

Exploring the Mediating Role of Internship Experience to the Self-Efficacy and Career Aspirations of Undergraduate Students

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Abstract. This research investigated the hypothesized relationships between internship experience, self-efficacy, and career aspirations among undergraduate students in the Philippines. A sample of 100 participants completed an online survey that comprised the Work Experience Questionnaire (WEQ), Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES), and Career Aspiration Scale (CAS) to measure the research variables. Cross-sectional surveys and purposive sampling were employed to identify the participants. To test the potential mediating role of internship experience, a mediation analysis was conducted using the Hierarchical Multiple Regression Method. The findings revealed a significant positive association between self-efficacy and career aspirations. However, contrary to the initial hypothesis, the analysis did not detect a mediating effect of internship experience. This challenges the prevailing assumption that internships universally enhance the self-efficacy-career aspiration link. The study acknowledges limitations, such as the potential influence of unexplored variables not incorporated into the research design. Despite this, the study explores the interplay between internship experiences, self-efficacy, and career aspirations within the undergraduate population. Future research with a larger sample and a more comprehensive framework incorporating additional potentially mediating factors is warranted for a deeper understanding of this intricate relationship.

Keywords: Self-efficacy; Internship experience; Career aspirations; Mediation analysis; Undergraduate students.

1.0 Introduction

Internships are a crucial bridge between theoretical education and practical experience for undergraduate students. It allows students to apply their classroom knowledge to real-world scenarios (Bawica, 2021; Sharir et al., 2016) and foster a deeper understanding of their chosen field (Kaşlı & İlban, 2013). It also provides students with invaluable exposure to the realities of the workplace. The literature emphasizes that experiencing real job situations allows students to develop realistic expectations for their future careers (Lam & Ching, 2007). This exposure can be particularly beneficial in adjusting career aspirations to align with the demands and opportunities of the chosen field.

Moreover, research highlights a positive correlation between internship experiences that provide significant

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insights and students' self-efficacy (Tabbada et al., 2023). Self-efficacy refers to individuals' confidence in their ability to execute tasks and pursue goals (Bhati et al., 2022), influenced by practical experiences, mentorship, and exposure to real-life challenges (Yao & Wu, 2024). High levels of self-efficacy among undergraduate students are associated with more ambitious career aspirations (Njiku et al., 2022), reinforcing the link between self-belief and career goals (Bindu & Padmahan, 2016).

However, while these studies show that internship offers a valuable bridge between education and the professional world, it was also found that some internship experiences can negatively impact student self-efficacy and career aspirations. Potential challenges within the perceived internship experience, such as menial tasks or a lack of mentorship, can create negative learning experiences. These negative experiences can lead to decreased self-efficacy, hindering advancement within the student's chosen career path (Ko, 2007). Some studies also suggest that negative internship experiences can lead to students' uncertainty about their chosen career paths and may even cause some to abandon their fields altogether (Fidgeon, 2010)

To deepen our understanding of these insights, we turn to the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) proposed by Lent et al. (1994). SCCT is a model of career development that describes how personal inputs, contextual affordances, and social cognitive variables affect the formation of self-efficacy and career aspirations. One of SCCT's strengths lies in its emphasis on self-efficacy. SCCT positions self-efficacy as the driving force behind ambitious career aspirations. By allowing students to apply their knowledge in real-world settings through internships, SCCT suggests a positive impact on student confidence. However, the theory assumes a linear relationship between positive experiences and increased self-efficacy. Negative internship experiences, such as menial tasks, inadequate supervision, or lack of learning opportunities, can create a sense of inadequacy and disillusionment. When students encounter these negative experiences, their confidence in their abilities and chosen career paths can be undermined, potentially leading them to question their suitability for their chosen fields.

Building upon this knowledge base, our study delves into the intricate relationship between Filipino undergraduate students' perceived internship experiences, self-efficacy beliefs, and career aspirations. We aim to achieve this by investigating the impact of self-efficacy on students' career aspirations and assessing the potential mediating role of perceived internship experience to students' self-efficacy and career aspirations.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

Cross-sectional surveys and purposive sampling were employed to identify the participants. To test the potential mediating role of internship experience, a mediation analysis was conducted using the Hierarchical Multiple Regression Method. The findings revealed a significant positive association between self-efficacy and career aspirations.

2.2 Research Locale

The study was conducted in the Luzon and Visayas regions of the Philippines. These two regions are the major geographical portion of the Philippines, with Luzon Island being the largest and the Visayas being the center part of the country. The research area included private and public colleges across various provinces and cities within the Luzon and Visayas regions. The colleges vary in specialization and institutional distinctiveness, reflecting the diversity of Higher education in the Philippines.

2.3 Research Participants

This study's participants are 100 undergraduate students from different institutions in the Philippines who have completed at least one internship requirement for the school year 2023-2024. Among the respondents, 73% are female, and the greater proportion of courses, accounting for 48%, are in the profession of Health Sciences (e.g., nursing, psychology, and pharmacy). Among the hundred participants, the majority, 82%, hailed from private schools, with the remaining 18% coming from public schools.

