. However, because these fantasies were often disconnected from concrete planning, they did not resolve the underlying instability of self-worth. The participants remained dependent on subsequent scores and external approval, which reproduced the same fluctuations in confidence and distress. The findings therefore suggest that the wish for liberation was not independent of academic identity but emerged partly as an attempt to protect the self from repeated threats to personal worth. The more strongly the participant's identity became concentrated around examination outcomes, the more psychologically necessary fantasies of escape appeared to become.

Study-related work-family conflict reflected the collapse of boundaries between examination preparation, family life, economic dependence, and personal autonomy. Participants did not experience examination preparation as an individual educational activity separated from family relationships. Their study schedules, financial costs, leisure activities, sleep patterns, social interactions, and decisions about employment were frequently monitored or influenced by family members. Several participants felt that they had become the object of family aspirations and that the emotional well-being or social pride of the family depended on their success. Statements such as "We have tied all our dreams to you" were experienced not simply as encouragement but as a transfer of responsibility for the family's hopes and sacrifices.

Financial dependence intensified this conflict. Participants were aware of the costs associated with books, preparatory courses, counseling, transportation, registration fees, and years without stable employment. This awareness produced a sense of indebtedness and guilt, particularly after repeated unsuccessful attempts. The participant was simultaneously positioned as someone for whom the family was making sacrifices and as the person expected to justify those sacrifices through success. This created a double

burden: the candidate had to manage the demands of preparation while also managing the emotional consequences of possible family disappointment. Rest, recreation, or reduced study time could be interpreted by family members as laziness or lack of commitment, which made participants feel that they were required to perform visible effort even when such effort was not productive.

The loss of personal autonomy was a recurring dimension of this conflict. Some participants believed that they had to study for excessively long periods or remain visibly occupied to demonstrate seriousness. One participant reported feeling required to appear busy for as many as 16 hours a day because even a short period of rest could be interpreted as insufficient effort. Such monitoring reduced the participant's ability to regulate study according to personal needs, fatigue, concentration, or emotional condition. Family involvement therefore became paradoxical: it was often motivated by concern and support, yet it could also increase pressure, reduce autonomy, and intensify shame.

Existential identity crisis represented the most profound level of the findings. At this level, participants' questions moved beyond academic strategies and probabilities of acceptance. They began to question the value of the goal itself, the meaning of their suffering, and the continuity of their identity. Some participants asked what would happen even if they were eventually accepted: whether university would simply lead to another period of pressure, whether the future profession would be meaningful, or whether the chosen field reflected their own interests. One participant asked, "If I pass, then what?" This question illustrated the weakening of the examination as a meaningful future goal.

Other participants described losing a coherent sense of who they were. Previous identities based on ability, ambition, social relationships, personal interests, or hope had gradually narrowed to the identity of a person who repeatedly studied and failed. This narrowing prevented participants from recognizing dimensions of the self unrelated to academic performance. The loss of a positive future horizon was particularly important. Participants were no longer merely uncertain about which university they would attend; some were unable to imagine any satisfactory future. Emotional indifference and emptiness appeared when prolonged exposure to pressure reduced the emotional significance of events that had previously been important. In these accounts, repeated failure had become an existential condition rather than a temporary educational outcome.

