

When networking pays unequally: proactive personality, gender and career satisfaction in Vietnam and the United States

Personnel Review

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates how proactive personality shapes employees' career networking and career satisfaction across two national contexts and whether the career returns to networking differ by gender. Drawing on the social role theory, we argue that proactive employees are more likely to engage in career networking, but that the payoff of networking for career satisfaction depends on gendered expectations and cultural context.

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted two multi-wave survey studies. Study 1 used a two-wave design with 252 employees in Vietnam. Study 2 used a three-wave design with 261 employees in the United States. The designs enabled tests of the proposed mediation and cross-context gender differences while reducing common-method concerns.

Findings – Across both studies, proactive personality was positively associated with career networking, and career networking, in turn, mediated the relationship between proactive personality and career satisfaction. Contextual differences emerged in the networking–career satisfaction link. In Vietnam, networking was positively related to career satisfaction for men but not for women. In the U.S., the indirect effect of proactive personality on career satisfaction via networking was comparable for men and women.

Originality/value – This study advances cross-national career research by showing that proactive dispositions reliably translate into networking across contexts, whereas the career satisfaction benefits of networking are contingent on gendered cultural expectations. The findings underscore the need for research to consider not only whether proactive career behaviors occur, but also when and for whom those behaviors are returned.

Keywords Proactive personality, Career networking, Career satisfaction, Gender, Social role theory, Cross-national comparison

Paper type Research article

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Introduction

Research across human resource management, gender and career studies consistently shows that proactive career behaviors, particularly career networking, are important predictors of career satisfaction (Blickle *et al.*, 2009; Jiang *et al.*, 2023; Le *et al.*, 2024). Career satisfaction reflects individuals' subjective evaluation of their career progress and accomplishments and is conceptually distinct from objective indicators such as pay or promotions (Greenhaus *et al.*, 1990; Ng and Feldman, 2014). As a core dimension of subjective career success, career satisfaction warrants focused theorizing because it has partly unique antecedents and does not always track objective career outcomes (Spurk *et al.*, 2019). Recent reviews further highlight a growing emphasis on proactive and self-directed career behaviors, including networking, as key antecedents of career satisfaction (Jansen *et al.*, 2022; Seibert *et al.*, 2024). Yet much cumulative evidence has centered on performance-related behaviors at work. For example, a meta-analysis reported a positive relationship between proactive personality and career satisfaction that operated largely through task performance and organizational citizenship behavior (Zhang *et al.*, 2022). As a result, it remains less clear whether and how interpersonal behaviors at work, such as networking, may also constitute a central mechanism through which proactive dispositions translate into career satisfaction.

At the same time, research suggests that the career returns to proactive behaviors may be uneven across social groups and cultural contexts. In Asian settings, research has linked career-related relationship building and career success indicators, including subjective outcomes, among Malaysian managers, underscoring the relational foundations of careers in collectivist environments (Rasdi *et al.*, 2011). External networking has been linked to career satisfaction among Sri Lankan middle managers (Wanigasekara *et al.*, 2023), but evidence on gender differences is mixed. Wanigasekara *et al.*'s (2023) quantitative study found that gender did not moderate the relationships between internal networking and career success, or external networking and career success, whereas the follow-up qualitative study suggests that men and women may experience networking and its consequences differently. This divergence between quantitative findings and qualitative accounts of gendered experiences underscores the need for theory-driven, cross-national tests that distinguish between networking enactment and the conditions under which networking translates into subjective career outcomes.

In the U.S. context, agentic and self-advocacy behaviors have been associated with greater career satisfaction by helping individuals navigate organizational environments proactively (Moturu and Lent, 2023). Research on women's networks further indicates that women actively invest in networking and can accumulate social capital, yet the extent to which such investments translate into career satisfaction appears to vary across settings (Grimme *et al.*, 2026). Prior work also points to structural and life course factors that may shape both the accumulation of career-relevant attributes and the returns individuals receive from them (Frear *et al.*, 2019). Thus, existing scholarly work implies that proactive behaviors and networking are widely enacted, but it remains unclear whether comparable networking efforts yield equivalent career satisfaction for men and women across cultural contexts and, critically, whether inequality arises from differences in networking behavior or from differences in how networking is evaluated along the career process. This motivates a cross-national test of whether networking is equally converted into career satisfaction for men and women, rather than assuming its benefits generalize across contexts.

Despite substantial evidence linking proactive personality and networking to career satisfaction, several important limitations remain. First, prior research links proactive personality and networking to career outcomes, but contemporary reviews note that process-based tests specifying *how* these relationships unfold, and whether they generalize across contexts, remain comparatively limited in the subjective career success literature (Jansen *et al.*, 2022; Seibert *et al.*, 2024). Second, gender remains underexamined as a boundary condition in the networking–career satisfaction relationship. Prior research suggests that women may accumulate social capital through formal networks yet face constraints in converting those resources into comparable career satisfaction, pointing to gendered frictions in how

