

Navigating the storm: understanding the impact of a COVID-19-induced negative career shock on career success and life satisfaction in China

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Abstract

Purpose – Our study aimed to understand how a negative career shock (CS), caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis, impacted employees' career success and life satisfaction in China.

Design/methodology/approach – Employees ($n = 737$) from industries adversely impacted by COVID-19-related restrictions (e.g. (a) catering, hotel and tourism; (b) construction and real estate; (c) finance; (d) technology; (e) logistics and (f) manufacturing) responded to an online survey on a negative CS, subjective career success, objective career success (OCS), life satisfaction and protean career orientation (PCO).

Findings – A negative CS was negatively associated with OCS and life satisfaction. Subjective and OCS were positively associated with life satisfaction. PCO moderated the association between a negative CS and OCS.

Practical implications – The practical contribution comes from informing strategies for individuals and employers in China to enact when facing future chance events on a national or global scale.

Originality/value – The theoretical contribution of our research comes from advancing the conservation of resources theory by considering the impact of a negative CS as an independent variable and PCO as a moderator on career success and life satisfaction.

Keywords Career shock, China, COVID-19 pandemic, Life satisfaction, Objective career success, Subjective career success, Protean career orientation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a global-level chance event that caused significant disruption to our daily lives (Legrand *et al.*, 2023), including via career shocks (CSs) (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020; Mouratidou and Grabarski, 2022). A CS is “a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career” (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018, p. 4). It is important to note that a CS can be positive (e.g. an unexpected promotion) or negative (e.g. unexpected redundancy) (Akkermans *et al.*, 2021).

There has been a growing interest in the career literature examining CSs induced by the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions (e.g. Mousa and Abdelgaffar, 2023; Silva *et al.*, 2023). There has also been interest in the impacts of CSs on subjective and objective career

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success (OCS) (e.g. Okay-Sommerville, 2023; Spurk *et al.*, 2019) and life satisfaction and protean career orientation (PCO) (e.g. Legrand *et al.*, 2023). However, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the perspectives of workers in China, especially within industries most vulnerable to disruption during the pandemic.

Understanding such views is vital since the Wuhan lockdown, which began on 23rd January 2020, was the earliest example of a lockdown imposed upon a population. The World Health Organization (2020) referred to the move as “unprecedented in public health history.” Additionally, the pandemic-related restrictions impacted different people in different ways, including via CSs (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020). Given that, as of mid-2023, China was the second-most populous country in the world by population (Statista, 2023), it merits empirical research and attention on this topic.

Furthermore, the cultural context of China, characterized by collectivism, high power distance and a strong emphasis on societal harmony (Hofstede, 1984; House *et al.*, 2004), plays a significant role in shaping career experiences and responses to CSs. The unique societal and organizational structures in China may influence how CSs are perceived and managed, which has not been sufficiently explored in existing research (Farh *et al.*, 2007a, b).

Consequently, our research aimed to understand how a negative CS caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis, impacted employees’ career success and life satisfaction in China. We opted to focus explicitly on a negative CS and on industries that were most significantly impacted in China by the restrictions, which included (1) catering, hotel and tourism; (2) construction and real estate; (3) finance; (4) technology; (5) logistics and (6) manufacturing. A total of 734 employees completed an online questionnaire during the pandemic-related restrictions. The theoretical contribution of our research comes from advancing the conservation of resources (CoR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2012; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) by considering the impact of a negative CS (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018, 2020; Seibert *et al.*, 2013) and PCO (Hall, 1976, 2004) as a moderator on career success and life satisfaction. The practical contribution comes from informing strategies for individuals and employers in China to enact when facing future chance events on a national or global scale.

Literature review and hypotheses development

Negative career shock and life satisfaction

Life satisfaction, a key component of psychological well-being, refers to the cognitive process of assessing quality of life based on personal criteria (Jawahar and Liu, 2017). Research by Donald and Jackson (2022) highlights that COVID-19 pandemic restrictions negatively impacted life satisfaction. Pandemic-related job insecurity was also negatively correlated with employees’ life satisfaction (Lee and Tsai, 2022). A useful framework for understanding this is the CoR theory.