Table 3

Dimensions of Study-Related Work–Family Conflict and Existential Identity Crisis

Main theme	Constituent dimension	Description of the lived experience	Representative statement or meaning unit
Study-related work–family conflict	Economic dependence	Awareness of the financial costs imposed on the family through courses, resources, and prolonged preparation	“They have spent so much, and I do not want to disappoint them.”
Study-related work–family conflict	Perceived indebtedness	Feeling morally obligated to repay family sacrifices through examination success	Success was experienced as repayment of an emotional and financial debt
Study-related work–family conflict	Performance expectations	Pressure to achieve a specific result that would satisfy family hopes and produce social pride	“We have tied all our dreams to you.”
Study-related work–family conflict	Continuous monitoring	Ongoing observation of study time, rest, sleep, social activity, and use of technology	“I have to remain occupied so they can see that I am studying.”
Study-related work–family conflict	Restricted autonomy	Limited ability to independently organize study, rest, employment, relationships, and future plans	“If I rest for an hour, they think I am being lazy.”
Study-related work–family conflict	Guilt and shame	Feeling responsible for family disappointment, financial pressure, and unsuccessful outcomes	“Sometimes I feel that I am being crushed under the pressure.”
Study-related work–family conflict	Role entanglement	Inability to separate the roles of family member, dependent young adult, student, and future provider	Family relationships became organized around examination performance
Existential identity crisis	Philosophical questioning	Questioning why the examination process should continue and whether the desired outcome is meaningful	“Sometimes I do not know why I am doing this.”
Existential identity crisis	One-dimensional identity	Reduction of the person’s identity to the role of a repeatedly unsuccessful candidate	“I am only someone who studies and fails.”
Existential identity crisis	Loss of temporal horizon	Difficulty imagining a positive, coherent, or personally meaningful future	“Is this what I will always be?”
Existential identity crisis	Disruption of self-continuity	Perception that the current self no longer corresponds to the previously ambitious and hopeful self	“I no longer know who I am.”
Existential identity crisis	Emotional indifference	Reduced emotional responsiveness to outcomes, relationships, and events that were previously meaningful	Success and failure gradually became emotionally flattened
Existential identity crisis	Feelings of emptiness	Experience of inner hollowness, wasted time, and absence of meaningful direction	Participants described life as empty or suspended
Existential identity crisis	Questioning the value of success	Doubt about whether university admission would resolve distress or produce a desirable future	“If I pass, then what?”

As presented in Table 3, study-related work–family conflict was not limited to disagreement between candidates and their parents. It was a complex conflict involving financial dependence, perceived moral debt, performance expectations, continuous monitoring, limited autonomy, and fear of disappointing significant others. Participants frequently experienced their families as both essential sources of material support and major sources of psychological pressure. This dual position made it difficult for them to express exhaustion, reconsider their educational path, reduce study hours, or explore alternative goals. Rejecting the examination pathway could be interpreted as wasting family sacrifices, while continuing the pathway prolonged dependence and emotional distress. This contradiction intensified guilt and made independent decision-making increasingly difficult.

The dimensions of existential identity crisis indicated that repeated failure altered the participants’ relationship with

themselves and their futures. Identity became increasingly organized around a single social judgment: whether the person had been accepted into university. As alternative identities weakened, each unsuccessful result threatened the individual’s overall sense of worth and continuity. Participants’ uncertainty was therefore not limited to occupational choice. It included uncertainty about whether they remained capable, valuable, and recognizable to themselves. The question “Who am I?” emerged alongside the question “Why should I continue?” The combination of identity reduction, futurelessness, emotional indifference, and emptiness demonstrated that the psychological consequences of prolonged examination preparation extended beyond conventional test anxiety or academic burnout. The findings suggested a movement from performance-related distress toward a crisis involving meaning, identity, agency, and the perceived value of life direction.

Figure 1

Cyclical Model of the Structural Reproduction of Failure and Self-Erosion among Repeat University Entrance Examination Candidates

