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The Psychology of Subjective Career Success: A Systematic Literature Review of Meaning, Satisfaction, and Personal Achievement

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This systematic literature review aimed to synthesize recent evidence on the psychological processes underlying subjective career success (SCS) and develop an integrative conceptual framework.

Methods and Materials: A systematic review was conducted following PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines. Scopus was searched for English-language journal articles published between January 2023 and July 2026. Of 326 initially identified records, 41 studies met the eligibility criteria. Study characteristics, theoretical approaches, psychological constructs, and contextual factors were examined through framework-based thematic synthesis.

Findings: Among the 41 studies, 28 (68.3%) employed cross-sectional quantitative designs, four (9.8%) longitudinal designs, four (9.8%) qualitative approaches, three (7.3%) psychometric designs, and two (4.9%) review-based approaches. Three provisional psychological processes emerged: meaning, satisfaction, and personal achievement. Meaning involved career identity, calling, personal values, and purpose. Satisfaction reflected affective evaluations associated with leadership, psychological safety, organizational support, and person–career fit. Personal achievement involved perceived competence, self-efficacy, resilience, adaptability, and mastery. Cultural expectations, structural constraints, organizational resources, and career shocks emerged as contextual influences. These findings informed the proposed Tripartite Psychological Model of Subjective Career Success (TPM-SCS).

Conclusion: Subjective career success may involve interconnected meaning-making, satisfaction, and achievement processes. However, the proposed tripartite framework remains conceptually derived and requires psychometric, longitudinal, and cross-cultural validation.

Keywords: Subjective Career Success, Career Satisfaction, Meaning and Purpose, Personal Achievement, Systematic Literature Review, Career Psychology.

Introduction

Traditionally, career success was measured through objective measures such as earnings, promotion, career position and organizational status due to their visible, comparative, and verifiable nature (Shockley et al., 2016). These measures still matter although they only give an incomplete view of how people judge and perceive their careers. In recent times, the proliferation of boundaryless, flexible, protean and self-managed careers has seen the responsibility for career development shift from organizations to individuals. This makes it necessary to have personally defined standards of achievement in contemporary careers since they involve movements between different firms, changes in career roles, flexible working arrangements, and career decisions that are based on the person's value system and aspirations. The emergence of these types of careers has increased academic interest in SCS which entails one's perception of his or her career success (Adriansyah et al., 2026).

The study of SCS has expanded within the past three years, fueled by the pandemic-related shifts in the organization of work and a more general focus on employee well-being as a component of corporate strategy. Studies exploring SCS have utilized diverse professional samples, ranging from health-care workers and hospitality-industry employees to postgraduate students and multinational firms in Asia, Africa, and Europe. SCS appears to be a ubiquitous phenomenon, cutting across professions and cultures, based on these studies. However, the concept itself has been subjected to considerable theoretical fragmentation, as researchers have used mixed indicators to operationalize it, despite the fact that these indicators stem from various psychological processes (Shockley et al., 2016).

Subjective career success is, however, not just the opposite of objective career success or just a positive work-related disposition. Rather, it is self-referential assessment of career achievements relative to personal aspirations, values, expectations, and standards. This is significant conceptually since individuals who are in the same career positions and receive similar objective rewards may have different perceptions of their careers (Özsoy & Turan Yilmaz, 2025). Promotion, for instance, may be perceived as a success by one individual whose value system stresses status while at the same time being perceived as unsuccessful by another individual whose values place greater emphasis on autonomy, balance between work and personal life, and contributing to society. The origins of theoretical elaboration of the SCS concept have been influenced by changes in career theory in general. Specifically, boundaryless career theories rejected the traditional assumption that successful career development takes place within a certain hierarchy of one organization. Protean career theory, on the other hand, was focusing on individual agency and values as well as psychological definitions of career success (Zhao et al., 2025).

