

A Study on Locus of Hope and Suicide Ideation among Undergraduate Students in the Philippines

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Abstract

Last Academic Year 2021-2022, an alarming total of 2,147 students attempted suicide when most schools were still closed due to the pandemic as reported by the Philippine Daily Inquirer [1]. This study gained insight into suicide ideation among undergraduate students across the country anchoring Bernardo's extended hope theory [7] of Snyder [8] with the premise that blockage towards the goal pathway may lead to suicide ideation among individuals with perceived low hope. The data were collected online (N=128) through Google Forms. Descriptive and multiple regression analyses of data were used. Results have shown a negative relationship between undergraduate students' external locus of hope and suicide ideation. The likelihood of suicide ideation decreases by (-0.44 as predicted by EXT-PA; -0.62 as predicted by EXT-PE, and -0.79 as predicted by EXT-SP). Internal locus of hope (INT) on the other hand, does not predict suicide ideation. A high level of hope and a low level of suicide ideation were reported at the time of data collection. Proposed interventions to universities or colleges are recommended to further increase or maintain the hope level of undergraduate students as well as lessen or keep their suicide ideation at bay.

Keywords: suicide ideation, external locus-of-hope, internal locus of hope

Introduction

As reported by the Philippine Daily Inquirer [1], in the previous Academic Year 2021-2022, a total of 404 young students in various parts of the country took their own lives and 2,147 students attempted suicide when most schools were still closed due to the pandemic. This is alarming news for schools, parents, and mental health professionals. According to Assistant Education Secretary Dexter Galban, as he shared the statistics collected by the Department of Education (DepEd), during a meeting of the Senate basic education committee, based on the country's 28 million young learners in public schools, a total of 775,962 sought the assistance of guidance counselors during that period. Around 8,000 of the mentioned cases involved bullying, as per Galban. He believed that this was assumed to be underreported given the lack of guidance counselors in most schools. However, DepEd did not provide comparative s from previous academic years but Gatchalian cited a 2021 study by the University of the Philip-pines Population Institute which showed that 20 percent of young Filipinos had considered suicide. According to Senator Gatchalian, this may imply that as many as 5 million young Filipinos may have thought of suicide. He mentioned that there's a great number of students who needed counseling and reach out to them. The Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS), a collaborative

surveillance project supported by the World Health Organization, also showed an uptrend in suicidal thoughts among 13 to 17-year-old students in the Philip-pines. Based on the 2019 survey, teenage respondents who reported they seriously considered suicide rose to 23.1 percent and those who tried to take their own lives at least once rose to 24.3 percent as per Ramos.

Nearly one out of five young Filipinos have considered ending their lives, according to findings of a nationwide survey released by the University of the Philippines Population Institute (UPPI) on October 10, 2022 [2]. The UPPI announced 6 out of 10 of those who thought of committing suicide did not reach out to anyone about it. Only a few who did reach out mostly sought help from their close friends or peers (25% of suicide ideators), followed by their parents or guardians (7%), and their relatives (5%). Among those individuals who acted on their thoughts, seeking professional help was highly unpopular (4%) for them. In addition, only 1 in every 10 young Filipinos is aware of any suicide prevention program or service [2]. An interview was made last October 2022 with a 22-year-old college student who stated that his suicidal thoughts have always been there, and just amplified by the pandemic [3]. He also added that for some students, the notion of attending means admitting that something is wrong with them when it comes to mental health seminars.

According to Rizal, his famous line: “Ang kabataan ang pag-asa ng bayan” or in the English language – “The youth is the hope of our country.” [4]. From this teleological perspective in the Philippine context, the youth has an important part to play in society. However, due to the alarming concern that the youth have been facing since the pandemic, students have their share of troubles with the transition to online learning. In an interview with a freshman taking up social work at Southern Christian College in Southern Cotabato, Veverly Avance shared that her first year of senior high in 2020 was a struggle and that she had to climb her way up to eventually become an honor student. Her remote learning has been her most difficult time during her academic year; she also lacked interest in participating in school activities and encountered internet problems [5]. Cases like Avance’s might be a contributing factor toward students’ perspective in life. GMA News [6] reported the urge to implement school-based mental health programs due to the rise of suicides and attempted suicides from The Philippine Inquirer. In addition, Save the Children Philippines emphasized that the country’s problem with mental health is considered- “a public health concern that requires an urgent whole-community approach response.”

