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Article

The Culture of Cramming: A Sociocultural Inquiry into Academic Survival Strategies among Filipino Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the frequency, functions, and sociocultural drivers of cramming as an academic survival strategy among Filipino senior high school students. Anchored on Cognitive Load Theory and sociocultural perspectives, the research employs a mixed-methods approach involving 154 Grade 12 students at Mindanao State University – Buug Campus. Quantitative data reveal that cramming occurs "sometimes" to "seldom" across various indicators, with emotional stress reported "often" during last-minute academic work. Despite these behaviors, the average academic performance of students remains within the "Very Satisfactory" range (M = 85.50). Correlation analysis indicates no statistically significant relationship between cramming frequency and academic performance (r = -0.0657, p > .05). Thematic analysis of open-ended responses reveals that personal distractions (e.g., social media, procrastination), family responsibilities, and school-related pressures contribute to cramming behavior. These findings highlight cramming not merely as a time management issue but as a culturally embedded coping mechanism shaped by the learners' social, economic, and institutional environments. The study underscores the need for educational reforms that promote time regulation, learner engagement, and psychosocial support to address both the behavioral and contextual roots of cramming in the Philippine academic setting.

Keywords: *cramming, Filipino students, academic performance, sociocultural factors, time management*

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Introduction

In many academic contexts worldwide, cramming, intensive, last-minute studying before examinations or deadlines, is often dismissed as an inefficient learning strategy. However, within the Philippine educational landscape, cramming persists as a study habit and a culturally situated academic survival mechanism. Rooted in structural pressures and socio-behavioral norms, cramming has evolved into a shared experience among Filipino students, shaped by educational systems, familial expectations, and personal coping strategies.

This study recognizes that cramming is more than a personal time-management flaw; it reflects broader sociocultural realities. Students cram to meet academic demands and navigate the pressures of institutional workload, familial responsibilities, and the cultural narrative that equates productivity with worth. Particularly among senior high school students preparing for university education, cramming becomes an adaptation strategy learned in response to the rigorous and often competitive academic environment.

The investigation is anchored on three theoretical frameworks: Cognitive Load Theory, which highlights the limitations of working memory in high-pressure learning; Motivation Theory, which explores internal and external drivers of academic behavior; and the Science of Cramming model, which considers cramming as a short-term learning strategy rather than a sustainable educational approach. Through these lenses, this research aims to uncover the frequency and academic impact of cramming and its function within the cultural ecosystem of student life.

By exploring the cramming practices of senior high school students, this study seeks to situate academic behavior within a sociocultural context. It examines cramming as a learned, shared, and rationalized practice in response to systemic academic demands. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the culture of learning in the Philippines, where resilience, adaptability, and social expectation converge in shaping how students engage with their academic responsibilities.

Cramming as a Sociocultural Academic Practice

Cramming, or last-minute intense studying, has become a deeply embedded academic survival strategy across various educational contexts. In the Philippine setting, it is often normalized, even romanticized, as part of the *"diskarte"* culture, a socio-behavioral coping mechanism that reflects students' adaptability to academic pressures (Dela Cruz & Mendoza, 2020). Rather than a purely cognitive strategy, cramming may be a cultural practice influenced by collective expectations, peer norms, family pressures, and institutional scheduling. Filipino students often balance

academic obligations with familial responsibilities and socio-economic demands, which forces them to rely on short-term coping methods such as cramming (Sicat & David, 2019).

In this light, cramming is not merely an individual failure of time management, but a systemic response to formal education's rigid and competitive structures. This perspective aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the influence of cultural tools and social interactions in shaping cognitive practices (Vygotsky, 1978). Within this framework, cramming may be interpreted as a learned and shared response to environmental and institutional demands.

Cognitive Load and Academic Consequences of Cramming

Despite its cultural prevalence, cramming imposes significant cognitive and psychological burdens. Anchored on Sweller's (1988) Cognitive Load Theory, cramming overwhelms working memory by quickly bombarding it with large volumes of information, leading to shallow encoding and poor retention. While it may yield short-term performance benefits, research shows it contributes minimally to deep learning and long-term academic success (Sommer, 1968; Calderwood et al., 2016). The spacing effect, a principle in cognitive psychology, consistently demonstrates that distributed learning leads to more substantial knowledge consolidation and retrieval (Cepeda et al., 2006).

Moreover, cramming often coincides with sleep deprivation, increased anxiety, and diminished comprehension (Tice & Baumeister, 1997). In studies involving university and senior high school populations, students who cram frequently report elevated stress and reduced academic satisfaction (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). These findings underscore the cognitive cost of cramming and question its continued viability as a sustainable learning strategy.