The notion of the career construction has been developed within Career Construction Theory and implies that individuals construct career identities and meaning in their adaptation to life events and circumstances. Social cognitive perspectives were emphasizing self-efficacy, agency, and adaptive behaviour in career development. It can be seen that these perspectives demonstrate that successful careers cannot be explained only in terms of their objective outcomes. However, these perspectives do not offer an adequate description of psychological processes underlying such processes as definition of success and assessment of one's career experience and achievements. As a result, there are several partially overlapping concepts of SCS in the contemporary literature without a unified psychological framework (Walsh et al., 2023).

The literature review on career success is currently fragmented, as most reviews focus on organizational repercussions or individual trajectories while failing to consider the underlying psychological processes (Vukčević et al., 2026). When it comes to the study of SCS, little research has been done on the mechanisms that lead to the emergence of a sense of meaning, satisfaction, and accomplishment, or how a combination of individual, interpersonal, and organizational elements might contribute to these outcomes. As a result, this review's findings will help to enhance the understanding of the mechanisms that lead to the

development of employees' SCS, as well as promote the growth of scholarly literature on the analysis of SCS.

An important reason for this fragmented view of SCS can be attributed to its conceptual proximity to some other notions. Career satisfaction can be defined as an individual evaluation of his or her career and, thus, is close to, but not necessarily identical to, SCS. One may feel satisfied with his or her career because of the desirable work environment, although he or she will not necessarily consider it to be successful (Ullah et al., 2024). In comparison with career satisfaction, job satisfaction concerns evaluations of the current employment conditions, while SCS is related to an individual's perception of success in terms of his or her career accomplishments, direction, and development.

Perceptions of career success may be seen as an umbrella term comprising objective and subjective criteria. The SCS is a measure of one's self-reflection on career achievements and, hence, should not be considered as synonymous with all perceptions of career success. The concept of occupational well-being is more extensive than SCS as it involves psychological processes like work-related affect, health, engagement, and functioning (Walsh et al., 2023). Vukčević et al. (2026) argue that the SCS might contribute to the experience of occupational well-being, but occupational well-being does not mean career success per se. Employability refers to an individual's perception or capability of obtaining, retaining, or changing their jobs. Employability can help achieve career success, but very high levels of employability do not necessarily mean that a person will see their career as successful if their work is not meaningful or does not meet their personal goals (Takawira, 2024, 2025). Finally, career identity refers to one's perception of oneself or his/her desire to be in the context of career. Career identity can define the standards of interpretation of career experience but it is not synonymous with the evaluation of the achievement of those standards. Hence, career success perception should be considered as an evaluative psychological construct existing in the context of various career-related processes (Ali & Mehreen, 2024).

The examples of recent research on the topic also illustrate the conceptual diversity of SCS. Studies on calling, career identity, protean and kaleidoscope career orientations, self-efficacy, career resilience, career adaptability, leadership, psychological safety, organisational support, work engagement, and social capital in the context of career success have been conducted. For instance, career identity was found to mediate the effect of career commitment on the perception of career success, while protean orientations emphasize self-direction and values as key factors of career outcomes (Imhanrenialena et al., 2025). At the same time, other research established connections between career commitment, self-efficacy, career resilience, and subjective career success, especially among employees working in the hospitality and tourism industries (Sharma & Akram, 2024). Leadership and organisational resources were also found to be associated with career satisfaction and SCS via psychological safety, work engagement, and perceived support (Tran Huy et al., 2025).

However, Özsoy and Turan Yilmaz (2025) argue that this variety of mechanisms raises an important issue on a theoretical level. In current studies, psychological constructs that play different roles in the concept of career success were grouped into one analytical construct. Constructs such as calling or career identity refer to how people conceptualize and make sense of their definition of a successful career. Satisfaction is a concept of affective evaluation of a person's experience in his/her career. Odland et al. (2025) identified achievements such as self-efficacy, resilience, adaptability, and perceived accomplishment determine whether a person believes he/she makes progress towards personal career standards.