networking is evaluated (Grimme *et al.*, 2026; Zhu *et al.*, 2016). Evidence from collectivist settings highlights the importance of networking for career outcomes and suggests the possibility of gender-differentiated returns, but findings remain fragmented and rarely integrated into a coherent cross-cultural account (Rasdi *et al.*, 2011; Wanigasekara *et al.*, 2023). Third, the literature is dominated by single-country designs; for example, Wanigasekara *et al.* (2023) conducted both studies in Sri Lanka, limiting insight into whether gender differences in returns to networking generalize or vary across cultural contexts. Because networking opportunities, mentoring access and career development systems are shaped by HR policies and managerial practices (Lee *et al.*, 2026), this gap also matters for organizations seeking equitable talent development and retention.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the mediating and moderating mechanisms linking proactive personality, career networking behaviors and career satisfaction across two cultural contexts. Building on social role theory (Eagly *et al.*, 2012), we argue that proactive personality is associated with career networking across contexts, whereas the career satisfaction returns to networking are likely to depend on gender role expectations that shape how career behaviors are interpreted. Importantly, social role theory (Eagly *et al.*, 2012) suggests that gender differences are more likely to emerge in the conversion of networking into career satisfaction (Stage 2) than in the enactment of networking (Stage 1). In particular, we posit that it is through ‘doing gender’ whether the actor’s behaviors (in our case career networking) are deemed appropriate by their surrounding stakeholders in the workplace, which translated into whether or not the actor experiences career satisfaction inherent to the perceptions by their peers. As such, we propose that gender differences emerge primarily in the prevalence of career satisfaction because gender role expectations shape how career networking is evaluated and reciprocated by an employee’s peers. We tested our hypothesized model (see Figures 1 and 2) in two empirical studies. Study 1, conducted in Vietnam, examines the model relationships in a collectivist and more gender-traditional context. Study 2, conducted in the United States (U.S.), assesses whether the same career process operates similarly in a more individualist and relatively gender-egalitarian setting (Hofstede, 2001).

Our study makes three novel theoretical contributions to the scholarly fields of careers, proactive personality and gender. First, we advance career research by theorizing career networking as a central interpersonal-related behavioral pathway through which individual differences, such as proactive personality, relate to career satisfaction, moving beyond accounts that emphasize primarily performance-related behavioral mechanisms (Zhang *et al.*, 2022) or broad competency-based explanations (Akkermans and Tims, 2017; Seibert *et al.*, 2024).

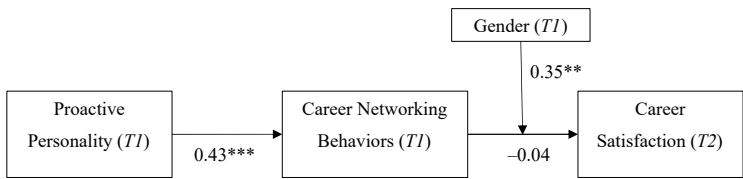


Figure 1. Theoretical model and results for Study 1 (the Vietnam Study). Source: Authors’ own work

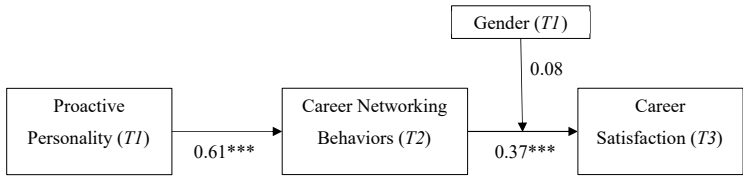


Figure 2. Theoretical model and results for Study 2 (the U.S. Study). Source: Authors own work

Second, drawing on social role theory (Eagly *et al.*, 2012), we develop a gendered perspective on career behaviors by proposing that the same career networking behaviors may yield different levels of career satisfaction returns depending on how they are socially evaluated within a given context. This shifts attention from the extent to which men and women network to whether similar networking efforts translate into comparable career satisfaction or not. Third, by testing our hypothesized model in Vietnam and the U.S., we provide cross-national evidence on whether the career satisfaction returns to networking vary by country context, addressing the field's reliance on Western-centric and single-country evidence and offering a more context-sensitive account of how individuals build satisfying careers.

Theory and hypotheses

Proactive personality is a well-established individual difference in career research and is widely used to explain why some employees more actively shape their work and career environments (Din *et al.*, 2023; Seibert *et al.*, 2001). Beyond broad trait frameworks such as the Big Five, proactive personality remains one of the most frequently examined proactivity-related constructs in management and organizational behavior (Crant *et al.*, 2017; Din *et al.*, 2023). Employees who score higher in proactive personality tend to take initiative, scan their environment for opportunities and persist in efforts to bring about change that improves their work and career prospects (Aryee *et al.*, 2005). Consistent with research on proactivity during organizational entry and early career development, this disposition is expressed through self-directed career behaviors aimed at shaping work experiences and longer-term career trajectories (Ashford and Black, 1996; De Vos *et al.*, 2009; Jawahar and Liu, 2017).

Proactive employees are likely to shape their work contexts in ways that create career-relevant advantages. This may be because proactive employees may capitalize on opportunities rather than merely respond to situational demands, which can support favorable career outcomes (Le *et al.*, 2024; Seibert *et al.*, 1999). Previous studies have similarly linked proactive personality to higher career satisfaction (Barnett and Bradley, 2007; Jawahar and Liu, 2017). Career satisfaction refers to an individual's overall evaluation of their career progress over time, and whether the latter is in line with their goals, affinities and preferences, rather than their satisfaction with a current job (Greenhaus *et al.*, 1990). Hence, it is widely used as a key indicator of subjective career success (Le *et al.*, 2023) and is increasingly positioned as an important outcome in sustainable careers research (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020).

More specifically, in the contemporary perspective of the sustainable career framework, career development is conceptualized as a dynamic process shaped jointly by the person, context and time, rather than as the product of individual agency alone (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). Drawing on this perspective, we theorize that proactive personality represents a personal resource that supports self-directed career management, whereas networking is a relational behavior through which employees seek information, support, visibility and access to career opportunities. Proactive employees may therefore use networking to actively shape their career trajectories and build more satisfying career outcomes. Yet, the benefits derived from these self-directed efforts remain dependent on the organizational and institutional contexts within which employees pursue their careers.