Procrastination, Flow, and Academic Motivation

Cramming behavior is closely linked to procrastination, which has dispositional and contextual causes. Tice and Baumeister (1997) distinguish between *"procrastinators by choice,"* who find stimulation in deadlines, and *"procrastinators by necessity,"* who are overwhelmed by external obligations. In the context of Filipino students, procrastination is often reinforced by digital distractions and inadequate study environments (Guillermo & Ramos, 2021). However, some students report achieving flow states, a heightened sense of focus and immersion, during cramming, which can enhance concentration and task performance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Nevertheless, this temporary boost is rarely sustained and does not mitigate the long-term disadvantages. Students who rely on cramming may struggle to develop intrinsic motivation and self-regulated learning habits, which are crucial for academic resilience (Tross et al., 2000). This highlights the need for institutional strategies that address both the cultural roots and cognitive impacts of cramming among Filipino learners.

Design and Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection to examine the frequency, function, and sociocultural drivers of cramming among Grade 12 students. The methodology was designed to measure the prevalence and impact of cramming behavior and explore the underlying motivations and contexts that shape such academic strategies within a Filipino learning environment.

The research was conducted in a university in Zamboanga Sibugay, specifically among the Senior High School Department, which offers three academic strands: Accountancy and Business Management (ABM), Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS), and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). All four sections of Grade 12, totaling 154 students enrolled for the first semester of SY 2022–2023, were selected as the respondents. The choice to focus on Grade 12 students was informed by the intensified academic load in their curriculum compared to Grade 11, making them more susceptible to cramming behaviors due to increased pressure and task complexity.

Data collection was facilitated through a structured questionnaire and open-ended interviews. The questionnaire was adapted from Teh and Luquing (2019) and was designed to gather numerical data for statistical treatment and narrative responses for thematic analysis. The quantitative component focused on measuring the frequency of cramming and its correlation with students' academic performance, while the qualitative component explored students' subjective explanations and experiences related to cramming. Of the 154 respondents, 102 voluntarily provided qualitative responses to the open-ended prompts.

The data gathering process adhered to ethical standards, beginning with acquiring formal permissions from school administrators and securing informed consent from both students and their guardians. Questionnaires were distributed directly to students, and individual interviews were conducted with selected participants for in-depth insights. The study emphasized voluntary participation,

confidentiality, and the anonymity of all respondents in accordance with standard ethical research practices (Smythe, 2000).

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including correlation analysis to determine the relationship between cramming frequency and academic performance. Academic averages were retrieved from the school registrar to ensure accuracy. Qualitative data were subjected to thematic coding, categorizing recurring patterns and identifying sociocultural factors influencing cramming behaviors. This methodological triangulation allowed the researchers to validate findings across data types and present a holistic understanding of cramming as both a cognitive behavior and a sociocultural phenomenon.

Results

Frequency of Cramming

Table 1 presents varying frequencies of cramming behavior among Grade 12 students, as measured by their self-reported responses to a series of statements. The weighted means of the eight indicators ranged from 2.28 to 3.77, interpreted across a Likert scale as seldom, sometimes, and often.

Table 1. Frequency of Cramming Experienced by the Respondents

Statement	Weighted Mean	Interpretation
I do not submit my school requirements on or ahead of time	2.52	This statement falls under the frequency of cramming in sometimes.
I do not do my assignment at home.	2.28	This statement falls under the frequency of cramming in sometimes.
I do not study the lessons given to me ahead of time.	2.72	This statement falls under the frequency of cramming in seldom.
I do not prioritize my assignment.	2.36	This statement falls under the frequency of cramming in sometimes.
I started my school tasks at the last minute.	2.77	This statement falls under the The frequency of cramming is seldom.
I do not accomplish my requirements on time.	2.38	This statement falls under the frequency of cramming in sometimes.

I feel stressed or pressured while making my requirements at the last minute before the submission.	3.77	This statement falls under the frequency of cramming in often.
I prioritize other tasks than my academic tasks.	2.39	This statement falls under the frequency of cramming in sometimes.

Notably, the highest mean was observed in the item *"I feel stressed or pressured while making my requirements last minute before the submission"* (M = 3.77), falling under the often category. This suggests that while students may not consistently procrastinate in all aspects of their academic workload, the emotional and cognitive toll of cramming is frequently experienced. This aligns with the findings of Tice and Baumeister (1997), who emphasized the paradox of procrastination. Although students may delay tasks to avoid short-term stress, they ultimately face heightened stress and diminished performance outcomes as deadlines approach.