This research focuses on the current public health concern regarding suicide ideation among undergraduate students. As this is an alarming case in the Philippine context, this global mental health phenomenon should not be overlooked by professionals in authority. Awareness of one’s mental health is as important as one’s physical health.

This study aimed towards a better understanding of the relationship between Bernardo’s [7] locus-of-hope and suicide ideation among undergraduate students. Data derived from the study may help formulate interventions or mental health assessments in educational settings. Authorities namely: principals, deans, program heads, faculties, parents, and students respectively, may benefit from this study through established modified interventions in schools in terms of assessing the mental health condition of the entire school population. This study may also pave the way towards the concern of limited guidance counselors due to the lack of proportion towards the overall number of students seeking

help. Participation-wise, students in need of guidance counselors or mental health professionals would feel neither excluded nor ostracized among other students when seeking help if interventions were done and practiced in groups, as well as for students to be aware that their feelings are valid, and so does other students.

Literature Review

According to Snyder [8], hope is a goal-directed cognitive construct that considers future expectancies and encompasses pathway thinking (plans to meet goals) and agency thinking (the motivational component of goal pursuit). With this in mind, suicidal thoughts and attempts result from goal blockage [8]. Bernardo [7] proposed a study as an extension to Snyder's hope theory [8]. As stated, he added locus-of-hope as the dimension of trait hope which comprised internal or external agents, and internally or externally generated pathways. The internal locus-of-hope (INT) dimension focuses on the individual as the agent of goal-attainment cognitions, while external locus-of-hope (EXT) refers to significant others and external forces as agents of goal-attainment cognitions. Three sub dimensions were proposed by Bernardo namely: parent/family (EXT-PA), peers (EXT-PE), and supernatural/spiritual beings or forces (EXT-SP) [7]. The three sub-dimensions were derived from Philippine studies [7].

World Health Organization (WHO) reported over 700,000 individuals die by suicide around the world per year and at least 20 times as many attempted suicides [9]. Both low- and middle-income countries, including the Philippines, are disproportionately affected, with over 70 percent of global suicide deaths. Furthermore, suicide risk may contribute to the increase as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect individuals' physical and mental health, social life, and economic status. Philippine Statistics Authority and the Department of Health both reported the rise in the number of deaths by suicide and the number of suicide-related calls to the National Center for Mental Health crisis hotlines since the start of the pandemic. However, on the bright side, suicides are preventable. Therefore, each individual must play their part in being responsible and protecting the lives of those within their reach as per Gonzalez. In addition, adjusting one's beliefs and attitudes toward suicide is important for efforts in prevention. Quintos' findings from a nationally representative sample of 19,728 Filipino youth aged 15 to 27 revealed that suicide ideation is a by-product of the interplay between poor family relationships, affiliated peers, deviant behaviors, and the limited availability of counselors [10]. His findings suggested the importance of five factors in suicide: (1) the quality of strong family relationships between parent/s and child, (2) the importance of regulating the youth's involvement in peer groups, (3) the danger of deviant and risky lifestyles, (4) the convenience of access to guidance counselors, and (5) the danger of having suicidal peers [10]. Concerning suicide ideation among undergraduates, Choi & Bae found that suicide ideation and the acquired capability for suicide significantly predicted the frequency of suicide attempts, and the interaction between students' suicide ideation and acquired capability for suicide had a significant effect on suicide attempt frequency [11]. The findings suggest that the feeling of being worthless to society as well as burdensome to others is a major risk factor affecting the suicide rates of undergraduate students in South Korea. In addition, to assess suicide risk or suicide, providing intervention on the acquired capability for suicide, along with suicide ideation should be considered. Age, alexithymia subscales of difficulty identifying feelings, externally oriented thinking, and impulsivity subscales of motor, self-control, and non-planning were considered significant in the regression analysis of suicide risk [12]. This may imply that age may contribute to predicting suicide