2.4 Research Instrument

This study utilized three primary questionnaires to gather data on internship experience, self-efficacy, and career

aspirations. The instruments include the adapted Work Experience Questionnaire (WEQ), the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES), and the Career Aspiration Scale (CAS).

The researchers adapted the Work Experience Questionnaire (WEQ) originally developed by Martin (1997). The 11-item questionnaire was modified to enhance its relevance and applicability to this study and to assess various aspects of the students' perceived internship experiences. The scale demonstrates strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.902$). The questionnaire includes items that measure the quality and relevance of the internship as perceived by the students, as well as the skills and competencies gained.

The Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES) by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) was used to measure the students' level of self-efficacy. The 10-item GSES, with a reliability score of ($\alpha = 0.935$), was designed to assess a broad and stable sense of personal competence to deal effectively with various stressful situations. In this study, the researchers modified the GSES to focus on domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs related to career development, such as efficacy in job performance, networking, and professional decision-making.

The Career Aspiration Scale (CAS), established by Gregor and O'Brien (2015), was also utilized. The CAS is a self-report questionnaire designed to assess the student's career aspirations, including leadership, achievement, and educational aspirations. With a strong internal consistency of ($\alpha = 0.806$), the scale consists of 24 items, each rated on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all true of me) to 4 (very true of me). For the specific context of this study, the researchers modified items to focus on career aspirations and to ensure that the questionnaire is relevant and applicable to the undergraduate students.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

An online questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms on Facebook groups, university email lists, and online forums tailored for undergraduate students who completed at least one internship requirement for the school year 2023-2024.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were applied to ensure the protection and respect of all participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's nature, purpose, and potential risks. Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study without any repercussions. To maintain confidentiality, no personally identifiable information was collected, and all data was stored securely, accessible only to the researchers. The study also adhered to the principle of non-maleficence by ensuring that the questionnaire avoided sensitive or distressing questions that could cause harm to the participants. By adhering to these ethical considerations, the study aims to maintain the highest standards of integrity and respect for the rights and well-being of all participants.

3.0 Results and Discussion

This study hypothesized that self-efficacy influences the career aspirations of undergraduate students and that the perceived internship experience mediates the relationship between their self-efficacy and career aspirations. The result is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation analysis of internship experience, self-efficacy, and career aspiration

		Career Aspirations	Self-Efficacy	Internship Experience
Career Aspirations	Pearson r	-	0.497**	0.189
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	<.001	0.059
Self-Efficacy	Pearson r	0.497**	-	0.171
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	-	0.088
Internship Experience	Pearson r	0.189	0.171	-
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.059	0.088	-

Note: *p <.05, **p <0.1, ***p <.001

The researchers analyzed three variables based on participant responses to examine their relationships. In Table 2, self-efficacy significantly correlates with career aspiration ($r = .497$, $p = .001$). While internship experience also

positively correlates with career aspirations, it is not statistically significant ($r = .189$, $p = .059$). Additionally, although self-efficacy positively correlates with internship experience, the correlation is not statistically significant ($r = .171$, $p = .088$). These findings suggest that self-efficacy plays a role in influencing career decision-making alongside contextual factors and personal attributes (Winga, 2021) and highlight self-efficacy as a key factor influencing career aspirations (Betz & Hackett, 1981; Gregor et al., 2020). Furthermore, this aligns with Bandura's (1977) theory, which posits that self-efficacy in career contexts relates to an individual's confidence in handling tasks related to their career pursuits.

Moreover, students with high self-efficacy have stronger interest in a particular career area. They are likely to demonstrate the behaviors they aim to exhibit, exert significant effort to achieve their goals, and confidently navigate the workplace, thereby influencing their future career-planning decisions (Betz & Hackett, 1981; Rodinda & Eva, 2023). Conversely, individuals with low self-efficacy may need more confidence in their abilities as they navigate the world of work, potentially impacting their career planning (Rodinda & Eva, 2023). Each student must assess their skills and abilities when determining their career path. Educators are encouraged to develop programs that enhance students' sense of belief, as it significantly influences their career paths. Individuals with lower or moderate self-efficacy may benefit from support, training, and additional development to progress in their careers (Hartman, 2020). These findings build upon prior research highlighting the impact of self-efficacy on career aspirations (Ballout, 2009; Hartman, 2020).

Considering that internships rank among the most influential factors shaping students' career decisions (Richardson, 2008), the relationship between internship experience, career aspirations, and self-efficacy reveals a weak correlation. This suggests that the quality and nature of internship experiences among undergraduate students have a limited impact on altering their career aspirations. Potential contributing factors to these findings stem from the initial gap in expectations (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000) that students encounter at the outset of their internships. Therefore, institutions are advised to carefully plan and communicate structured internship programs to students before they commence their internships (Cheong et al., 2014).