Several other behaviors, such as *"I started my school tasks at the last minute"* (M = 2.77) and *"I do not study my lessons which are given to me ahead of time"* (M = 2.72), were rated under the seldom category, suggesting that while these practices are present, they are not habitual for most students. Still, these responses reflect a pattern of occasional disengagement and task postponement, both hallmark traits of cramming (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984).

The overall frequency of cramming behavior appears to fall mainly under the sometimes category, as seen in items such as *"I do not submit my school requirements on or ahead of time"* (M = 2.52), *"I do not prioritize my assignments"* (M = 2.36), and "I prioritize other tasks than my academic tasks" (M = 2.39). These responses suggest that Filipino senior high school students navigate a complex web of competing priorities, often leading to sporadic instances of academic delay. This observation supports the sociocultural perspective offered by Sicat and David (2019), who argued that Filipino students develop coping mechanisms in response to the structural and familial pressures that define their educational experience.

Interestingly, while cramming is not reported as dominant or frequent behavior in most indicators, emotional distress during last-minute academic work suggests that even occasional cramming is cognitively taxing. Sweller's (1988) Cognitive Load Theory explains that working under time pressure increases intrinsic and extraneous cognitive loads, reducing learning efficiency and performance. The findings, therefore, highlight a disconnect between students' frequency of cramming and its psychological

impact, revealing that even low to moderate levels of cramming may carry significant emotional burdens.

Moreover, the optional qualitative responses reinforce these observations, with students frequently citing procrastination, distractions from social media, and poor time management as underlying causes. Such explanations are consistent with Guillermo and Ramos (2021), who found that digital distractions and lack of executive functioning skills significantly contributed to Filipino students' delayed academic engagement.

In sum, while cramming is not a dominant strategy among students regarding frequency, its cognitive and emotional impacts are evident. These results suggest a need for schools to implement structured time management programs and metacognitive strategies that address both the behavioral and psychological facets of cramming. Educational institutions should consider academic skill-building and mental wellness frameworks that recognize cramming as a behavioral and sociocultural phenomenon.

Respondents' Academic Performance

Table 2 presents the academic performance of the 154 Grade 12 respondents during the first semester of School Year 2022–2023. The data reveal that a significant majority of the students achieved commendable academic standing. Specifically, 51% (n = 63) of the students obtained a Very Satisfactory rating, with grades ranging from 85 to 89. This was followed by 32% (n = 48) who attained a Satisfactory level (80–84), and 11% (n = 17) who achieved an Outstanding performance (90–100). Meanwhile, 6% (n = 9) were classified under the Fairly Satisfactory category (76–79). Notably, no student fell below the passing grade, as 0% were reported in the "Did Not Meet Expectations" bracket (below 75). The mean academic performance was calculated at 85.50, placing the overall performance of the cohort within the Very Satisfactory range. These findings suggest that despite possible academic pressures and time management challenges, the students generally performed well in their academic requirements.

Table 2. Academic Performance of the Respondents

Academic Performance	Frequency	Percentage	Interpretation
90-100	17	11%	Outstanding
85-89	63	51%	Very Satisfactory
80-84	48	32%	Satisfactory
76-79	9	6%	Fairly Satisfactory
75 below	0		Did not meet

expectations

These results suggest that students perform well academically despite the cramming behavior reported in other study sections. The absence of respondents in the lowest performance category implies a strong baseline of academic achievement among the student population, even when confronted with challenges related to time management and academic pressure.

This finding supports the assertion of Steel (2007) that while procrastination (a behavioral aspect of cramming) can negatively affect performance, its impact is not always catastrophic, especially among high-achieving or resilient students. Similarly, Zarick and Stonebraker (2009) found that students may rely on short-term strategies like cramming without necessarily incurring immediate academic penalties. However, such strategies may compromise deep learning and long-term retention.

The mean grade of 85.50 also corresponds with studies by Teh and Luquing (2019), which noted that moderate cramming behaviors did not always predict poor academic performance. In fact, in collectivist learning environments like the Philippines, where familial support and peer collaboration often buffer stress, students may still achieve high marks despite inefficient study practices.

However, the literature warns that the adequacy of performance should not be the sole metric of success. Rabin, Fogel, and Nutter-Upham (2011) argue that repeated cramming may promote surface learning, hinder metacognitive awareness, and increase long-term academic anxiety. Thus, while students in this study are currently achieving well, overreliance on last-minute studying can have delayed cognitive consequences.

Given these findings, educators should proactively address cramming through academic penalties, fostering time management skills, promoting spaced learning strategies, and encouraging intrinsic motivation. Integrating non-cognitive interventions, such as self-regulation workshops or mindfulness practices, could help sustain academic performance while nurturing students' mental well-being and lifelong learning capacities.