We further argue that a central pathway through which proactive personality may be associated with career satisfaction is career networking. Proactive employees are typically better positioned to build and mobilize resources (Le *et al.*, 2024), including social capital, by cultivating relationships that provide information, visibility and developmental feedback (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2006). Meta-analytic evidence further indicates that networking is systematically related to personality and resource acquisition, suggesting that individuals with more proactive and agentic dispositions are more likely to engage in networking behaviors (Bendella and Wolff, 2020). Networking, in turn, is a well-established type of career behavior through which individuals gain access to career-relevant opportunities and support,

which is expected to strengthen subjective career outcomes such as career satisfaction (Ng and Feldman, 2014). Accordingly, we propose that proactive personality is positively associated with career networking, and that such networking, in turn, explains the relationship between proactive personality and career satisfaction.

- H1. Employees with higher levels of proactive personality are more likely to engage in career networking behaviors.
- H2. Employees' proactive personality increases their career satisfaction through their career networking behaviors.

We draw on the social role theory to explain whether the career satisfaction returns to career networking are likely to differ by gender across contexts. The social role theory (Eagly *et al.*, 2012) argues that many observed sex differences and similarities in behaviors are shaped by the social roles that women and men typically occupy, rather than reflecting fixed traits. That is, gender roles emerge from a history of division of labor between the sexes and are reinforced through socialization, norms and institutional arrangements. As a result, people develop descriptive expectations about what women and men are like and about how they should behave. These expectations influence both behaviors (through incentives, constraints and self-regulation) and evaluations (through approval and penalties). Because roles would differ across countries and change over time, the social role theory suggests that gender differences will vary with cultural and structural conditions.

For organizational settings, the framework implies that the same career behavior may be enacted by men and women but can be interpreted differently by surrounding stakeholders of the actors when it aligns or conflicts with prevailing gender role expectations, particularly for behaviors associated with agency, influence and visibility (Eagly *et al.*, 2012). That is to say, the social role theory (Eagly *et al.*, 2012) explains gender differences and similarities as shaped by the social roles women and men typically occupy and the descriptive and prescriptive expectations that follow from those roles. Applied to careers, this perspective implies that gender differences may emerge, yet what counts is how career behaviors enacted by individuals are interpreted by their peers. Building on the social role theory, we therefore suggest that gender differences are likely to appear in the conversion of career networking into career satisfaction, because gender role expectations can shape whether similar networking efforts yield comparable career returns.

In this study, we propose that proactive personality reflects a generalized tendency toward initiative and opportunity seeking, which should motivate career networking broadly because networking is a self-initiated means of acquiring information, visibility and support (Forret and Dougherty, 2004). Gender role expectations, however, are more likely to shape the consequences of career networking than its enactment. Networking involves influence-seeking and status-related behaviors (Forret and Dougherty, 2004) that, consistent with social role theory (Eagly *et al.*, 2012), may be evaluated through gendered lenses, shaping whether networking yields recognition, access to high-value ties and ultimately career satisfaction. We therefore posit that gender differences emerge in the career networking-to-career satisfaction link. Moreover, much of the evidence comes from single-country studies in which gender contingency is either not theorized explicitly or produces mixed evidence, leaving it unclear when networking translates into career satisfaction similarly for women and men. For example, Wanigasekara *et al.* (2023) report null gender moderation in their survey study but describe gender-differentiated networking experiences in their qualitative follow-up, highlighting the need for theory-driven cross-national tests.

We use Hofstede's (2001) work to describe the broad contextual contrast between collectivist and individualist contexts, on the one hand, and gender-traditional and gender-egalitarian contexts, on the other hand, rather than as a deterministic explanation. After all, the pattern is not universal and varies by socio-economic development/modernization level, demographic pressures and migratory movements and globalization/increasing contact

(Yeganeh, 2024). However, we examine two national contexts that differ on widely cited cultural dimensions, including individualism–collectivism and masculinity–femininity (Hofstede, 2001). These differences provide a useful contextual contrast, as masculinity–femininity is often interpreted as reflecting the extent to which traditional gender role expectations are emphasized in a society (Hofstede, 2001).

More specifically, in collectivist and more masculine (or gender-traditional contexts), career advancement often relies more heavily on informal relationships and reputation within tightly knit networks (Ren and Chadee, 2017). Under such conditions, gender role expectations may be more salient in social exchange processes, shaping the extent to which career networking is reciprocated, yields access to influential ties and translates into subjective career outcomes. By contrast, in more individualist and feminine (relatively gender-egalitarian) contexts, norms surrounding career agency and self-advocacy tend to be more flexible, thereby reducing the likelihood that women's career networking is interpreted as role-incongruent. Accordingly, we expect gender differences to be more pronounced in the career networking–career satisfaction relationship in the more gender-traditional context than in the less gender-traditional context.

Empirical evidence from Asian contexts is broadly consistent with the view that gendered norms and informal network dynamics can constrain women's ability to convert networking into career satisfaction. For example, research conducted in Japan and China suggests that women often face narrower ranges of acceptable career strategies and greater constraints in building and mobilizing career-relevant social capital, which can limit the career benefits associated with agentic networking among women (Jung and Takeuchi, 2016; Zhu *et al.*, 2016). Related work shows that women report stronger perceptions of discrimination and career obstacles, which may further weaken the subjective career benefits typically associated with proactive career behaviors and networking (Watts *et al.*, 2015). In Malaysia, internal networking aimed at increasing visibility influences career satisfaction (Rasdi *et al.*, 2011), and evidence from Sri Lanka indicates that external networking impacts career satisfaction while men and women may experience networking processes and outcomes differently (Wanigasekara *et al.*, 2023).