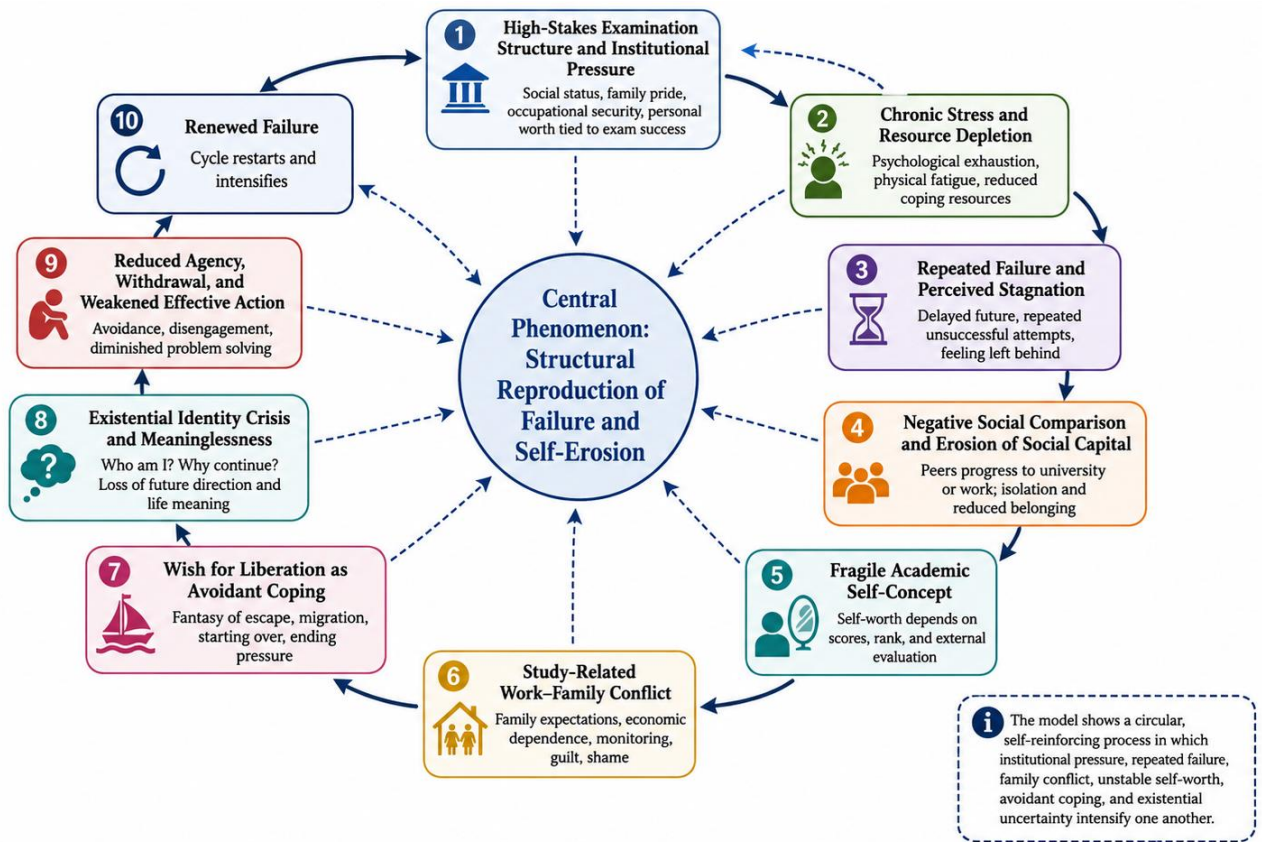


Figure 1 represents the central interpretive model derived from selective coding. The model conceptualizes the participants' experiences as a circular and self-reinforcing process rather than a linear sequence with a single cause or outcome. Structural pressures associated with the highly competitive and high-stakes examination system created a context in which educational success was closely linked to social status, family pride, occupational security, and personal worth. Repeated exposure to this context produced chronic stress and gradual depletion of psychological, physical, and social resources. When effort did not result in the desired outcome, participants experienced failure not merely as an unsuccessful examination attempt but as evidence that their future had been delayed and their social position had deteriorated.

As repeated failure accumulated, participants became more vulnerable to negative social comparison, withdrawal, perceived exclusion, and weakening of social capital. Friends and peers progressed to university, employment, or other developmental roles, while repeat candidates experienced themselves as remaining in the same position. This perceived stagnation reinforced fragile academic self-

concept and increased dependence on future examination success as the only imagined means of restoring personal value. At the same time, family expectations, economic dependence, and monitoring intensified study-related work-family conflict. The candidate increasingly experienced the family as a source of obligation and evaluation, despite continuing to rely on it for material and emotional support.