Discrepancies in the results of the studies may arise due to differences in research methodology, the nature of occupation, operationalization of the constructs of interest, as well as the studied psychological variables. In some cases, the organizational resources and leadership may influence the career satisfaction, while in other cases the individual characteristics like career initiative, calling, career identity, self-efficacy, or resilience may play a role. Tran Huy (2024) that these discrepancies are not necessarily contradictions; they may also not imply the differences in the underlying psychological mechanisms that affect the subjective career success (SCS). Instead, they may show differences in the

operationalization, measurement, and evaluation of SCS and related constructs in different studies. Thus, organizational support may be related to individual evaluations of one's career, while career identity and self-efficacy may be related to individual perceptions and assessments of the career progress. However, in order to understand the specific functions played by each variable, the details about the designs and results of individual studies should be considered. The theoretical integration of the literature should distinguish SCS from its possible precursors, correlates, mediators, moderators, and outcomes.

the currently available reviews do not provide sufficient insights into this problem. Many scholars have made a significant contribution to the understanding of career success in terms of the distinction between the objective and subjective indicators, career paths, organisational antecedents, and outcomes. However, much less attention has been paid to the issue of integrating the psychological mechanisms behind the relationships between meaning, affective evaluation, and personal achievement as the components of SCS.

The current paper intends to fill in this gap by conducting a systematic literature review that focuses on the three dimensions identified as distinguishable and interrelated within the context of the current literature: meaning and purpose, affective satisfaction, and personal achievement. The first dimension implies the interpretation and motivation of the process of establishing individually meaningful standards of career success, such as calling, career identity, values, and purposes (Ali & Mehreen, 2024). The second dimension implies the process of evaluating the quality and desirability of the experiences of one's career in terms of leadership, support, engagement, psychological safety, and overall work-life balance. The third dimension implies the evaluation of competence, growth, adaptation, mastery, and progression towards personally valuable career goals. These dimensions should not be considered as empirically interchangeable or as a measurement structure. They imply different psychological processes as identified in the recent literature.

As such, this review aims to answer the following two research questions: First, it critically reviews how recent empirical research defines and measures the psychological processes involved in subjective career success. Second, it synthesises the existing evidence and generates a conceptual framework for understanding the possible relationship between meaning and purpose, affective satisfaction, and achievement in subjective career success. The proposed framework serves as an attempt at a theoretically informed conceptual synthesis of the existing body of knowledge rather than an empirically tested model and thus calls for further empirical testing.

This review is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How are meaning and purpose, affective satisfaction, and personal achievement defined and measured as psychological processes in relation to subjective career success in the recent literature?

RQ2. Which individual, relational, organizational, and structural factors impact each of the aforementioned three psychological processes, and what types of interrelationships among them do we find in the literature?

RQ3. In which specific context factors – including career shocks, organizational resources, labor market constraints, and cultural expectations – do these psychological processes tend to reinforce, diminish, or interplay in terms of subjective career success?

With a view to answering the above research questions, this review seeks to go beyond the mere identification of the predictors of SCS and provide an empirically informed understanding of how the process of career success evaluation actually works. The generated theoretical framework will be the Tripartite Psychological Model of Subjective Career Success (TPM-SCS). This article presents it as a result of a conceptual synthesis of the relevant literature, not as a validated causal or measurement model.

Methods and Materials

Review Design

A systematic literature review (SLR) was performed in order to conduct a synthesis of empirical research concerning the subject of career success. The focus of this SLR was the

concept, measurements and related psychological processes of subjective career success (SCS). The SLR was conducted according to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for reporting. In order to incorporate recent developments in the field of empirical research, only studies conducted during the period of 2023-2026 were included in the review.