The CoR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) captures how an individual is motivated to acquire new resources while guarding against losing existing resources. One of the principles of CoR is that one’s motivation to invest effort in acquiring resources comes from one of the following three reasons: (1) to protect against resource loss, (2) to recover from resource loss or (3) to gain resources in their own right (Hobfoll, 2002). The other principle of CoR is that “it is psychologically more harmful for individuals to lose resources than it is helpful for them to gain the resources they lost” (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014, p. 1335). Based on the two principles of CoR theory, it would seem logical that a negative CS (loss of existing resources) will negatively impact life satisfaction, especially since the acquisition of resources has been shown to enhance both life satisfaction and career sustainability in India (Nimmi *et al.*, 2021, 2022).

Hobfoll (2012) also introduces the abstract notion of resource caravans and resource passageways. A resource caravan represents the resources that an individual has accumulated, while resource passageways represent the opportunity to operationalize one’s resource caravan (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). During a negative CS, the resources in one’s resource caravan

may be threatened, and the ability to deploy these resources via resource passageways may also be limited. For instance, [Suzanne et al. \(2023\)](#) discuss how a health-related CS, such as a stroke, can lead to identity shredding. Similarly, pandemic-related restrictions increased mental health issues and reduced opportunities to work, diminishing life satisfaction ([Hou et al., 2022](#); [Lam and Zhou, 2020](#)).

In collectivist cultures like China ([Hofstede, 1984](#)), where family well-being and social status play pivotal roles in life satisfaction ([Lu and Gilmour, 2004](#)), the pandemic disrupted economic and traditional social structures, amplifying stress and reducing life satisfaction ([Jiang et al., 2023](#)). Furthermore, academic and career success, heavily emphasized in Chinese culture, made career disruptions during the pandemic more detrimental to life satisfaction compared to more individualistic cultures ([Han and Kakabadse, 2009](#)). Consequently, we propose:

H1. A negative CS is negatively associated with employees' life satisfaction.

Negative career shock and career success

Career success can be described as accomplishing desirable work-related outcomes ([Judge et al., 1999](#)) and consists of two dimensions: subjective career success and OCS. Subjective career success is the evaluation of one's career attainments through internal, subjective experiences ([Spurk et al., 2019](#)). In contrast, OCS is directly observable by others, for example, a salary rise or promotion ([Dries et al., 2009](#)) or increased responsibilities ([Van der Heijden et al., 2009](#)).

Building on CoR theory and the development of *H1*, the COVID-19-related restrictions threaten subjective career success, driven by stress ([Titova, 2021](#)) and job insecurity ([Nemteanu et al., 2021](#)). These impacts also threaten OCS since the pandemic adversely affected low-paid workers and those in specific sectors compared to others ([Donald, 2020](#); [Larrimore et al., 2022](#)). In China, restaurants, manufacturing, real estate, tourism and transportation were among the industries most affected by the pandemic-related restrictions ([Lu et al., 2021](#)). Loss of opportunities for overtime work increased financial stress, along with decisions not to raise the minimum wage ([Cho, 2020](#)). Given the threat to one's existing resources within their resource caravan ([Hobfoll, 2012](#)), coupled with reduced opportunities to operationalize one's resource caravan along resource passageways ([Hobfoll et al., 2018](#)), we propose:

H2. A negative CS is negatively associated with an employee's job satisfaction (i.e. subjective career success).

H3. A negative CS is negatively associated with objective career success.

Career success and life satisfaction

The CoR theory ([Hobfoll, 1989](#)) proposes that career success indicators, such as high wages or status, motivate individuals to maintain and expand their resources. Career success is closely tied to life satisfaction, with reciprocal relationships between the two ([Bialowolski and Weziak-Bialowolska, 2020](#)). For instance, [Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller \(2012\)](#) found that individuals with high levels of career success live longer and report higher life satisfaction up to 32 years later. Similarly, those with prestigious jobs maintain high subjective well-being levels post-retirement ([Judge et al., 2010](#)).

Subjective and OCS can function as a resource ([Spurk et al., 2019](#)), leading to increased life satisfaction ([Choi and Nae, 2022](#)) and career sustainability ([Donald et al., 2024c](#)). This aligns with career construction theory ([Savickas, 2013](#)), which emphasizes life satisfaction as a key outcome due to spillover from work to non-work settings. Put differently, subjective career success is positively related to life satisfaction because perceived career satisfaction can influence happiness ([Abele et al., 2016](#)). Similarly, OCS can lead to preferential treatment and more resources via resource gain cycles ([Spurk et al., 2019](#)).