Additionally, developing network ties does not necessarily ensure an equivalent capacity to mobilize those ties for obtaining career success. Recent career research shows that systemic barriers can restrict women's access to and use of career advancement resources, while organizational inclusivity can either intensify or reduce these constraints (Beigi *et al.*, 2026). Gender and career research similarly distinguishes between unequal access to career-relevant attributes and unequal returns to comparable attributes and behaviors (Frear *et al.*, 2019). In the networking domain, women may face exclusion from influential informal networks, constrained access to powerful sponsors and competing expectations concerning their professional visibility. Moreover, evidence from formal female networks suggests that building social capital does not automatically translate into subjective career success (Grimme *et al.*, 2026). These structural and institutional frictions help explain why comparable networking behaviors may generate different career satisfaction returns across gender and organizational contexts. Taken together, we theorize that in more gender-traditional contexts, men may be better positioned than women to convert career networking behaviors into career satisfaction. Therefore, we propose:

H3a. In an Asian context, men who engage in more career networking behaviors experience higher levels of career satisfaction compared to their female counterparts.

Drawing on social role theory (Eagly *et al.*, 2012), we expect gender differences in career satisfaction returns to networking to be smaller in cultural contexts where gender role expectations are less differentiated and career agency is more broadly accepted. However, the empirical literature is not fully conclusive in this regard, as studies vary in samples, networking operationalizations and outcomes. Available evidence nonetheless points to the possibility of

more comparable returns to agentic career behavior for men and women in the U.S. For example, workplace advocacy and self-assertive career behavior have been linked to beneficial career-related outcomes in ways that do not consistently indicate systematic disadvantages for women relative to men (Moturu and Lent, 2023). Research on women's professional networks also indicates that women can accrue career-relevant social capital and support through structured communities, although the strength and form of these benefits can vary across settings (Grimme *et al.*, 2026). In addition, contemporary reviews emphasize that contextual conditions could shape how career behaviors translate into subjective outcomes, implying that gender gaps in returns are likely to be smaller in settings where norms and organizational structures support women's career agency (Seibert *et al.*, 2024). Taken together, prior work suggests a reasonable expectation of comparable career networking–career satisfaction associations for men and women in a Western context, which we test directly in our U.S. sample:

- H3b.* In a Western context, men who engage in more career networking behaviors experience equivalent levels of career satisfaction compared to their female counterparts.

Overview of study design

Two studies were conducted to test our hypotheses. Both of these are multi-wave studies testing how employees' proactive personality may improve their career satisfaction through promoting their career networking behaviors. Specifically, we conducted Study 1 in Vietnam (an Asian context) and Study 2 in the U.S. (a Western context) and examined the moderating role of gender in helping employees achieve higher levels of career satisfaction under different cultural contexts. In Study 1, we surveyed employees working in Vietnam, a country with an Asian cultural background. In Study 2, we surveyed employees working in the U.S. Ethics approvals of both studies were granted by the University where the first author was employed. Below, we will describe the sample and procedures, and the measures that were used in both studies. Next, we will go into the results of our empirical work.

Study 1: The Vietnam study

Sample and procedure. Study 1 drew on a sample of full-time employees working in the service industry in Vietnam. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was assured. Data were collected using a two-wave, time-lagged survey design, with questionnaires administered approximately one month apart to reduce the risk of common-method variance. At Time 1, using personal and professional networks, paper-based surveys were distributed to participants by one of the authors. Of the 500 questionnaires distributed, 420 were returned (84% response rate), and 384 responses were retained after excluding incomplete data. At Time 2, follow-up surveys were administered to these participants, yielding 272 responses, of which 252 were useable and successfully matched across waves using a self-generated identification code.

Data on demographic variables, proactive personality and career networking behaviors were gathered at Time 1. Data on career satisfaction were gathered at Time 2. The final sample composed 252 employees with 149 who identified as men (59.1%). Age ranged from 22 to 59 years with an average age of 32.97 years ($SD = 6.53$). For organizational tenure, 2% of the respondents had worked at their current organization for less than one year, 14% had worked for at least one year but less than three years, 20% had worked for at least three years but less than five years, 36% had worked for at least five years but less than 10 years, and 28% had worked for 10 years or more in their current organization.

Measures. Participants responded to all measures using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). *Proactive personality* was assessed at Time 1

using a four-item measure from [Wu et al. \(2014\)](#), adapted from [Bateman and Crant \(1993\)](#). A representative item is: “I am excellent at identifying opportunities.” The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.73$).

Career networking behaviors were measured at Time 1 with the three-item scale from [Ren and Chadee \(2017\)](#), which was originally drawn from the seven-item career networking behavior scale developed by [Sturges et al. \(2002\)](#). A sample item is: “I have built contacts with people in areas where I would like to work.” Reliability was satisfactory (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.75$).

Career satisfaction was measured at Time 2 using the five-item scale developed by [Greenhaus et al. \(1990\)](#). A sample item is: “I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my overall career goals.” Internal consistency for this measure was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.92$).

As regards the demographic variables, data on the respondents’ *gender*, *age* and *organizational tenure* were collected at Time 1. Gender was coded such that men = 1 and women = 0. Given that traditional and cultural practices in Vietnam limit gender options to “men” and “women” (e.g. [Nguyen et al., 2025](#)), none of the participants identified as another gender. We controlled for age and organizational tenure when testing our research hypotheses since senior employees might have more resources and opportunities which might impact their career satisfaction. Organizational tenure was coded categorically (see details in [Table 1](#)).