Within this context, the wish for liberation emerged as an avoidant response to overwhelming pressure. Fantasies of migration, starting again, or simply reaching the end of the examination period temporarily reduced distress. However, when these fantasies were not accompanied by realistic planning and active coping, they weakened engagement with present challenges and contributed to the persistence of failure. Continued failure then produced further damage to academic self-concept, greater family conflict, and deeper uncertainty about identity and meaning.

The final and deepest layer of the model was existential identity crisis. At this point, the participant no longer questioned only how to improve performance but questioned whether the goal remained valuable, whether continued effort had meaning, and whether an identity existed beyond

the examination. Meaninglessness and loss of agency could subsequently reduce effective action, strengthen withdrawal and avoidance, and increase the probability that the same pattern would be reproduced. The cycle therefore returned to renewed failure, intensified pressure, and further self-erosion. The model demonstrates that repeated examination failure should not be interpreted as an isolated educational event. It is embedded in a dynamic system in which institutional pressure, family relationships, economic dependence, maladaptive coping, unstable self-worth, social comparison, and existential uncertainty continuously interact and reinforce one another.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to explain the lived experiences of repeat university entrance examination candidates through an interpretive phenomenological analysis. The findings showed that repeated involvement in the entrance examination was not experienced merely as an extended period of academic preparation, but as a progressive process of psychological, relational, and existential self-erosion. The analysis identified a central phenomenon described as the structural reproduction of failure and self-erosion, within which four core categories occupied a particularly prominent position: the wish for liberation as a maladaptive defensive mechanism, fragile academic self-concept, study-related work-family conflict, and feelings of meaninglessness accompanied by existential identity crisis. The findings further indicated that these categories were not independent or sequentially isolated. Rather, they formed a circular and mutually reinforcing system in which institutional pressure, repeated unsuccessful attempts, chronic stress, negative social comparison, family expectations, economic dependence, weakened self-worth, avoidant coping, and reduced agency progressively intensified one another. In this cycle, each unsuccessful attempt was interpreted not only as an academic outcome but also as evidence of personal stagnation, social delay, and failure to meet family and cultural expectations. This interpretation weakened the participants' capacity for adaptive action and increased the likelihood that the same psychological and educational difficulties would be reproduced in subsequent attempts.

The first major finding concerned the wish for liberation, which appeared as a recurrent desire to escape examination pressure, family monitoring, social judgment, and the identity of a repeatedly unsuccessful candidate. Participants imagined the examination period ending regardless of the

result, moving to another country or city, beginning life again in a setting where no one knew their previous failures, or entering a future in which they were no longer required to justify their daily activities. These fantasies temporarily reduced distress and enabled some participants to tolerate an otherwise overwhelming situation. However, they often lacked realistic pathways, concrete planning, or a sense of personal agency. The wish for liberation therefore differed from constructive hope because it was directed primarily toward the disappearance of pressure rather than toward the active attainment of a meaningful goal.

This finding can be understood in light of previous research showing that entrance examination candidates experience prolonged anxiety, uncertainty, and psychological pressure. High levels of anxiety among students preparing for university examinations have been associated with the perceived importance of the test, uncertainty regarding outcomes, and fear of failure (Yel Kenci, 2013). Likewise, qualitative evidence indicates that students perceive university entrance examinations as events that substantially affect their daily routines, emotional states, educational decisions, and future expectations (Cirak, 2016). Under such circumstances, fantasies of escape may function as a short-term emotional regulation strategy. When candidates experience the examination as an inescapable and all-encompassing condition, mentally constructing an alternative life can provide temporary psychological distance. However, the present findings extend previous studies by demonstrating that this response may become maladaptive when it replaces active decision-making, problem-solving, and realistic exploration of alternative educational or occupational pathways. The wish for liberation thus reflected both the severity of the participants' distress and the weakening of their perceived capacity to modify present conditions.