In China, career success is evaluated not only through individual achievement but also through societal and familial expectations (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2016). High career success enhances social status and brings honor to one's family, a critical source of life satisfaction in collectivist cultures (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2016). However, failure to meet these expectations can lead to stress and reduced life satisfaction (Yang, 2003), contrasting with more individualistic cultures, where personal satisfaction plays a larger role in assessments of life satisfaction (Diener *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, we propose:

H4. Subjective career success is positively associated with an employee's life satisfaction.

H5. Objective career success is positively associated with an employee's life satisfaction.

Based on H2 and H4, as well as H3 and H5, we further propose the following hypotheses:

H6. Subjective career success mediates the relationship between negative CS and life satisfaction.

H7. Objective career success mediates the relationship between negative CS and life satisfaction.

The moderating role of protean career orientation

PCO is defined by Hall (1976) as:

a process which the person, not the organization, is managing. It consists of the entire person's varied experience in education, training, work in several organizations, changes in occupational field, etc. The protean person's own personal career choices and search for self-fulfillment are the unifying or integrative elements in his or her [their] life (p. 201).

The protean career, inspired by the shape-shifting Greek God Proteus, reflects an individual's ability to adapt to external environments (Mirvis and Hall, 1994). From a CoR theory perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), individuals can deploy the resources within their resource caravan (Hobfoll, 2012) in different ways based on the opportunities afforded by a resource passageway at any given point in time (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Studies have also shown that PCO positively influences career success (e.g. Haenggli *et al.*, 2021; Herrmann *et al.*, 2015; Wiernik and Kostal, 2019).

Additionally, PCO is part of "career identity capital" in Donald *et al.*'s (2024a) employability capital growth model, where personal outcomes can include career success. High-PCO individuals have strong identity awareness (Hall *et al.*, 2018) through self-reflection, self-exploration and self-management (Hirschi and Koen, 2021), knowing their needs and aspirations. They also display high career adaptability (Hall *et al.*, 2018), a valuable asset in turbulent working conditions (Savickas, 2013), and actively seek better opportunities and resources (Cortellazzo *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, high-PCO individuals are more likely to be proactive, make plans and initiate change (Baruch, 2014), especially when facing unexpected events (Hall *et al.*, 2018). They tend to perceive themselves as employable (Baruch *et al.*, 2020) and seek new work opportunities proactively (Ayoobzadeh, 2022). Relying less on external resources, they are more likely to retain employment due to traits like proactivity, optimism and adaptability (Waters *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, we propose:

H8. PCO moderates the association between a negative CS and subjective career success; therefore, as protean career orientation increases, the negative association between a negative CS and objective career success decreases.

H9. PCO moderates the association between a negative CS and objective career success such that, as PCO increases, the negative association between a negative CS and objective career success decreases.

Hypothesized model

Figure 1 depicts the relationships between the variables in this study, grounded in the CoR theory, where individuals strive to acquire, maintain and protect resources, and resource loss or threat of loss can lead to stress and negative outcomes. In this model, negative CS signifies resource loss or threat, which can negatively affect subjective career success (H2) and OCS (H3), ultimately reducing overall life satisfaction (H4, H5), as individuals may feel diminished in their ability to achieve personal and professional goals.

Additionally, the model incorporates PCO as a moderating variable. A PCO reflects a self-directed and values-driven career attitude, which can serve as a resource or a coping mechanism in the face of CSs. According to the COR theory, individuals with a higher PCO may better manage the loss of resources, thereby reducing the negative impact of a CS on career success (H6 and H7). This moderating role of PCO is represented by the dashed lines in the figure.

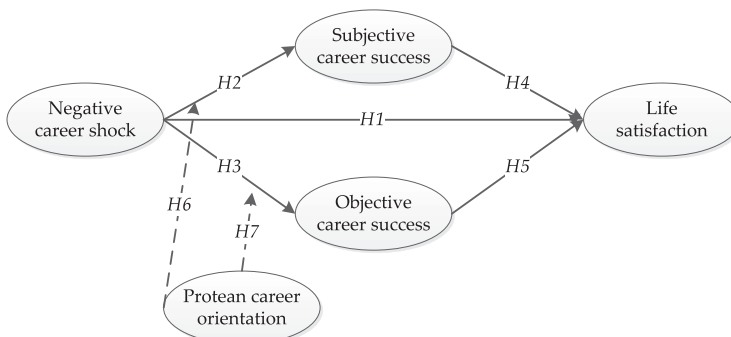
Finally, H1 represents the relationship between subjective and OCS, suggesting that career success in one domain may contribute to success in the other as individuals accumulate resources that enhance their overall career outcomes. Together, these hypotheses demonstrate how resource loss (negative CS) and resource accumulation (career success and protean orientation) interact to influence life satisfaction.