Results. Given that proactive personality and career networking behaviors were both measured at Time 1, and all three scales were self-reported, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in *Mplus* to test the discriminant validity of the scales. In our hypothesized three-factor model, items loaded on intended constructs and model fit was acceptable: $\chi^2(51) = 148.51$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.05. [Table 1](#) reports the mean, standard deviation and reliability of each scale along with their correlations.

Hypotheses were tested using SPSS PROCESS v4.2 ([Hayes, 2022](#)). Specifically, [H1](#) and [H2](#) were tested using the results generated from SPSS PROCESS Model 4 using a default bootstrapping of 5,000 times and a confidence interval of 95%. As shown in [Table 2](#), proactive personality was positively associated with career networking behaviors ($B = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$),

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities (studies 1 and 2)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Study 1 (the Vietnam Study)</i>							
1. Proactive Personality (T1)	3.61	0.65	0.73				
2. Gender ^a (T1)	0.59	0.49	0.08	-			
3. Career Networking Behaviors (T1)	3.32	0.79	0.34***	0.14*	0.75		
4. Career Satisfaction (T2)	3.11	0.83	0.06	0.07	0.14*	0.92	
5. Age (T1)	32.97	6.53	0.15*	0.05	0.01	0.09	-
6. Organizational Tenure ^b (T1)	3.73	1.08	0.16*	0.02	-0.01	0.17**	0.62***
<i>Study 2 (the U.S. Study)</i>							
1. Proactive Personality (T1)	3.61	0.83	0.86				
2. Gender ^a (T1)	0.59	0.49	0.13*	-			
3. Career Networking Behaviors (T2)	3.20	1.07	0.48***	0.06	0.89		
4. Career Satisfaction (T3)	3.56	1.12	0.49***	-0.03	0.55***	0.95	
5. Age (T1)	40.75	10.42	-0.01	-0.10	-0.02	0.14*	-
6. Organizational Tenure ^b (T1)	3.76	1.14	0.03	0.04	0.09	0.17**	0.34***

Note(s): $N = 252$ for Study 1; $N = 261$ for Study 2; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. ^aFor Gender, 1 = men, 0 = women. ^bFor Organizational tenure, 1 = less than 1 year; 2 = at least 1 year but less than 3 years; 3 = at least 3 years but less than 5 years; 4 = at least 5 years but less than 10 years; and 5 = 10 or more years. T1 = Time 1 Survey, T2 = Time 2 Survey, T3 = Time 3 Survey

Source(s): Authors own work

Table 2. Regression results from SPSS process model 4 (studies 1 and 2)

Variable	Study 1 (the Vietnam study)				Study 2 (the U.S. Study)			
	Career networking behaviors (T1)		Career satisfaction (T2)		Career networking behaviors (T2)		Career satisfaction (T3)	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	−1.98***	0.33	2.26***	0.39	0.84*	0.37	−0.07	0.34
Age (T1)	−0.00	0.01	−0.00	0.01	−0.00	0.01	0.01*	0.01
Organizational Tenure ^a (T1)	−0.04	0.06	0.14*	0.06	0.09	0.05	0.08	0.05
Proactive Personality (T1)	0.43***	0.07	−0.03	0.09	0.61***	0.07	0.40***	0.07
Career Networking Behaviors ^b			0.16**	0.07			0.42***	0.06
R ²	0.12***		0.05*		0.23***		0.40***	

Note(s): *N* = 252 for Study 1; *N* = 261 for Study 2. Unstandardized beta coefficients are reported. T1 = Time 1, T2 = Time 2, T3 = Time 3; **p* < 0.05; ****p* < 0.001. ^aFor Organizational tenure, 1 = less than 1 year; 2 = at least 1 year but less than 3 years; 3 = at least 3 years but less than 5 years; 4 = at least 5 years but less than 10 years; and 5 = 10 or more years, ^bCareer networking behaviors was measured at T1 for Study 1 and T2 for Study 2

Source(s): Authors own work

thereby supporting H1. H2 proposed that employees' proactive personality improves their career satisfaction through engaging in career networking behaviors. According to the SPSS PROCESS Model 4 output, the indirect effect of proactive personality on career satisfaction, via career networking behaviors, is 0.07, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.01, 0.15]. Therefore, H2 was supported as well.

H3a was tested using the moderation results generated from SPSS PROCESS Model 14 applying a default bootstrapping of 5,000 times and a confidence interval of 95%. The continuous variable (i.e. career networking behaviors) was centered before creating the interaction with gender. Given the fact that gender is a binary variable with men being equal to 1 and women being equal to 0, we did not mean center the gender variable in our study. The indirect effects were calculated for men and women, respectively. As shown in Table 3,

Table 3. Regression results from SPSS process model 14 (studies 1 and 2)

Variable	Study 1 (the Vietnam study)				Study 2 (the U.S. Study)			
	Career networking behaviors (T1)		Career satisfaction (T2)		Career networking behaviors (T2)		Career satisfaction (T3)	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	−1.34***	0.33	2.71***	0.37	−2.36***	0.37	1.36***	0.37
Age (T1)	−0.00	0.01	−0.00	0.01	−0.00	0.01	0.01*	0.01
Organizational Tenure ^a (T1)	−0.04	0.06	0.14*	0.06	0.09	0.05	0.08	0.05
Proactive Personality (T1)	0.43***	0.07	−0.04	0.08	0.61***	0.07	0.42***	0.07
Gender ^b (T1)			0.10	0.10			−0.19	0.11
Career Networking Behaviors ^c			−0.04	0.10			0.37***	0.08
Career Networking Behaviors × Gender (T1)			0.35**	0.13			0.08	0.10
R ²	0.12***		0.08**		0.23***		0.41***	