The emergence of avoidant fantasy was also related to hopelessness. Participants often continued preparing while simultaneously doubting that their efforts would lead to success. Previous research has identified hopelessness and depression as significant concerns among university entrance examination candidates and has linked them to sustained pressure, perceived failure, diminished confidence, and uncertainty about the future (Fathi et al., 2019). The present findings support this evidence but show that hopelessness may not always appear as complete behavioral withdrawal. Some participants remained highly active in studying, attending classes, and taking practice tests while inwardly experiencing resignation and

disengagement. Their persistence was therefore not necessarily evidence of hope; it could represent an externally maintained routine driven by fear, family pressure, or the absence of an acceptable alternative. In this context, the wish for liberation functioned as a psychological retreat from an activity that continued behaviorally but had lost much of its personal meaning.

The second major finding was the formation of a fragile academic self-concept. Participants' evaluations of their intelligence, competence, and personal value changed rapidly in response to practice-test scores, rankings, parental comments, and comparisons with successful peers. A favorable score temporarily restored confidence, whereas a poor result produced a global sense of worthlessness or incompetence. Participants did not consistently interpret low performance as evidence of a specific weakness in study methods or subject knowledge. Instead, they tended to regard it as proof that they lacked ability or had failed as individuals. Academic self-concept therefore became unstable, externally regulated, and almost entirely dependent on examination outcomes.

This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that the entrance examination can alter students' motivation and transform learning into an outcome-oriented and externally evaluated activity (Kazemi & Sayyadi, 2014). When admission, rank, and field of study become the dominant criteria of success, students may gradually lose intrinsic interest in learning and evaluate themselves primarily through comparative performance indicators. The present study suggests that this process is especially damaging for repeat candidates because repeated unsuccessful outcomes accumulate and become integrated into their self-definition. Rather than viewing failure as a temporary event, participants increasingly described themselves as inherently incapable, delayed, or unsuccessful. Such identity-based interpretations intensify distress and make future setbacks more psychologically threatening.

The finding also aligns with evidence regarding perfectionism among candidates with test anxiety. Schema-focused intervention has been shown to reduce maladaptive perfectionism among female university entrance examination candidates, indicating that rigid standards, conditional self-worth, and fear of mistakes are central psychological vulnerabilities in this population (Abazari, 2023). The fragile academic self-concept identified in the present study appeared to be sustained by similar patterns. Participants frequently adopted all-or-nothing evaluations in

which only complete success was acceptable. Improvements, partial achievements, or alternative pathways were often discounted. This cognitive structure made their self-worth highly vulnerable because every score became a judgment about the whole person. The findings therefore indicate that repeated failure interacts with perfectionistic standards to produce an unstable and one-dimensional academic identity.

The results also showed that stress contributed to the deterioration of self-concept and performance. Previous research has reported a significant relationship between stress and academic performance among university entrance examination candidates (Mohammadi & Hosseini, 2018). Excessive stress may impair concentration, memory retrieval, sleep, persistence, and effective self-regulation, thereby reducing performance and confirming candidates' fears about their inadequacy. The present findings illustrate the subjective experience of this circular relationship. Participants described feeling exhausted and mentally depleted, performing poorly, interpreting the poor performance as evidence of incompetence, and subsequently experiencing even greater anxiety and self-doubt. Thus, stress was not merely a reaction to failure; it also became a mechanism through which further failure and self-erosion were reproduced. This interpretation is consistent with research identifying entrance examination pressure as a serious threat to students' mental health and adaptive functioning (Nouri et al., 2020).

The third major finding concerned study-related work-family conflict. Participants experienced a complex combination of family support, financial dependence, emotional obligation, continuous monitoring, and pressure to fulfill family expectations. Families often provided the financial and practical resources required for repeated preparation, yet this support created a sense of indebtedness. Participants believed that they had to compensate for the costs of courses, books, counseling, and delayed employment by achieving the desired result. Repeated failure intensified guilt because candidates perceived that family sacrifices had not been justified. At the same time, parental monitoring of study time, rest, sleep, and social activity restricted personal autonomy and transformed the home into a continuous evaluative environment.