Methods

Data collection and procedures

Data collection took place in China in late 2020, nearly a year after the stringent COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, focusing on industries vulnerable to the prolonged impacts of the pandemic (Xia, 2020). We commissioned *Questionnaire Star* (<https://www.wjx.cn>) for data collection, with over one million members who can be randomly invited to participate. Ethics approval was obtained via the institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. Out of 910 responses received, 737 valid responses were retained for analysis.

The sample comprised 382 women (51.8%) and 355 men (48.2%), providing a balanced and representative gender distribution. Of these, 141 (19.1%) had an education level of a bachelor's degree or below, while 596 (80.9%) held postgraduate qualifications, reflecting a highly educated workforce, which is relevant given the study's focus on career success. Industry sectors included manufacturing (190, 25.8%), information communications technology (159, 21.6%), catering, hotel and tourism (138, 18.7%), finance (99, 13.4%), construction and real estate (92, 12.5%) and logistics (59, 8.0%). The diversity of industries



Source(s): Figure created by authors

Figure 1. Hypothesized research model

covered allows for the generalization of findings across various sectors, which is crucial for understanding CSs and success across different professional environments. Respondents were aged between 18 and 69 (mean age 32.28 and standard deviation 6.89), representing a broad range of career stages, from early to mid-career professionals, which is important for exploring how a CS impacts individuals at different points in their career trajectory.

Participants were asked about the characteristics of their companies, including establishment time and employee size. In total, 77 companies (10.4%) had been established within the previous 3 years, 335 (45.5%) between 3 and 10 years before the study, while 325 (44.1%) over 10 years prior. This range of company ages provides insight into how organizational stability and maturity might influence employees' career experiences and responses to a CS. In terms of company size, 108 companies (14.7%) had less than 30 employees, 260 (35.3%) had 30 to 100 employees and 369 (50.1%) had over 100 employees, offering a balanced representation of small, medium and large enterprises, which could affect career development opportunities and the impact of a CS. Additionally, 467 companies (63.4%) had a monthly income of CNY8,000 (1177.6 USD) and below, while 270 (36.6%) earned over CNY8,000 (1177.6 USD), reflecting a range of economic conditions that may affect both organizational resources and employee outcomes.

Measures

Back translation was employed to prepare the questionnaire (Table 1), which was initially developed in English. The process began with the lead author translating the scales into Chinese. To reduce translation bias, a native English speaker then undertook back translation, and two independent academics evaluated content validity.

The scales were chosen based on their strong validity, reliability and relevance to the constructs in this study. Negative CS was measured using Seibert *et al.*'s (2013) scale, which captures unanticipated career disruptions. Career success was assessed using scales from Shockley *et al.* (2016) and Spurk *et al.* (2019) to distinguish between subjective career success and OCS, both critical to understanding career outcomes. Life satisfaction was measured using the widely validated scale by Diener *et al.* (1995). Finally, PCO was assessed using Briscoe *et al.*'s (2006) scale, which captures self-directed career management. Control variables were gender and age.

Strategy of analysis

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed for analysis due to its suitability for exploratory research and for situations where the model is not fully established. PLS-SEM is advantageous in handling complex models with multiple constructs and indicators, especially when the primary objective is prediction rather than confirmation (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, PLS-SEM allows for greater flexibility in theory development and is effective for models in the early stages of theoretical development (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

We operationalized PLS-SEM by first evaluating the measurement model. We examined factor loadings to ensure that each indicator reliably measured its intended construct, only retaining items with loadings above 0.70. We assessed composite reliability (CR) to confirm internal consistency (CR > 0.70) and convergent validity using the average variance extracted (AVE), ensuring that constructs explained more than 50% of the variance in their indicators (AVE > 0.50). For discriminant validity, we applied both the Fornell–Larcker criterion (ensuring that the square root of each construct's AVE was larger than its correlation with other constructs) and the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio (ensuring HTMT values did not exceed the threshold of 0.90) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Henseler *et al.*, 2015).