The review distinguished empirical studies that explicitly examined or measured SCS from studies addressing related career constructs, such as career satisfaction, career identity, calling, meaningful work, career self-efficacy, and career resilience. These related constructs were considered relevant only when they met the predefined eligibility criteria and contributed directly to understanding SCS. Theoretical contributions concerning protean and boundaryless careers, career construction, career identity, and calling were used as contextual and interpretive resources rather than treated as equivalent to empirical evidence on SCS. This distinction was intended to maintain conceptual clarity and minimise the inclusion of studies that addressed career-related experiences without directly investigating subjective career success.

These were the two purposes which directed the literature review. Firstly, it investigated the ways in which empirical research of recent years approached and operationalized the concept of SCS and defined the dimensions through which people perceive their career success. Thus, meaning, satisfaction, and achievement were regarded as sensitizing concepts for the synthesis, instead of assuming from the very beginning that they form the three dimensions of career success. Secondly, it investigated the factors which relate to SCS and how these dimensions and factors connect in existing research. The obtained synthesis was applied in order to evaluate the usefulness of the proposed Tripartite Model of Subjective Career Success (TPM-SCS). At the same time, it should be recognized that distinctiveness of its dimensions is to be proved empirically.

Search Strategy and Data Source

The literature review was conducted using the Scopus bibliographic database to locate recent empirical research dealing specifically with subjective career success (SCS). Scopus has been used due to its multidisciplinary coverage of scholarly literature as well as its bibliographic references that can be searched for. The review deals with those articles that deal with SCS. Search was carried out on 22 July 2026. The search string that was used is as follows:

The search was conducted on 22 July 2026. The full search string used was:

TITLE-ABS-KEY ("subjective career success" OR "subjective career success scale" OR "subjective career success measure" OR ("career success" W/3 subjective)) AND PUBYEAR > 2022 AND PUBYEAR < 2027 AND LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar") AND LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English"

The search was limited to journal articles published from 1 January 2023 to 22 July 2026 in English language. The parameters of publication year, document type, and language were mentioned in the Scopus search string. Thus, these limitations were applied during retrieval and not considered separate exclusion criteria post-retrieval, unless the process of screening mentioned otherwise.

The search strategy favoured the explicit mention of SCS in terminology as a means to enhance construct specificity. Works related to but not about SCS were not considered for inclusion as a matter of course. Related concepts such as career satisfaction, career identity, calling, meaningful work, career self-efficacy, and career resilience could be considered for inclusion only if their full-text evaluation showed they examined or measured SCS and met the inclusion criteria.

Scopus was employed as the exclusive bibliographic database. Thus, the review compiles eligible studies found in Scopus but does not necessarily include all literature on SCS. This may have limited inclusion of relevant works indexed by other databases like PsycINFO and Web of Science. No additional backward or forward searches for citations were conducted.

For reproducibility purposes, the review noted the date of the search, full search strategy, database limitations, selection criteria, screening process, and total number of citations after the process. The total number of selected articles was not pre-selected based on sample size but based on the selection criteria that were applied to the search results.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria were developed prior to the final screening phase. The included articles had to be studies in which the concept of SCS was explored or in which the conception, measurement, dimensions, and associations of the SCS construct were considered. Studies had to present some evidence regarding the manner in which individuals assess their career success. Career satisfaction, career meaning, meaningful work, career identity, calling, personal achievement, career self-efficacy, and career resilience were viewed as different constructs, although similar in some aspects. Their inclusion into the literature review could not be justified merely on the grounds of their conceptual association with career-related phenomena.