These findings are consistent with previous studies demonstrating that the university entrance examination affects both students and their families and can reorganize family interactions around academic success (Fathabadi et al., 2017; Fathabadi & Sadeqi, 2017). The examination

becomes a family project in which parents invest emotionally and financially, while the candidate is expected to convert that investment into admission and future social mobility. The present study expands this literature by showing that repeat candidates experience a distinctive form of role conflict. They are simultaneously dependent family members, emerging adults seeking independence, full-time examination candidates, and potential future providers. These roles often impose incompatible expectations. Working may be necessary for economic independence but may be interpreted as a reduction in academic commitment. Continued full-time preparation may satisfy family expectations but prolong dependence and delay adult roles. This contradiction creates guilt, resentment, and a sense of being trapped.

The importance of family influence has also been emphasized in research on students' academic futures, which indicates that family expectations, support, involvement, and decision-making substantially shape the entrance examination experience (Badfar et al., 2023). The present findings suggest that family involvement is not uniformly protective or harmful. Its effects depend on the quality of communication, the realism of expectations, respect for autonomy, and whether support is perceived as conditional on success. When families communicated that their hopes, sacrifices, or social standing depended on the candidate's admission, support became psychologically burdensome. In contrast, candidates appeared to need relationships in which their value remained stable regardless of the examination result.

The reciprocal nature of examination-related family distress is supported by evidence showing that mothers of university entrance examination candidates experience difficulties in parenting adaptability, parenting orientation, and rumination (Mirzaei et al., 2025). Parental worry may produce greater monitoring and control, which increases the candidate's distress and may lead to secrecy, avoidance, or reduced autonomy. The candidate's anxiety then reinforces parental concern, creating a mutually escalating family cycle. The present study indicates that this dynamic becomes particularly intense after repeated unsuccessful attempts because both candidates and parents enter each new preparation period with memories of previous disappointment. Family interactions may consequently become saturated with fear, caution, and pressure, even when all parties intend to provide support.

The fourth and deepest finding was the emergence of meaninglessness and existential identity crisis. Participants

began by questioning whether they would pass the examination, but over time their questions shifted toward why they should continue, whether admission would create a meaningful future, and who they had become after years of preparation and failure. Some participants could no longer imagine a coherent identity beyond the examination. Their lives had become suspended, and their previous self-images as capable, ambitious, or hopeful individuals were replaced by the identity of someone who studied and repeatedly failed. This one-dimensional identity was accompanied by loss of future direction, emotional indifference, emptiness, and uncertainty about the value of continued effort.

This finding integrates and extends previous evidence regarding anxiety, depression, motivation, and mental health. Studies have shown that entrance examination pressure can produce significant psychological distress (Nouri et al., 2020), that repeated pressure and failure are associated with hopelessness and depression (Fathi et al., 2019), and that the examination influences students' motivation and engagement with learning (Kazemi & Sayyadi, 2014). However, the present findings indicate that these difficulties may converge into a more fundamental crisis when the examination dominates identity for a prolonged period. Anxiety concerns the possibility of failure, whereas existential crisis concerns the meaning of the goal and the coherence of the self. Depression may involve reduced mood and energy, whereas existential meaninglessness includes the perception that effort, success, and future life no longer possess clear value. The participants' accounts therefore suggest that the psychological consequences of repeated examination failure cannot be adequately explained solely through conventional academic constructs.

The broader social context must also be considered. Success in the entrance examination is affected by unequal access to educational resources, socioeconomic advantages, school quality, family support, and preparatory opportunities (Tavakol & Amini, 2020). Nevertheless, candidates often interpret outcomes as if they were produced entirely by personal effort and ability. This individualization of failure conceals structural inequality and intensifies shame. Repeat candidates compare themselves with peers without fully accounting for differences in resources and opportunities, and their inability to succeed is consequently incorporated into their identity. The central model of structural reproduction of failure and self-erosion reflects this interaction between external and internal processes. Institutional pressure creates chronic stress; unequal

conditions influence outcomes; repeated failure weakens self-concept; family and social comparisons intensify shame; avoidant coping reduces agency; and reduced agency increases the likelihood that the cycle will continue.