Next, we assessed the structural model by examining path coefficients, *t*-values and significance levels to evaluate the strength and significance of the relationships between constructs. We also tested for multicollinearity using the variance inflation factor (VIF),

Table 1. Operational definition

Construct	Definition	Measurement and items	References
NCS	Event that triggers deliberation involving the prospect of a change in an important career-related behavior such as seeking further education, changing occupations or changing employment status	5-Likert Scale: from 1 = have not experienced it, to 5 = had large impact Your organization went through a significant negative event such as a reduction in workforce, bankruptcy or major ethical scandal	Seibert <i>et al.</i> (2013)
CS	Accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person's work experiences	7-Likert Scale from 1 = strongly dissatisfaction, to 7 = strongly satisfaction Considering my career as a whole 1. ... my career is personally satisfying. (SCS) 2. ... I am enthusiastic about my career. (SCS) 3. ... I have found my career quite interesting. (SCS) The gross income that you got in the last month (OCS) 1. 2,000 and below 2. 2,000 to 4,000 3. 4,000 to 8,000 4. 8,000 and above	Shockley <i>et al.</i> (2016) and Spurk <i>et al.</i> (2019)
LSN	Assessment that people make the overall quality of their lives	7-Likert Scale from 1 = strongly dissatisfaction, to 7 = strongly satisfaction 1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal 2. The conditions of my life are excellent 3. I am satisfied with my life	Diener <i>et al.</i> (1995)
PCO	The degree to which individuals self-directed their careers and are guided by their own values	5-Likert Scale from 1 = to no extent, to 5 = to a great extent 1. I am in charge of my own career 2. Ultimately, I depend upon myself to move my career forward 3. I am responsible for my success or failure in my career	Briscoe <i>et al.</i> (2006)

Note(s): NCS = negative career shock, CS = career success, SCS = subjective career success, OCS = objective career success, LSN = life satisfaction and PCO = protean career orientation
Source(s): Table created by authors

ensuring that all VIF values were below 5, indicating no problematic collinearity among predictor variables.

Finally, we conducted bootstrapping (with 5,000 subsamples) to test the significance of the moderation effects and to obtain robust standard errors and confidence intervals (Davison and Hinkley, 1997). This allowed us to evaluate whether PCO moderated the relationships between a negative CS and career success as hypothesized.

Results

Measurement model evaluation

Column (3) of Table 2 shows the factor loadings. Hair *et al.* (2019) recommend loadings >0.708. One factor loading less than >0.708 was retained because the AVE and CR were

Table 2. Reliability and AVE of the outer model

Construct	Indicators	Factor loading	Composite reliability	AVE
PCO	PCO1	0.799	0.750	0.508
	PCO2	0.535	–	–
	PCO3	0.774	–	–
SCS	SCS1	0.851	0.879	0.707
	SCS2	0.838	–	–
	SCS3	0.833	–	–
LSN	LSN1	0.874	0.892	0.735
	LSN2	0.884	–	–
	LSN3	0.811	–	–

Note(s): SCS = subjective career success, LSN = life satisfaction and PCO = protean career orientation
Source(s): Table created by authors

satisfactory. Since all AVE and CR were above the threshold, items with factor loadings from 0.50 to 0.70 were not deleted. Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using CR. As shown in Column 4, all values were <0.95 and were therefore satisfactory. Convergent reliability was assessed by AVE (Column 4), and all values were satisfactory at 0.50 or higher (Column 5).

Discriminant validity was evaluated using [Fornell and Larcker’s \(1981\)](#) metric, with each construct’s AVE compared to the squared inter-construct correlation. The minimum value of AVE was 0.713, suggesting satisfactory discriminant validity. [Table 3](#) shows these values.

We next evaluated discriminant validity using HTMT ([Henseler et al., 2015](#)), which is defined as the mean value of item correlations across constructs relative to the geometric mean of average correlations for items measuring the same construct. [Table 4](#) shows a maximum value of 0.729, suggesting reliable discriminant validity.

Structural model evaluation

The significance of each hypothesis was examined using bootstrapping to calculate the significance of the path coefficients. [Table 5](#) shows that a negative CS was significantly associated with life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.067$, t -value = 2.183). Thus, [H1](#) was supported. A negative CS was not significantly associated with subjective career success ($\beta = -0.018$ and t -value = 0.488), but it was significantly related to OCS ($\beta = -0.131$ and t -value = 3.640); therefore, [H2](#) was rejected, while [H3](#) was supported. Subjective career success was positively correlated with life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.566$ and t -value = 16.488); thus, [H4](#) was supported.