ideation among college students. Hope may be important in buffering against suicide ideation and behavior across different populations, which he considered a future-oriented construct [13]. The statement that constructs hope and hopelessness are correlated but distinct from each other [14]. In line with that, hope may serve as a buffer or a resilience factor that may have an impact on suicidal ideation. In summary, influencing hope towards people may be a helpful factor in preventing suicide. A positive correlation was found between the internal locus of hope and capability for suicide, while the external locus of hope has a negative correlation with capability for suicide [15]. This may imply that the higher an individual's external locus of hope is, the lower capability for suicide may be expected.

In the Philippine context, the prevalence of suicide ideation among participants from a private university in Manila revealed 24%, which showed a low level of severity of suicidal thoughts [16]. In addition, none of the socio-demographic variables was associated with suicide ideation. Multivariate analyses presented that students who were dissatisfied with one's love relationships and those who reported low levels of closeness with parents and with peers were more likely to think of suicide.

In an international context, students displayed high rates of complete mental health, even though the survey was conducted amid the Coronavirus pandemic [17]. No evidence was found that medical students are particularly stressed. There was no difference between medical students and other students regarding suicidal ideation and behavior. Furthermore, the majority of students reported high levels of positive mental health. Regardless of the pandemic situation, medical students showed lower rates of depressive symptomatology and higher rates of positive mental health. The results may indicate that medical students may be resilient in adversities and are focused on their goals. Perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness revealed no interaction in the prediction of 12-month suicidal ideation [18]. Although reported no interaction, internal factors, including entrapment mediated the relationship between defeat and the 12-month suicidal ideation. In addition, moderation of belongingness and burdensomeness found support from entrapment to the pathway of suicide ideation.

A previous study proved that there were evident research gaps in the literature and the population gap regarding suicide ideation in youth [16]. Hence, the present study aimed to know the relationship between the two variables studied: Locus-of-hope [7] (INT, EXT-PA, EXT-PE, and EXT-SP) which is an extension of Snyder's hope theory [8], and suicide ideation in undergraduate students in the Philippine context.

The importance of this study is to provide awareness and help establish interventions derived from the data in assessing undergraduate students' mental health conditions at the present time.

Method

Study Design and Variables

The study used a correlational design which determined the relationship between the variables: (Independent Variable: Locus-of-Hope (INT, EXT – PA, EXT – PE, and EXT – SP) and (Dependent Variable: Suicide Ideation) [7].

Study Setting

The study was conducted purely online due to the safety restrictions of COVID-19. From April 24, 25, 26, and 27, 2023, online data gathering was conducted through shared links of Google forms to Facebook groups, friends, and friends of friends who were qualified to take part in the study.

Eligibility criteria

The study focused on Filipino adolescents [1] who were also young Filipino students [2, 3] currently enrolled in the Academic Year 2022-2023.

Population and Sampling

The population in this study comprised undergraduate students currently enrolled in different universities, or colleges (N=128). The undergraduate students were ages 18 and above, categorized as young adults between the ages of approximately 18 to 40 years old [19]. The type of sampling used in the study was convenience sampling due to various limitations and restrictions of soliciting responses from willing and available respondents to the survey.

Materials used

The researcher made use of 2 instruments (Bernardo's Locus-of-Hope Scale (LOHS) [7], and a self-made Suicide Ideation scale).

Bernardo developed the Locus-of-Hope Scale (LOHS) [7] by incorporating the Trait Hope Scale (THS) essentially verbatim (as the internal locus-of-hope subscale) and adding three more subscales namely: external-family, external-peers, and external-spiritual—to reflect those external loci-of-hope. The items of the scale are scored using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“Definitely false”) to 4 (“Definitely true”). Including eight filler items, the Locus-of-Hope Scale thus consists of 40 items and can yield a total score as well as four subscale scores obtained by totaling the relevant items. High scores may indicate high levels of hope. Internal consistency in the present study was excellent ($\alpha > .90$) for all measures of general hope (i.e., pathways and agency combined). When pathways and agency subscales were considered separately, alphas ranged from .84 (agency hope [internal]) to .97 (pathways hope [external-spiritual]) [15].