Note(s): *N* = 252 for Study 1; *N* = 261 for Study 2. Unstandardized beta coefficients are reported. T1 = Time 1, T2 = Time 2, T3 = Time 3; **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001. ^aFor Organizational tenure, 1 = less than 1 year; 2 = at least 1 year but less than 3 years; 3 = at least 3 years but less than 5 years; 4 = at least 5 years but less than 10 years; and 5 = 10 or more years, ^bFor Gender, 1 = men, 0 = women, ^cCareer networking behaviors was measured at T1 for Study 1 and T2 for Study 2

Source(s): Authors own work

the relationship between career networking behaviors and career satisfaction was moderated by gender ($B = 0.35, p < 0.01$). We further conducted a simple slope test to better clarify the pattern of the interaction effect (Aiken *et al.*, 1991). As shown in Figure 3, career networking behaviors helped men to achieve higher levels of career satisfaction ($effect = 0.31, p < 0.001$) but not for women ($effect = -0.04, p = 0.72$). In other words, the results supported our H3a that gender moderates the relationship between employees' career networking behaviors and their career satisfaction in such a way that career networking behaviors benefit men but not women in improving their career satisfaction.

Study 2: The U.S. study

Sample and procedures. In Study 2, we implemented a three-wave survey design in the U. S. using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an established online panel for recruiting working adults in a range of industries. Eligibility was limited to full-time employees based in the U.S. At Time 1, participants provided demographic information and completed the proactive personality measure. At Time 2, they reported their career networking behaviors, and at Time 3, they completed the career satisfaction measure. The time intervals between the waves were from about three weeks.

The final matched sample comprised 261 employees; 155 identified as men (59.4%). Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 70 years ($M = 40.75, SD = 10.42$). In terms of self-reported ethnicity, 85% identified as White, 3% as African American, 5% as Hispanic, 7% as Asian and the remaining participants selected other categories. Organizational tenure at the current employer was distributed as follows: 3% reported less than one year, 13% reported one to less than three years, 20% reported three to less than five years, 32% reported five to less than ten years and 32% reported ten years or more.

Measures. Proactive personality (Time 1), career networking behaviors (Time 2) and career satisfaction (Time 3) were measured using the same scales as employed in Study 1. Cronbach's α was 0.86 for proactive personality, 0.89 for career networking behaviors and 0.95 for career satisfaction. As regards the demographic variables, data on gender, age and organizational tenure were collected at Time 1. Like in Study 1, gender was coded such that men = 1 and women = 0. Note that to ensure consistency between the U.S. study and the Vietnam study, we included only respondents who identified as either men or women for the U.S. study. We again controlled for age and organizational tenure when testing our research hypotheses. Organizational tenure was also coded categorically as illustrated in Table 1.

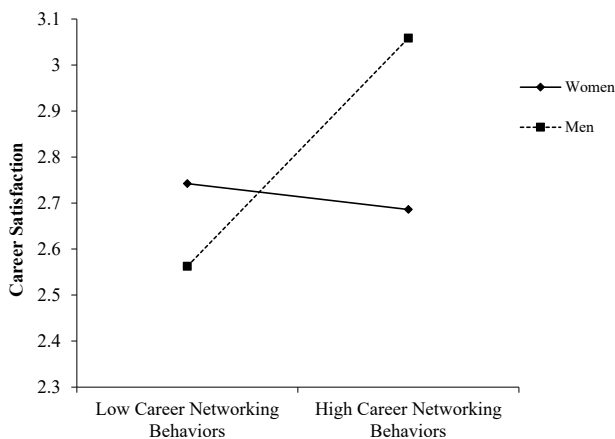


Figure 3. The moderation effect of career networking behaviors and gender on career satisfaction (Study 1). Source: Authors own work

Results. Although the predictor, mediator and outcome variables were measured at separate time points to help minimize common-method concerns, all focal constructs were assessed via self-reports. Accordingly, we conducted a CFA in *Mplus* to evaluate the discriminant validity of the three measures. In our hypothesized three-factor model, items loaded on intended constructs and model fit was acceptable: $\chi^2(51) = 167.62, p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.04. Table 1 reports the mean, standard deviation and reliability of each scale along with their correlations.

We followed the same procedure as in Study 1 to test our hypotheses. That is, H1 and H2 were tested using the results generated from SPSS PROCESS Model 4 using a default bootstrapping of 5,000 times and a confidence interval of 95%. As shown in Table 2, proactive personality was positively related to career networking behaviors ($B = 0.61, p < 0.001$), thereby supporting H1. H2 suggested that employees' proactive personality improves their career satisfaction, through career networking behaviors, which was supported by the indirect results generated from PROCESS Model 4 (*indirect effect* = 0.26, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.16, 0.36]). Therefore, H2 was supported in Study 2 as well.

Analogous to Study 1, H3b was tested using the moderation results generated from SPSS PROCESS Model 14 applying a default bootstrapping of 5,000 times and a confidence interval of 95%. The continuous variable (i.e. career networking behaviors) was centered before creating the interaction with gender. The indirect effects were calculated for men and women, respectively. As shown in Table 3, gender did not impact the relationship between career networking behaviors and career satisfaction ($B = 0.08, p = 0.41$). In other words, career networking behaviors benefit both men and women in improving their career satisfaction in the U.S. context, therefore supporting H3b.