Eligibility Criteria: Publication type, database indexing, publication years, language, and occupational contexts were among the other parameters included in the eligibility criteria. Articles written in English and indexed in the Scopus database within the time span of 1 January 2023 and 22 July 2026 were selected. The review encompassed occupational and vocational environments where career success could be studied, while excluding those articles where career psychological assessment was not discussed. The choice of the time period was made for capturing the most recent empirical developments and was not aimed at implying that the research on SCS began in 2023. Older theoretical works were used as a framework for interpreting the results obtained in this study. The review eligibility requirements are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

Eligibility criteria used in the Scopus review

Criterion	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference papers, editorials, book chapters, letters, notes, and other non-journal publications
Database indexing	Records indexed in Scopus	Records not indexed in Scopus
Publication period	Published from 1 January 2023 to 22 July 2026	Published before 1 January 2023 or after the search date
Language	Articles published in English	Articles published in languages other than English
Primary construct	Studies explicitly investigating or measuring SCS	Studies addressing career-related constructs without directly examining SCS
Construct relevance	Studies examining SCS conceptualisation, measurement, dimensions, or empirical associations	Studies mentioning SCS or career success only incidentally
Related constructs	Studies of career satisfaction, meaning, calling, identity, achievement, self-efficacy, or resilience only when they directly meet the SCS eligibility requirements	Studies focusing exclusively on related constructs without directly investigating SCS

The time period of 2023–2026 was deliberately chosen in order to reflect the present-day empirical development of SCS and not to revive its theoretical past. The early literature was therefore not viewed as irrelevant, but rather utilized for creating a theoretical heritage in relation to which the present-day findings were analyzed.

Screening and PRISMA Process

The process of selecting studies was performed following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The search of Scopus provided 326 references at first. Having imposed the restrictions regarding publication year, document type, and language, 135 references remained. Removing four duplicates resulted in 131 references being screened for titles and abstracts. As a result, 62 references were excluded from the pool as they were insufficiently related to subjective career success or relevant psychological dimensions.

Finally, 69 articles were evaluated in terms of their relevance based on predefined inclusion criteria. In the course of screening, 28 references were excluded due to not meeting the content criteria of the review. Thus, 41 studies were selected and analyzed within the scope of this paper. Further, the studies were coded in terms of theoretical background, psychological dimensions, geographical and occupational context, methodology, and antecedents, mediators, and

moderators of subjective career success. The study-selection counts supplied for the review are displayed in Figure 1.

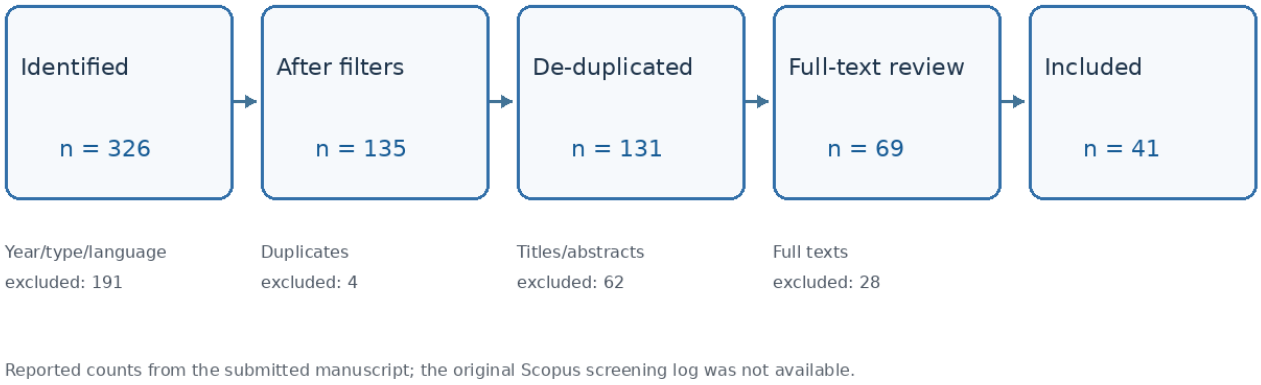


Figure 1.

Reported PRISMA-style study selection summary

Quality Appraisal and Risk of Bias

In contrast to the thematic-frequency analysis, the methodological quality of the included studies was assessed independently, as the former was focused on the frequency of occurrence of the constructs while the latter evaluated the quality of evidence for those constructs. The quality appraisal aimed at the evaluation of the results rather than at giving more importance to the frequent themes based only on their frequency.