The self-made suicide ideation scale (Ebreo Suicide Ideation scale) was anchored by the theoretical model Integrated Motivational-Volitional (IMV) Model of Suicidal Behavior which proposes that suicidal behavior results from a complex interplay of motivational and volitional phase factors [20]. The main proposition of the theoretical model is the factors related to the progress of suicidal ideation or intent are distinct from those that govern the transition from suicidal ideation to suicide attempts or suicide [21]. It is a diathesis-stress model that specifies the components of the pre-motivational, motivational (ideation/intent formation), and volitional (behavioral enaction) phases of suicidality. According to the theory, suicidal behavior results from a complex interplay of motivational and volitional phase factors. It is a three-phase biopsychosocial framework that outlines the final common pathway toward suicidal ideation and behavior. The core constructs of defeat/humiliation, entrapment, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior form the backbone of the theoretical model and span both phases (motivational & volitional) [20].

The researcher consulted with experts in terms of validating the items of the scale. The participants in the study were also the sample in the pilot testing. A total of 40 items were developed; 20 items for the Defeat/Humiliation domain, 10 items for the Entrapment domain, and 10 items for the Suicide Ideation/Behavior (past) domain. The items were measured using a 4-point Likert-type scale, with 4 (Strongly Agree), 3 (Agree), 2 (Disagree), and 1 (Strongly Disagree). High scores indicate a high level of suicide ideation. Psychometric properties of the scale reveal very high reliability per domain measured: Defeat/Humiliation domain (.95), Entrapment domain (.94), and Suicide Ideation/Behavior (past) domain (.92). Overall, the scale has very high reliability (.97).

Results

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1 represents the demographic profile of the respondents. The study comprised 128 undergraduate students enrolled from different universities, and colleges in the Philippines.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the respondents (n=128).

Demographic Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-24	113	88.3%
	25-54	15	11.7%
Gender	Male	39	30.5%
	Female	81	63.3%
	LGBTQ+	8	6.3%
Year Level	1	11	8.6%
	2	30	23.4%
	3	54	42.2%
	4	28	21.9%
	5+	5	3.9%

Table 1 shows a total of 113 (88.3%) respondents were from the 18-24 age bracket, while 15 undergraduate students reported from the 25-54 (11.7%) age bracket. In terms of gender, the majority of the respondents were female, with a total of 81 (63.3%) respondents, followed by 39 (30.5%) male respondents, and 8 (6.3%) from the LGBTQ+ community. The distribution of the current year level of the respondents was also measured. A total of 54 (42.2%) were undergraduate students from the 3rd year level, followed by 30 (23.4%) from the 2nd year level, then 28 (21.9%) from the 4th year level, and 5 (3.9%) undergraduate students reported year 5 above. The researcher managed to collect the respondents' university/college names, degree programs, and email addresses for assessing the respondents' current suicide ideation level should there be an alarmingly high level derived from the suicide ideation scale. All respondents in the study are currently enrolled in different universities or colleges in the Philippines.

Regression Summary Results

Table 2: Regression Summary Results

N=128	Regression Summary for Dependent Variable: SUICIDE IDEATION					
	R= .99645661 R ² = .99292578 Adjusted R ² = .99263821 F(5,123)=3452.8 p<0.0000 Std. Error of estimate: .75053					
	b*	Std. Err. of b*	b	Std. Err. of b	t(123)	p-value
Intercept			-1.23725	0.081129	-15.2504	0.000000
INT	-0.409447	0.212015	-0.41496	0.214871	-1.9312	0.055756
EXT - PA	-0.441377	0.181125	-0.44677	0.183339	-2.4369	0.016247
EXT – PE	-0.619192	0.177752	-0.62541	0.179539	-3.4835	0.000686
EXT – SP	-0.790595	0.159688	-0.79611	0.160802	-4.9509	0.000002
LOCUS OF HOPE	3.252560	0.555682	3.29422	0.562798	5.8533	0.000000

Note: All values in red indicate the significance of variables (p<0.0000).