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker criterion for discriminant validity

	LSN	NCS	OCS	PCO	SCS
LSN	0.857				
NCS	-0.091	1.000			
OCS	0.237	-0.131	1.000		
PCO	0.305	-0.026	0.193	0.713	
SCS	0.589	-0.018	0.225	0.393	0.841

Note(s): NCS = negative career shock, SCS = subjective career success, OCS = objective career success, LSN = life satisfaction and PCO = protean career orientation. Diagonals represent the square root of the average variance extracted, while other entries represent the correlations

Source(s): Table created by authors

Table 4. Results of discriminant validity by HTMT

	LSN	NCS	OCS	PCO	SCS
LSN					
NCS	0.101				
OCS	0.263	0.131			
PCO	0.361	0.072	0.234		
SCS	0.729	0.041	0.253	0.504	

Note(s): NCS = negative career shock, SCS = subjective career success, OCS = objective career success, LSN = life satisfaction and PCO = protean career orientation

Source(s): Table created by authors

Table 5. Summary of inner model results

Hypotheses		Path coefficients	t-value	Supported
H1	NCS → LSN	-0.066*	2.163	Yes
H2	NCS → SCS	-0.019	0.485	No
H3	NCS → OCS	-0.131***	3.625	Yes
H4	SCS → LSN	0.567***	16.389	Yes
H5	OCS → LSN	0.105**	3.017	Yes

Note(s): NCS = negative career shock, SCS = subjective career success, OCS = objective career success and LSN = life satisfaction. * p -value < 0.05; ** p -value < 0.01 and *** p -value < 0.001. Number of bootstrap samples = 5,000

Source(s): Table created by authors

OCS was also positively correlated with life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.100$ and t -value = 2.882); therefore, H5 was supported.

Mediation analysis

The mediation analysis results (Table 6) show that OCS significantly mediates the relationship between negative CS and life satisfaction (H6, $\beta = -0.014$ and t -value = 2.261). However, the mediating effect of subjective career success on the same relationship is not supported (H7, $\beta = -0.01$ and t -value = 0.482).

Moderation analysis

We performed bootstrapping to examine the moderation effect of employees' PCO (Davison and Hinkley, 1997). Table 7 shows that PCO did not moderate the relationship between a negative CS and subjective career success ($\beta = -0.039$ and t -value = 0.952). However, it

Table 6. Mediation effect

	Path coefficients	t-value	Supported
H6 NCS → OCS → LSN	-0.014*	2.261	Yes
H7 NCS → SCS → LSN	-0.010	0.482	No

Note(s): NCS = negative career shock, SCS = subjective career success, OCS = objective career success and LSN = life satisfaction. * p -value < 0.05. Number of bootstrap samples = 5,000

Source(s): Table created by authors

Table 7. Moderation effect

Hypotheses		Path coefficients	t-value	Supported
H8	NCS*PCO → SCS	−0.039	0.940	No
H9	NCS*PCO → OCS	−0.092*	2.195	Yes

Note(s): NCS = negative career shock, SCS = subjective career success, OCS = objective career success and PCO = protean career orientation. **p*-value <0.05. Number of bootstrap samples = 5,000

Source(s): Table created by authors

moderated the path between a negative CS and OCS positively ($\beta = -0.092$ and t -value = 2.209). Thus, H6 was rejected, while H7 was supported.

Discussion

Our study aimed to understand how a negative CS, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, impacted employees' career success and life satisfaction in China. Consistent with Gundogan (2021), we found that a negative CS is negatively related to employees' life satisfaction (H1). However, this effect is intensified in China, where societal stability and harmony are crucial (Farh *et al.*, 2007a, b). For many Chinese employees, work is closely tied to self-worth and identity, and career setbacks may be seen as disruptions to social order, exacerbating negative effects on life satisfaction.

The positive relationship between objective and subjective career success and life satisfaction (H4 and H5) supports previous findings (Abele *et al.*, 2016; Choi and Nae, 2022). In China, OCS – often measured by income, promotions or job titles – is particularly important. As Zhang *et al.* (2019) noted, Chinese employees prioritize objective career outcomes over subjective measures like job satisfaction, largely due to the cultural focus on material success and fulfilling familial and societal expectations. Societal pressure to achieve financial stability enhances the salience of OCS as a predictor of life satisfaction.