The appraisal process was described at the level of the individual study. For each selected study, the following information was provided by the review: study identifier, design of the research, tool used for the appraisal, judgement at the criterion level, general methodological concerns, and implications for the interpretation of the results. Information about the number of reviewers, the roles that each played, and the process used to reach consensus on any disagreement was also provided. In case of independent appraisals, the disagreement was reached through discussion or through consultation with an additional reviewer.

The results of the appraisal informed the contextualisation of the thematic synthesis rather than creating a numerical weight for each theme. The methodological weaknesses were taken into account in terms of the strength, consistency, and transferability of the findings that were reported. It was not automatically assumed that all studies offered equally strong evidence just because they fulfilled the inclusion criteria. The quality appraisal results were tabulated in a study level table to allow the reader to assess the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the underlying evidence.

Data Extraction and Thematic Coding

Thematic coding adopted a framework-informed procedure. Meaning, satisfaction, and achievement constituted preliminary analytical categories which were formulated prior to the synthesis for organizing the analysis of subjective career success (SCS). They were treated as provisional frameworks rather than empirically verified dimensions. The constructs and findings included in the studies were reviewed in light of their definitions and positions in respective studies. The relevant constructs were distinguished from SCS and categorized based on their roles in the studies, namely antecedent, correlate, mediator, moderator, or outcome construct depending on the context. A study could be assigned to multiple categories based on its findings. The synthesis then assessed the support, qualifications, and challenges that the evidence provided in respect to the suggested categories and relationships between them. Consequently, the framework could be seen as a provisional conceptual synthesis rather than a validated theory of SCS.

Analytical Strategy

Framework-based thematic synthesis was applied to the interpretation of the results reported in the studies included in the analysis. Satisfaction, meaning, and achievement were regarded as provisional analytical themes, but not as pre-existing psychological dimensions of SCS. First, the findings of the studies were coded depending on their conceptual

connection to the proposed themes and taking into account the difference between SCS and its related constructs. Second, the individual, relational, and contextual factors studied were identified in accordance with the findings reported in the literature. Third, the roles of the factors studied with regard to SCS were explored, namely, whether they were considered antecedents, correlates, mediators, moderators, or outcomes of SCS. The roles of the factors were defined based on the concepts proposed in each study and in accordance with its research design, not only in terms of empirical links. Finally, the findings were compared among the studies to detect converging trends, discrepancies, contextual differences, and connections between the constructs under consideration.

This synthesis informed the creation of the Tripartite Psychological Model of Subjective Career Success (TPM-SCS). This model has been described as a hypothetical conceptualization, and not an empirical testable model of measuring SCS or a theory on the dimensionality of SCS. The concepts of meaning, satisfaction, and achievement are suggested here as three organizing categories which have been used to capture recurrent themes from the literature review. It is important to note that this synthesis does not assume that these concepts are necessarily discrete, separate, or even dimensions of SCS that have been empirically validated.

Findings and Results

Descriptive Overview of the Reviewed Corpus

Final corpus was composed of 41 studies which were published from 2023 to 2026. Studies covered various occupations and geographical locations, thus showing that modern research on subjective career success (SCS) has gone beyond conventional Western business environments. The corpus includes studies carried out in East and Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and Latin America, as well as some studies carried out in cross-national or mixed occupation samples. Geographical diversity is not taken here just as descriptive diversity but rather as reflection of increasing attention to the evaluation of career success in different labour markets. The distribution of reviewed study settings is reported in Table 2.

Table 2.