Table 2. Model summary for internship experience

R	R ²	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
1.1717	.029	0.396	2.967	1.00	98.00	0.088

The findings presented in Table 2 reveal that self-efficacy accounts for approximately 2.49% of the variance in the internship experience ($R^2 = .029$). The results imply that gaining a positive or negative internship experience does not necessarily lead to an increase or decrease in a student's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations or tasks. Factors beyond internship experiences, such as personal backgrounds (Ivana, 2019), educational background, upbringing, and individual psychological traits (Lefevre et al., 2010), likely play a more critical role in shaping and developing self-efficacy beliefs. Since internship experiences may not significantly influence self-efficacy, educators can explore and implement alternative strategies that foster students' confidence, resilience, and preparedness for future career pursuits. Therefore, despite participating in internships, individuals may not observe a direct impact on their self-efficacy levels solely based on these experiences. This underscores the importance of considering broader influences on student development and career readiness.

Table 3. Direct and indirect effects summary

Effect Type	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	p
Total Effect of SE on CA	0.411	0.073	0.267	0.555	.001
Direct Effect of SE on CA	0.396	0.074	0.250	0.542	.001
Indirect Effect (IE)	0.075	0.023	-0.057	0.057	.088
Completely Standardized IE	0.018	0.023	-0.057	0.057	.088

*Note: SE = Self-Efficacy; CA = Career Aspirations; IE = Internship Experience.

Furthermore, Table 3 presents the second part of the analysis, which examines the variables' direct and indirect effects. The findings reveal a significant direct effect of self-efficacy on career aspirations (.396, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of self-efficacy predict stronger career aspirations among undergraduate students. This suggests

that students with elevated confidence and self-esteem are more likely to succeed in pursuing ambitious career goals and effectively implementing them in their workplace (Hamzah et al., 2022). Therefore, it is advised that educators and mentors foster students' self-belief, as this positive reinforcement can significantly impact their overall development and future achievements. Digamon and De La Pena (2022) also highlighted that educators who foster strong relationships with their students tend to show increased engagement and attentiveness to their academic progress.

Research suggests that individual differences among students, such as self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and prior experiences, often substantially influence career aspirations than internship experiences alone (Ivana, 2019). Factors like lifestyle preferences and intellectual challenges (Lefevre et al., 2010) also significantly shape students' career decisions besides internships. Therefore, while internships provide valuable opportunities for undergraduates to acquire practical skills and industry insights, their ability to significantly change career aspirations needs to be improved. Students are likely influenced more by their internal characteristics and external circumstances rather than the specific details of their internship experiences when determining their long-term career goals. Thus, educators, mentors, and institutions should consider a holistic career development approach encompassing various influences beyond internships alone.

4.0 Conclusion

This study investigated the potential mediating role of internship experiences on the relationship between self-efficacy and career aspirations in undergraduate students, drawing upon Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). While SCCT posits that environmental factors like internships can bolster self-efficacy, ultimately influencing career aspirations, the current research yielded a surprising outcome. The analysis confirmed a significant positive association between self-efficacy and career aspirations, aligning with SCCT principles. However, the hypothesized mediating effect of perceived internship experiences was not supported. This finding presents a critical challenge to the traditional understanding of internship experiences within SCCT. The theory suggests that internships provide students with opportunities to gain performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, and social persuasion – all of which can contribute to increased self-efficacy. However, the results suggest that, in this specific context, perceived internship experiences alone may not significantly influence career aspirations beyond the direct effect of self-efficacy.

Several explanations for this outcome can be explored. First, the nature of the internship experiences might be a contributing factor. The quality of the internship, the level of responsibility provided, and the industry relevance might have played a role. Internship experiences that lack these elements might not provide the necessary opportunities to enhance self-efficacy. Second, SCCT acknowledges the interplay of multiple factors. Perhaps other environmental factors, such as strong mentorship programs or career exploration activities alongside internships, might be necessary for internships to exert a stronger mediating influence on career aspirations.

Future research informed by SCCT could delve deeper into these possibilities. Investigating specific aspects of internship experiences that contribute most to self-efficacy development would be valuable. Additionally, exploring how internship quality or industry relevance moderates the mediating effect could provide a more nuanced understanding. Ultimately, a more comprehensive approach that considers the combined influence of internship experiences and other environmental factors within the SCCT framework is needed to elucidate their impact on career aspirations fully. By critically examining the limitations of internship experiences in isolation, this study hopes to contribute to a more holistic understanding of career development in undergraduate students. Future research informed by SCCT can build upon these findings to optimize internship programs and maximize their impact on student self-efficacy and career aspirations.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

Dioquino - conceptualization, revision, resources; Manaig - discussion, investigation, resources; De Veyra - validation, data analysis, resources; Obida - investigation, discussion, resources; Manaois - theorizing, supervision, and final editing

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

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