While a negative CS was negatively associated with OCS (H3), no significant relationship was found with subjective career success (H2). This may stem from cultural expectations to prioritize organizational goals over personal satisfaction (Lu *et al.*, 2021). Despite external disruptions, Chinese employees may suppress dissatisfaction and remain committed to work due to societal expectations of perseverance and the Confucian work ethic, which emphasizes hard work, loyalty and endurance in the face of adversity (Farh *et al.*, 2007a, b).

Finally, PCO moderated the relationship between a negative CS and OCS (H7) but not subjective career success (H6). Individuals with a high PCO can better navigate external challenges by leveraging personal resources and seeking new opportunities. However, in China, external validation and material success may limit the PCO's influence on subjective career success, as income and job stability take precedence over personal fulfillment.

Theoretical implications

Our research contributes by advancing the CoR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) by examining the effects of a negative CS as an independent variable and PCO as a moderator on career success and life satisfaction. Our focus on the interaction of resource caravans and resource passageways (Hobfoll, 2012; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) addresses calls for empirical research to capture the interplay of agentic and contextual factors (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020, 2021).

While career scholars have emphasized the importance of considering objective and subjective career success on life satisfaction (e.g. Spurk *et al.*, 2019), few empirical studies have explored these dimensions. Our findings, showing that a negative CS is not associated with subjective career success in China, contrast with previous findings from other countries (e.g. Larrimore *et al.*, 2022; Nemteanu *et al.*, 2021; Titova, 2021). These differences provide

empirical support for Hofstede's (1984) work on cultural differences in work-related values and coping with uncertainty. They also offer empirical support for the interplay between the person and context dimensions of sustainable career theory (De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, unlike studies that evaluated PCO in regular work contexts (e.g. Kumar *et al.*, 2022), our research explored PCO during a global crisis, adding to the literature by highlighting its moderating role between a negative CS and career success. Our findings suggest that while one can take ownership of their resource caravans to manage resource loss (Hobfoll, 2012; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018), individual agency can only moderate the effects of CSs and changes to resource passageways rather than entirely negate the negative CS. This supports calls to consider the interplay of agency and context in empirical career research (Akkermans *et al.*, 2024; De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

Practical implications

Our research provides practical insights for individuals and employers in China when responding to future national or global crises. While pandemic-related restrictions were deemed necessary to protect health services, they had clear negative effects on career success and life satisfaction. Therefore, national governments should consider increasing investments in healthcare capacity in preparation for future crises, aligning with Hite and McDonald's (2020) emphasis on the interplay of individual and contextual factors in work and life.

Given the adverse effects on OCS and life satisfaction, national governments might consider offering stronger financial support, such as minimum wage protections, to mitigate the loss of financial resources and reduce health-related quality of life impacts (Ikeda *et al.*, 2022). This could help lower unemployment, safeguard national well-being and alleviate pressures on mental health services (Bui *et al.*, 2022).

Organizations can also cultivate PCO behaviors in their employees, as high-PCO individuals provide value during chance events and negative CSs (Ayoobzadeh, 2022). However, precarious workers often lack resources for personal development, exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities (Côté, 2024). Governments should therefore offer targeted funding and ongoing career guidance to support these groups, not just during times of unemployment. This reflects calls for the liminality of career support to foster a sustainable career ecosystem (Donald *et al.*, 2024b).

Limitations and future research

The cross-sectional design limits our ability to deduce causality and restricts confidence in our mediation findings. Additionally, the focus on a negative CS at a specific point in time meant considering the evolution of these impacts over time or those of positive CSs (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020) was beyond the scope of our study.

Future research could employ a time-lagged research design to validate our mediation findings and longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of positive and negative CSs on life satisfaction. Additionally, incorporating views from socially diverse groups or comparing different regions or industries could provide richer insights.

Conclusion

Our research examined how a negative CS caused by the COVID-19 pandemic impacted employees' career success and life satisfaction in China, focusing on heavily affected industries. Findings showed that a negative CS was negatively associated with OCS and life satisfaction, while subjective and OCS positively influenced life satisfaction. PCO moderated the association between a negative CS and OCS. The study advanced the CoR theory by considering a negative CS as an independent variable and PCO as a moderator of career success and life satisfaction. Practically, it offers strategies for individuals and employers in China to manage future chance events.

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