The findings further suggest that educational skill development remains necessary but is insufficient by itself. Training in cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies can reduce academic self-handicapping and promote self-directed learning among pre-university candidates (Soleimani et al., 2021). Such strategies may help candidates regain control over studying and reduce ineffective behaviors. However, the present study shows that some repeat candidates require interventions addressing identity, meaning, family relationships, conditional self-worth, and hopelessness in addition to learning techniques. A candidate who has lost faith in the value of the goal or who interprets every setback as proof of worthlessness may not benefit fully from study-skills training unless these deeper concerns are also addressed. Effective support should therefore integrate educational, psychological, relational, and structural components.

Overall, the present study contributes to the literature by reframing repeated entrance examination failure as a multidimensional process rather than an isolated academic event. The four categories identified in the analysis represent interconnected layers of self-erosion. The wish for liberation reflects avoidant relief from overwhelming pressure; fragile academic self-concept reflects the collapse of stable self-worth; study-related work-family conflict reflects the relational and economic entanglement of examination preparation; and existential identity crisis reflects the deepest disruption of meaning, continuity, and future orientation. Together, these findings indicate that repeated candidates should not be regarded simply as students who need greater effort or better study strategies. They are individuals navigating a prolonged developmental, familial, social, and existential crisis that requires comprehensive and context-sensitive responses.

This study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the participants were selected through purposive maximum-variation sampling, and the qualitative nature of the study does not permit statistical generalization to all repeat university entrance examination candidates. Experiences may differ according to geographical region, socioeconomic status, gender, field of study, family structure, and access to educational resources. Second, the findings were based on self-reported narratives collected through semi-structured

interviews and may have been influenced by memory bias, current emotional state, social desirability, or participants' willingness to disclose highly personal experiences. Third, although reflexive procedures, member checking, peer review, and external auditing were used, interpretive phenomenological analysis necessarily involves the researchers' theoretical sensitivity and interpretive position. Fourth, the cross-sectional design captured participants' experiences at a particular stage of examination preparation and could not determine how identity, hope, family relationships, and meaning changed before and after subsequent examination outcomes. Finally, the study focused primarily on candidates' perspectives and did not directly include parents, siblings, teachers, counselors, or policymakers whose accounts might have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the broader system.

Future studies should examine the identified model in larger and more diverse samples across different provinces, socioeconomic groups, educational fields, and numbers of repeated examination attempts. Mixed-method research could be used to develop and validate quantitative measures of fragile academic self-concept, wish for liberation, study-related family conflict, self-erosion, and examination-related existential meaninglessness. Longitudinal studies are particularly important for examining how these experiences evolve across preparation, examination, result announcement, university admission, withdrawal from the examination pathway, or transition to employment. Comparative research could explore differences between first-time and repeat candidates, successful and unsuccessful repeat candidates, and candidates who voluntarily choose alternative educational or occupational paths. Future investigations should also include parents and other family members to clarify reciprocal patterns of anxiety, monitoring, dependence, and expectation. Intervention studies could assess the effectiveness of meaning-centered therapy, identity-focused counseling, family-based programs, acceptance-based approaches, and integrated academic-psychological support in reducing self-erosion and restoring agency.

Educational counselors, psychologists, families, schools, and policymakers should approach repeat candidates as individuals facing interconnected academic, emotional, relational, and existential pressures. Screening services should assess not only test anxiety and study skills but also hopelessness, conditional self-worth, identity disturbance, family conflict, social withdrawal, and loss of meaning. Counseling programs should help candidates develop a

multidimensional identity that is not dependent on examination performance, identify realistic alternative pathways, reconstruct a sense of agency, and distinguish constructive hope from avoidant fantasy. Family interventions should teach parents to provide unconditional emotional support, reduce excessive monitoring, communicate realistic expectations, and respect candidates' autonomy in decisions about study, work, rest, and alternative futures. At the structural level, accessible psychological services, career guidance, multiple pathways to higher education, and public recognition of non-university routes to achievement are needed to reduce the social monopoly of the entrance examination and prevent repeated academic failure from becoming a chronic crisis of identity and meaning.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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