Correlation Between Frequency of Cramming and Academic Performance

The statistical test to determine the relationship between the frequency of cramming and academic performance among Grade 12 students yielded an R value of -0.0657 and a p-value of 0.423187. The negative R value suggests an inverse relationship, indicating that as cramming frequency increases, academic performance

slightly decreases. However, the correlation is very weak, and the p-value exceeds the 0.05 significance level, concluding that the relationship is not statistically significant.

Table 3. Test of Significant Relationship Between Frequency of Cramming and Academic Performance

Statistical Results	Findings	Interpretation
R value = -0.0657	Negative Correlation	Weak
P value = 0.423187	Greater at the .05 level of significance	Not Significant

This implies that, within the context of this study, cramming behavior is not a reliable predictor of academic performance. Despite the common assumption that last-minute studying negatively affects learning outcomes, the data show no compelling statistical evidence to support a substantial or meaningful correlation between the two variables. These findings resonate with Teh and Luquing's (2019) study on college students, which found no significant link between cramming and final grades, suggesting that other factors, such as individual learning styles, content difficulty, or social support, may mediate academic outcomes.

Likewise, Zarick and Stonebraker (2009) noted that students may perform adequately despite procrastination, particularly if they possess higher cognitive capacities or external support systems. However, these studies also highlight that the lack of a negative statistical relationship should not be interpreted as validation of cramming as a sustainable academic strategy. Rabin, Fogel, and Nutter-Upham (2011) emphasized that cramming may not always impair short-term performance, but can still affect long-term knowledge retention, critical thinking development, and psychological well-being.

From a sociocultural perspective, the normalization of cramming within student communities, particularly in collectivist societies like the Philippines, may mask its more profound cognitive and emotional consequences. As Steel (2007) observed in his meta-analytic review of procrastination, students often use cramming as a coping mechanism to manage perfectionism, fear of failure, or motivation deficits, rather than as a strategic learning tool.

Given the statistical insignificance of the cramming-performance relationship, educators and administrators should avoid oversimplifying academic issues by attributing poor outcomes solely to student time management. Instead, interventions should focus on fostering metacognitive awareness, promoting early engagement with academic tasks, and understanding the cultural and emotional contexts that shape students' academic behaviors.

Reasons for Cramming among Students

The qualitative responses of 102 Grade 12 students revealed three major thematic categories encapsulating the most common reasons students resort to cramming: personal, family, and school-related factors.

Personal reasons were the most frequently cited cause. Many students attributed their cramming behavior to distractions such as social media use, laziness, poor time management, and lack of motivation. For instance, one respondent shared, *"I cram because of the distraction social media causes. I prefer happiness rather than the stress from assignments."* Others tended to delay academic tasks due to emotional exhaustion or mental fatigue. These observations align with Kornell and Bjork's (2007) findings on learners' difficulties in assessing their preparedness and engagement, especially under cognitive overload. Moreover, Calderwood et al. (2016) noted that students frequently underestimate the adverse effects of multitasking and digital distractions on their academic performance. This suggests that personal regulation and media consumption play a substantial role in the emergence of cramming behaviors.

Family-related factors also emerged as a significant theme. Several students cited economic and caregiving responsibilities as barriers to managing academic tasks. One participant noted, *"I cram because I need to do what I really need in my life, because I do not have parents to take care of us."* Others mentioned household duties and church responsibilities that take precedence over schoolwork. This echoes Wang's (2020) assertion that parental availability, expectations, and support structures greatly influence students' study habits, motivation, and prioritization of academic responsibilities. In low-resource households, students may be compelled to prioritize survival and familial duties over academic commitments.

Lastly, school-related reasons were also reported, ranging from overwhelming workloads to a lack of interest in specific subjects. One respondent explained, *"I get exhausted and not motivated to do it. It is also because of the number of tasks the teacher gives us."* Others indicated that they only study, when necessary, due to a lack of interest in the topic. These sentiments reflect the critical role of student engagement in academic behavior, as emphasized by Skinner et al. (2008), who found that disengaged learners are more likely to procrastinate, especially when faced with rigid or uninspiring instructional methods.

Across these categories, cramming among the respondents is not merely a result of poor study habits but is deeply rooted in broader sociocultural and systemic factors. These include digital distractions, economic hardship, domestic labor, and

institutional pressures, each contributing to a culture where cramming is normalized as a necessary survival strategy.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a nuanced understanding of cramming not merely as a time-management issue but as a complex academic survival strategy embedded within the sociocultural realities of Filipino senior high school students. The triangulated data, integrating frequency scores, academic performance, statistical correlation, and qualitative insights, demonstrate that while cramming may not significantly hinder academic outcomes in the short term, it exerts a considerable cognitive and emotional toll on students.