The data in Table 2 were analyzed using a statistical software (STATISTICA 12) through multiple regression analysis, using the values of Internal Locus of Hope (INT) (x₁), External Locus of Hope – Parent (EXT – PA) (x₂), External Locus of Hope – Peers (EXT – PE) (x₃), External Locus of Hope – Spiritual (EXT – SP) (x₄), and overall Locus of Hope (LOH) (x₅) as regressors or predictors of the likelihood of occurrence of suicide ideation. The regression was a good fit (R²adj=99%), and the overall relationship was significant F(5,123)=3452.8 p<0.0000. With other variables held constant, the values of Locus of Hope External – Parent (EXT – PA) (x₂), External Locus of Hope – Peers (EXT – PE) (x₃), and External Locus of Hope – Spiritual (EXT – SP) (x₄) are negatively and significantly related to suicide ideation (Y). The likelihood of suicide ideation (Y) decreases by -0.44 as predicted by External Locus of Hope – Parent (EXT – PA) (x₂), decreases by -0.62 as predicted by External Locus of Hope – Peers (EXT – PE) ((x₃), and decreases by -0.79 as predicted by External Locus of Hope – Spiritual (EXT – SP) (x₄).

Locus of Hope Summary

Figure 1 represents the overall responses of undergraduate students in terms of their locus of hope using histogram and box and whisker plot diagrams.