Discussion and theoretical contribution

Our findings show that networking was more strongly associated with career satisfaction for men than for women in the Vietnamese sample, whereas this gender difference was not evident in the U.S. sample. This pattern is consistent with social role theory and prior research suggesting that gendered career processes may be more pronounced where traditional gender role expectations remain influential. However, these findings should not be interpreted as indicating that all individuals in Vietnam or the U.S. uniformly endorse the cultural values commonly associated with their national settings. Rather, the two countries represent broader contextual configurations within which gender roles, organizational practices and career opportunities may operate differently.

This study advances theorizing on careers, proactive personality and gender in three important ways. First, we extend the literature by theorizing and empirically demonstrating career networking as a central behavioral mechanism linking interpersonal behaviors at work to career satisfaction across national contexts. Prior research has established associations between proactive personality, career self-management behaviors and career satisfaction (see reviews by Jiang *et al.*, 2023; Seibert *et al.*, 2024), yet built on cumulative accounts that emphasize primarily performance-related behavioral mechanisms (Zhang *et al.*, 2022) or broad competency-based explanations (Akkermans and Tims, 2017; Seibert *et al.*, 2024). Our study extends previous knowledge by examining whether and how interpersonal behaviors at work, in our case networking, may also play an explanatory role through which individual dispositions translate into career satisfaction. Specifically, we extend existing research by positioning career networking behaviors as an interpersonal, social-capital-based mechanism through which individuals convert personal initiative into career satisfaction. By demonstrating this mechanism in two national samples, we provide clearer process specification around a form of career-related behavior that is frequently cited as important in contemporary career frameworks but is less often theorized and tested as a focal mechanism for subjective career outcomes (Seibert *et al.*, 2024).

Second, we advance gendered career and social capital research by showing that gender differences arise from career satisfaction returns to networking, rather than from the tendency to network. Across the two contexts, the association between career networking and career satisfaction is gender-contingent in the more collectivistic and masculine (or gender-traditional) setting (i.e. Vietnam), but not in the more individualistic and feminine (or gender-egalitarian) setting (i.e. the U.S.). Building on the social role theory (Eagly *et al.*, 2012), this pattern is consistent with the idea that gender role expectations shape how influence- and visibility-enhancing behaviors are interpreted by one's surrounding stakeholders, thereby affecting the conversion of networking into subjective career outcomes. Prior work similarly suggests that underrepresented groups may face constraints in accessing and mobilizing career resources such as mentoring and networking, even when formally available (Beigi *et al.*, 2026), and that gendered norms can limit women's ability to translate social capital into career outcomes in certain contexts (Zhu *et al.*, 2016). Our findings add precision to this literature by locating gender inequality at the point of returns, being consistent with the "unequal effects" perspective that comparable behaviors and attributes can yield different benefits for men and women depending on context (Frear *et al.*, 2019). For HR research, our findings suggest that reducing gender inequality requires attention not only to whether employees invest in networking, but also to the organizational systems and evaluative contexts through which networking efforts translate into subjective career outcomes.

Finally, we contribute a comparative account of career satisfaction by showing that the career satisfaction returns to networking are context-contingent, even when the dispositional antecedent and behavioral activation process are similar across the countries under comparison. Seibert *et al.* (2024) note that contextual contingencies remain insufficiently integrated into theorizing about subjective career outcomes and that cross-national evidence is comparatively limited. Our Vietnam–U.S. comparison addresses this gap by indicating that the proactive personality–career networking association is relatively stable across contexts, whereas the career networking–career satisfaction association is gender-contingent, yet only in the more collectivistic and masculine (i.e. gender-traditional) setting. This pattern aligns with career research that highlights the joint role of individual agency and contextual conditions in shaping subjective career outcomes (Seibert *et al.*, 2024). It is also consistent with the work of Beigi *et al.* (2026), showing that systemic barriers can constrain how resources are accessed and leveraged by underrepresented groups. In accordance with research on context-specific relational systems, such as guanxi, which can shape who benefits from connections and how (Ren and Chadee, 2017), our findings suggest that informal networking regimes and gender role expectations can condition whether career networking is effectively converted into career satisfaction.

Overall, our study clarifies that proactive personality is consistently associated with career networking, yet the career satisfaction payoff of such networking is not uniformly distributed. By moving beyond decontextualized trait–outcome models, our empirical work indicates that the conversion of career networking into career satisfaction depends on contextual and gendered conditions. In doing so, we advance calls to strengthen career research by moving beyond decontextualized trait–outcome models toward explanations that embed career behaviors within broader social and institutional contexts (Jiang *et al.*, 2023). Importantly, we challenge the common assumption that greater engagement in proactive career behaviors is uniformly beneficial for all. Instead, the career satisfaction returns to career networking depending on the cultural and gendered evaluative context in which such networking is enacted.

Practical implications

This study offers practical implications for organizations, human resource professionals and career development practitioners by clarifying how proactive career behaviors translate into

career satisfaction under different cultural and gendered conditions. A central implication is that career networking, while valuable, is not sufficient to ensure equitable career satisfaction outcomes. We found that organizations influence not only whether networking opportunities are available, but also whether networking behaviors are recognized, and valued, as the same behaviors might receive different returns (Frear *et al.*, 2019). This is especially important in settings where informal relationships, hierarchy and gender norms shape access to influential networks and the perceived legitimacy of career-enhancing behaviors as often, informal networks can bypass formal practices (Ren and Chadee, 2017). Therefore, organizations and HR professionals may want to consider the informal relationships and gender norms in their organizations as part of the HR analysis, for both their male and female staff members, before they start designing the HR practices that are intended to help their employees translate proactive career behaviors into career satisfaction.