The frequency results reveal that cramming is not an overwhelmingly habitual behavior among Grade 12 students; most indicators hovered around the *"sometimes"* range, with only emotional distress during cramming episodes falling under the *"often"* category. This suggests that although students may occasionally delay academic tasks, the psychological burden of last-minute studying is consistently experienced. As Tice and Baumeister (1997) and Sweller (1988) have shown, even infrequent cramming can significantly increase stress and reduce cognitive efficiency due to heightened extraneous load, especially when tasks are complex and deadlines are imminent.

This dichotomy, between moderate behavioral occurrence and high emotional impact, underscores cramming's dual nature as both a coping mechanism and a stressor. The fact that students do not always procrastinate does not shield them from the anxieties and inefficiencies that arise when they do.

Interestingly, the academic performance data present a paradox. Despite reporting moderate levels of cramming, students achieved relatively high grades. Over 94% of respondents were categorized under *"Satisfactory"* or better, and no student fell into the *"Did Not Meet Expectations"* category. This apparent resilience suggests that cramming, while cognitively inefficient, may not immediately impair academic outcomes, particularly in high-context, collectivist societies such as the Philippines, where family support, collaborative learning, and peer scaffolding may mitigate academic stress (Teh & Luquing, 2019; Steel, 2007).

However, this should not be interpreted as validation of cramming as a sustainable or effective strategy. As Rabin, Fogel, and Nutter-Upham (2011) warned, short-term academic success under cramming may come at the cost of long-term retention, metacognitive development, and deeper learning. Thus, the good academic

standing of students may be more reflective of adaptive coping, grade inflation, or test-based evaluations that reward surface learning, rather than true academic mastery.

The weak and statistically insignificant correlation between cramming frequency and academic performance ($r = -0.0657$, $p = 0.423$) reinforces previous findings that cramming does not necessarily equate to academic failure (Teh & Luquing, 2019; Zarick & Stonebraker, 2009). However, this should not downplay its consequences. As Skinner et al. (2008) argue, disengagement, stress, and the normalization of cramming are symptomatic of deeper systemic issues such as uninspiring curricula, lack of student agency, and institutional overburdening.

Rather than serving as a metric for predicting grades, cramming in this context serves as a cultural signal of how students cope with overlapping demands from family, school, and personal life. It is a behavioral outcome of systemic constraints rather than individual failings.

The thematic analysis points to cramming as an adaptive response to environmental constraints. Students cited personal factors (e.g., digital distractions, laziness, stress), family obligations (e.g., household chores, financial responsibilities), and school-related pressures (e.g., workload, unengaging lessons) as key drivers. These findings reflect the sociocultural model of procrastination, which situates academic behavior within broader contexts of economic inequality, social expectations, and institutional structure (Wang, 2020; Calderwood et al., 2016).

Such results echo Sicat and David's (2019) sociological assertion that Filipino students often navigate learning environments shaped by survival-based priorities. In this context, cramming becomes a culturally negotiated compromise between academic obligations and life circumstances.

The study's findings carry important implications. First, while academic performance may remain stable, institutions should not overlook the affective costs of cramming. Programs focusing solely on grades miss the broader picture of student well-being and cognitive development. Second, interventions should go beyond punitive measures. Instead, schools should integrate metacognitive training, emotional regulation strategies, and time management workshops tailored to the students' sociocultural realities.

Finally, the normalization of cramming calls for curricular reform that considers workload distribution, instructional engagement, and student autonomy. Teachers should be trained in pedagogy and in identifying and responding to behavioral patterns that signify deeper emotional or familial distress.

Conclusion

This study examined cramming as a prevalent academic coping strategy among Grade 12 students. While cramming was not identified as a habitual practice for most respondents, it was found to exert a notable emotional toll and to be influenced by personal, familial, and institutional factors. Academic performance remained relatively high despite reported cramming behaviors, and no statistically significant correlation was found between cramming frequency and performance. These findings affirm that cramming among Filipino learners is not merely an issue of procrastination, but a sociocultural phenomenon rooted in the broader context of academic survival.

Given the cognitive and emotional costs associated with cramming, the study recommends that educational institutions adopt a holistic approach in supporting students. This includes integrating time management and metacognitive training into the curriculum, providing psychosocial support, and creating inclusive learning environments, considering students' socio-economic and familial contexts. By addressing both the behavioral and cultural dimensions of cramming, schools can promote academic success, student well-being, and long-term learning resilience.

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