Figure 1: Locus of Hope Graphical Summary

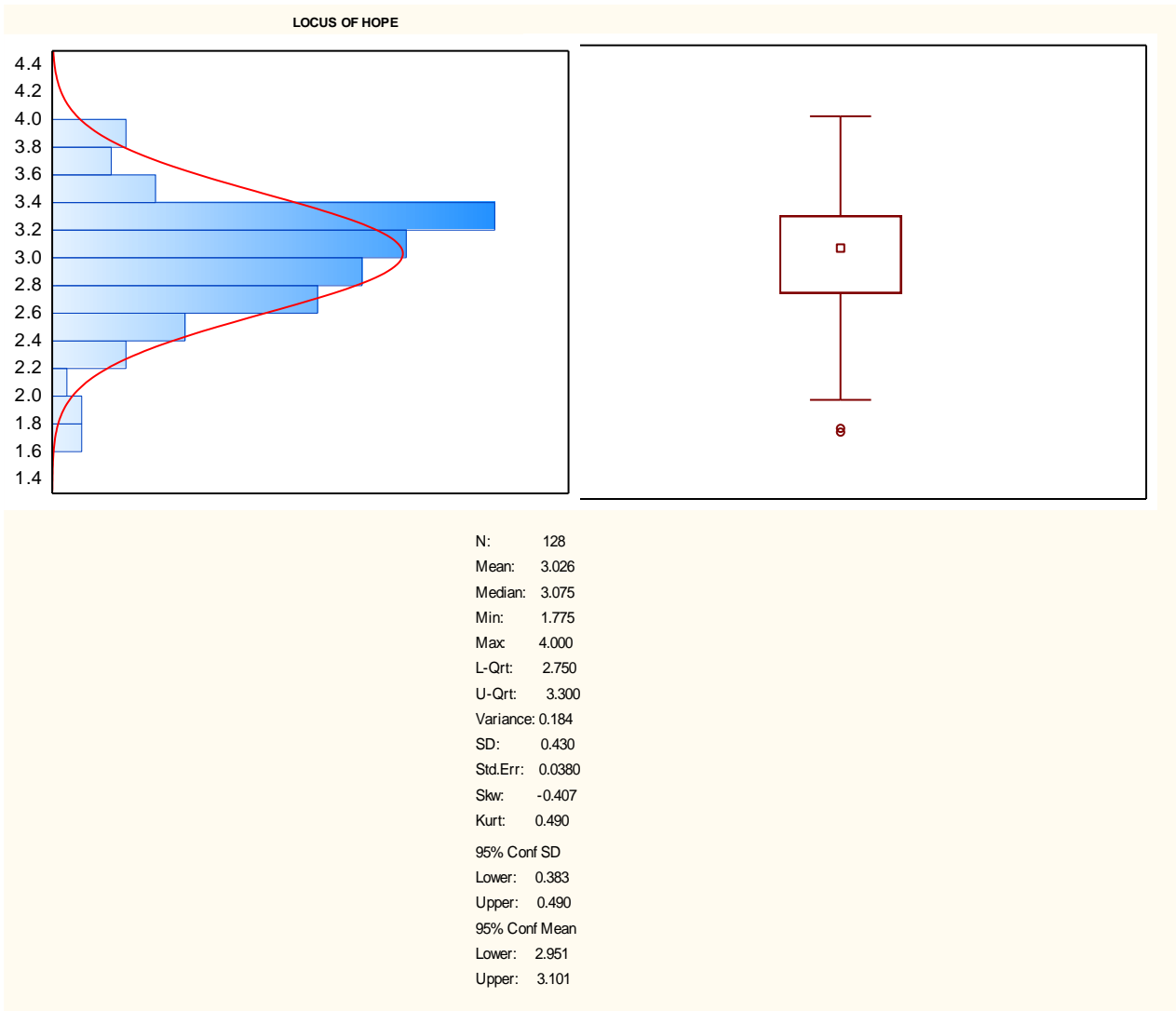


Figure 1 shows the results of the student’s level of hope, in which most scores fall on the higher end of the distribution ($M= 3.026$; $SD= 0.430$) which may indicate that most of the respondents have a high overall locus of hope. Factors for students’ high level of hope may include the gradual transition from online classes to face-to-face classes at most universities and colleges.

Suicide Ideation Summary

Figure 2 comprised scores from undergraduate students based on their suicide ideation presented using histogram and box and whisker plot.