For organizations and HR professionals, our findings also highlight the importance of context-sensitive career systems that reduce reliance on informal and potentially exclusionary networking dynamics. We recommend that managers and HR professionals create opportunities that enhance both formal and informal networking, especially for women from cultures where traditional gender-role expectations are strong. In collectivist and hierarchical environments, career progression may be more tightly embedded in social relationships and internal visibility (Rasdi *et al.*, 2011). To reduce unequal returns to career networking, organizations and HR practitioners can strengthen the systematic institutional architecture surrounding careers by formalizing mentoring and sponsorship arrangements for underrepresented groups including female employees, increasing transparency in promotion criteria and evaluation processes, and systematically monitoring who has access to high-value networks and career development opportunities. Organizations and HR professionals can then develop opportunities designed for those who have limited access to high-value formal and informal networks to help them to translate their proactive career behaviors into career satisfaction. For example, creating structured venues for networking, such as cross-functional projects, rotational assignments and formal networking forums, can also broaden access to influential contacts and decrease dependence on closed networks.

Importantly, our findings caution against placing the burden of career equity solely on individuals, particularly women. While employees may benefit from understanding how career networking is evaluated in their setting, structural supports are necessary for networking investments to translate into career satisfaction. This is especially salient where networking norms and opportunities are shaped by male-dominated informal networks (Socratous, 2018) and where comparable career behaviors can yield unequal returns (Frear *et al.*, 2019; Beigi *et al.*, 2026). In more gender-traditional contexts (e.g. Vietnam), organizations can reduce evaluative inequality by formalizing cross-gender sponsorship, offering inclusive leadership development pathways, and creating structured opportunities for women to gain visibility with key decision-makers. Training managers to recognize and counteract biased interpretations of agentic career behaviors can further help ensure that comparable networking efforts are appraised consistently across employees.

For career counselors and development practitioners, the results underscore the value of supporting individuals to develop networking strategies that fit their organizational and cultural context while also encouraging advocacy for systemic change. Rather than emphasizing networking effort alone, career practitioners can help clients identify which types of ties and activities carry career value in their specific environment and how to navigate gendered expectations that may shape the career satisfaction returns to career networking behaviors. At the same time, practitioners can partner with organizations to design career interventions that expand access to developmental relationships and reduce dependence on informal, male-dominated networks.

Limitations and future research

Similar to all empirical research, this study has limitations that point to opportunities for future work. Although we established satisfactory discriminant validity, our measures were self-reported. Future research could incorporate multi-source designs, for example, pairing employee self-ratings with supervisor assessments of career networking behaviors. In addition, while our time-lagged designs reduce common-method concerns, stronger longitudinal tests could further separate the measurement of antecedents, mediators, moderators and outcomes, ideally controlling for prior levels of the focal constructs. Such designs would also enable examination of short- and long-term dynamics in career satisfaction, including both between-person differences and within-person change trajectories (Morin *et al.*, 2018). Future studies could also test reciprocal relationships, such as whether career satisfaction feeds back into subsequent career networking behaviors, using cross-lagged panel approaches. This would be valuable for evaluating potential gain cycles.

The cross-study design of our scholarly work also introduces several methodological limitations. Study 1 used a paper-based convenience sample of service-sector employees in Vietnam, whereas Study 2 used an online Amazon MTurk sample drawn from multiple industries in the US. Consequently, the observed differences may partly reflect variation in sampling frames, industry composition or survey administration mode rather than due to national context alone. Future research should use longitudinal data with more closely matched cross-national samples from different industries, and data collection procedures that are able to isolate contextual influences more precisely. In addition, although the three-to four-week intervals provided temporal separation between the focal measures, they were not designed to capture changes in career satisfaction across an extended career period. Longer longitudinal studies with repeated assessments of career satisfaction would provide stronger evidence regarding whether networking contributes to durable changes in subjective career success.

Although Vietnam and the United States provide a meaningful contextual contrast, country membership is not a direct measure of individual cultural values, gender role beliefs or perceived organizational norms. Considerable cultural and psychological heterogeneity exists within each country, and employees may differ regarding the extent to which they endorse prevailing social roles. Future research should therefore directly assess individual-level cultural values, gender role orientations and perceived organizational norms, ideally within multi-level designs that distinguish individual, organizational and national influences. Such research would clarify whether the observed cross-national pattern reflects individual beliefs, organizational opportunity structures, broader institutional conditions or their interaction.

Moreover, our study focused on individuals' subjective career success but not on objective career returns. With the consideration that career networking behaviors can also benefit employees' objective career returns such as career advancement (e.g. Huang, 2016), future studies can examine whether individuals' objective career networking returns vary for men and women holding similar qualifications in different cultural settings. This is especially important given that the expectations from and evaluations about men and women are shaped by social role expectations (Eagly *et al.*, 2012), and such gender inequality may hinder women's career success. We, therefore, call for future studies to directly measure employees' career returns such as the number of job interviews and offers, promotion opportunities or direct evaluations from their supervisors or peers on their job performance to examine how these parties react to men's and women's career networking behaviors and whether cultural and gender context may play a role in impacting their objective career networking returns. Further, scholars may consider collecting real networking data to better capture the career networking behaviors of men and women over time and examine potential interventions that could reduce gender inequality in career returns to these behaviors.

It would be useful to examine whether the proposed relationships vary across occupations and industries, given differences in career structures and networking norms. Moreover, our studies operationalized age using chronological age. Future research could adopt broader

conceptualizations of age, including organizational, functional, psychosocial, or life-span development perspectives, which may capture career stage and resource dynamics more precisely (Sterns and Doverspike, 1989). Finally, because our findings indicate that the career satisfaction returns to networking depend on cultural and gendered conditions, research across additional countries could identify more specifically which cultural dimensions shape the returns to proactive personality and career networking behaviors.

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