Figure 2: Suicide Ideation Graphical Summary

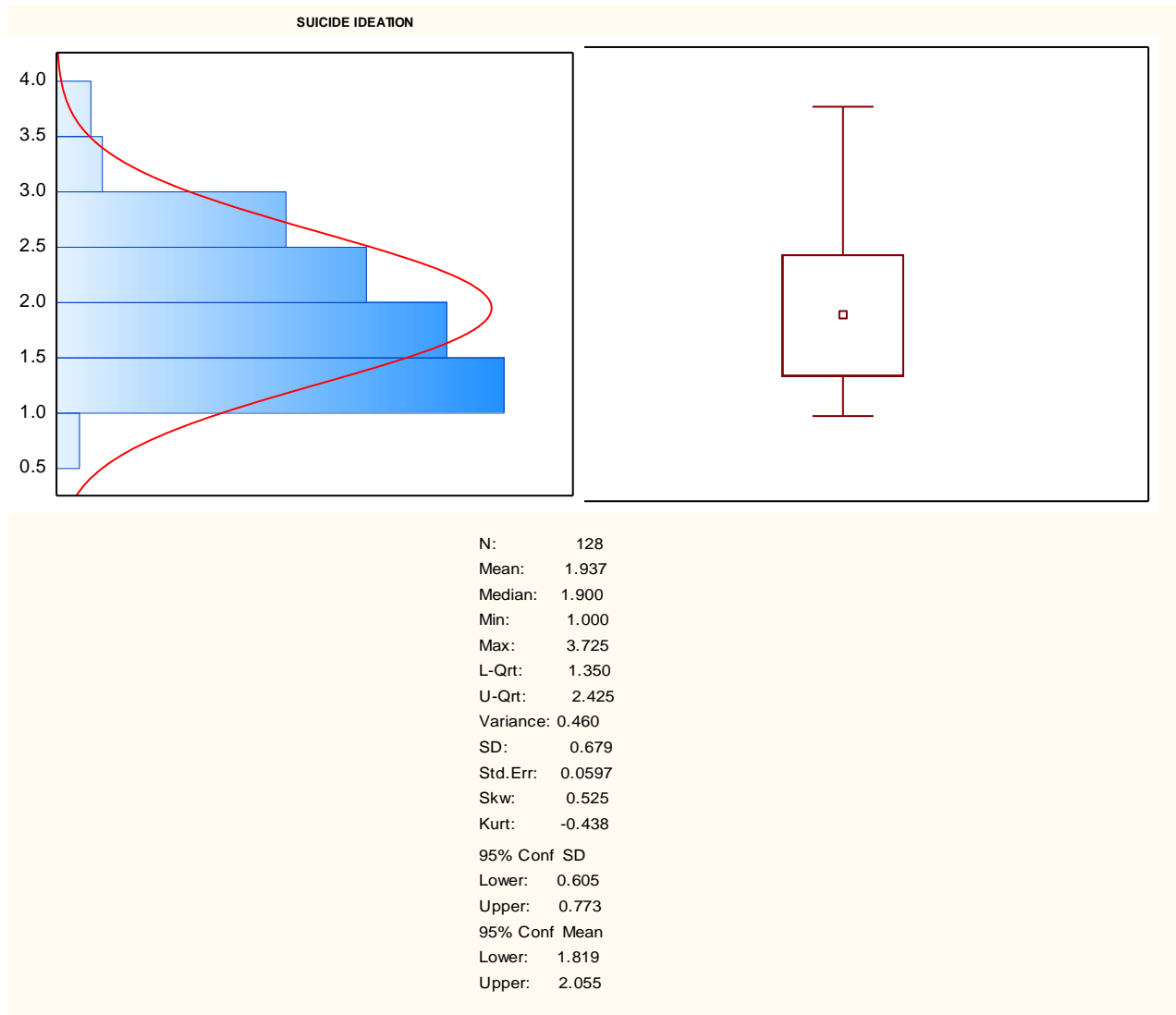


Figure 2 may indicate that most of the students have low suicide ideation ($M= 1.937$; $SD= 0.679$) at the time when the data was gathered (April 24, 25, 26, and 27, 2023). Factors for low suicide ideation may include undergraduate students being productive with their school work, well-established social connections, perspective, or optimism of students.

Discussion

The results of the study reveal that there is a negative relationship between an undergraduate student's external locus of hope (EXT – PA, EXT – PE, and EXT – SP) and suicide ideation. With that regard, external agents of locus of hope help predict suicide ideation. External Locus of Hope–Spiritual (EXT-SP) has a higher predictor factor as derived from the data compared to peers, and family factors of external locus of hope (Table 2). The data may indicate that most undergraduate students who

participated in the study are religious and have more faith and spiritual perspective. In summary, data indicates that hope may act as a buffer in terms of a student's suicidal thoughts [13, 15], particularly the external locus of hope concerning spiritual being (EXT-SP) (Table 2). Results in contrast with the findings of this study revealed no association between perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness [18], and high positive mental health rates amid the COVID-19 pandemic [17].

Suicide ideation as analyzed by STATISTICA is dependent on the student's external locus of hope, leaning more towards spirituality. Figure 1 and 2 in this study shows most scores fall on higher levels of hope (Figure 1), and low level of suicide ideation (Figure 2). From the data presented, factors that may contribute to the students having higher hope in terms of spirituality may involve the culture of the Filipinos, being bounded by one's faith, in times of stress some students may pray, schools with a religious background may also be contributing factor, as well as one's family background as nearly 79% of the Filipino population are Catholics [23].

Conclusion

The hope theory of Snyder [8] suggests that a blockage of a goal pathway may lead to an individual's suicide ideation or tendency when an individual has low hope. Bernardo's hope theory [7] on the other hand, extended Snyder's hope theory by introducing external agents (peers, family, and spiritual beings). Therefore, results from the study revealed that there is a significant relationship between undergraduate students' external locus of hope (spiritual, peers, and parent) in terms of their suicide ideation. In addition, data showed that undergraduate students' locus of hope scores were high as evident from the graphic summary, and suicide ideation scores were low at the time of data gathering. This may suggest that undergraduate students are hopeful due to the external factors based on the results, and may also be contributed to other factors including the gradual transition from online classes to face-to-face classes at universities or colleges; low active cases of COVID-19 or the students may be able to cope better at the present situation. On the other hand, the internal locus of hope does not predict suicide ideation among undergraduate students. This may indicate that external factors specifically spiritual have more impact on undergraduate students than their internal locus of hope in terms of having suicide ideation.

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