Distribution of studies by country and region

Country/Region	Number of Studies (n)	Percentage (%)	Predominant Occupational Context
China	7	17.1	Nurses, healthcare professionals, hospitality and service employees
South Korea	4	9.8	Nurses, healthcare workers, and early-career employees
Vietnam	3	7.3	Employees in private/public organisations and early-career workers
India	5	12.2	Hospitality workers, professional women, university lecturers, and service employees
Turkey	3	7.3	Hospitality employees, professionals, and organisational workers
Indonesia	2	4.9	Employees, prospective professionals, and organisational workers
Other Asian countries	3	7.3	Employees, professionals, and university/educational workers
Sub-Saharan Africa	5	12.2	Professional women, academics, teachers, healthcare workers, and organisational employees
Europe	5	12.2	Remote workers, professionals, academics, and vocational/educational populations
Latin America	1	2.4	Organisational and professional employees
North America	1	2.4	Professional and organisational employees
Cross-national/multi-country	2	4.9	Comparative samples of professionals and organisational employees
Total	41	100.0	

Of the 41 studies, there is evidence of geographically diverse but imbalanced distribution. Most studies were conducted in China (n = 7, 17.1%), followed by India (n = 5, 12.2%), Sub-Saharan Africa (n = 5, 12.2%), and Europe (n = 5, 12.2%). South Korea was also a location where four studies were conducted (9.8%). Three studies were done in Vietnam, Turkey, and other Asian countries (7.3%). There were two studies conducted in Indonesia (4.9%) and cross-national/multi-country category. Only one study was conducted in Latin America and another one in North America (both 2.4%). The geographical distribution of the evidence shows that a large part of the studies were carried out in the context of Asia and other emerging economies. At the same time, there is a lack of studies from Latin America and North America. Occupational contexts are rather diverse,

including healthcare, hospitality, education, academia, professional services, remote work, etc.

The reviewed collection of articles has demonstrated substantial geographical diversity, despite the uneven distribution of the number of studies between countries. Among 41 studies, those have been performed in Asian, African, European, Latin American, North American, and cross-national/multi-country settings. Asian settings form an especially noticeable part of recent research on subjective career success, which include the studies conducted in China, South Korea, Vietnam, India, Turkey, and other countries.

This distribution suggests that modern research on subjective career success goes beyond Western organizational settings. Researchers are now increasingly interested in evaluating how individuals perceive their career success in various economic, institutional, and cultural contexts. However, the uneven representation of countries restricts the possibility to draw universal conclusions concerning the psychological structure of subjective career success.

The geographical diversity of the corpus is significant from the theoretical point of view because of the potential differences in the meaning of career success in different cultural contexts. In some cultures, the assessment of career success will focus primarily on the individual autonomy, personal fulfillment, and self-development; in others, on family obligations, social contribution, collective recognition, or economic security. Therefore, future research should investigate if the meaning, satisfaction, and achievement dimensions reveal the same psychological structure across cultures.

Occupational and Professional Distribution

Occupational coverage of the included studies is detailed in Table 3.

Table 3.

Distribution of studies by occupational context

Occupational/Professional Context	Studies (n)	Share (%)	Typical Population
General/cross-occupational employee samples	15	36.6	Employees from multiple sectors
Higher education, graduates, and academia	7	17.1	Academics, postgraduate students, graduates
Healthcare and nursing	6	14.6	Nurses, healthcare professionals
Hospitality and tourism	3	7.3	Hotel and tourism employees
Remote, hybrid, and self-managed careers	3	7.3	Remote workers, independent professionals
Vocational and adolescent populations	2	4.9	Vocational students, young career entrants
Public-sector and uniformed services	2	4.9	Government and uniformed personnel
Other/mixed occupational contexts	3	7.3	Mixed or specialized populations
Total	41	100.0	

However, the occupational backgrounds of the reviewed studies varied greatly. General or cross-occupational groups of employees comprised the biggest number of studies (n = 15; 36.6%), which implies that the current trend in research often focuses on subjective career success as a cross-organizational phenomenon. The second place in terms of quantity is taken by the population of higher education, graduates, and academia (n = 7; 17.1%), while third is taken by healthcare and nursing professionals (n = 6; 14.6%).

Some less numerous but still significant occupational categories included the population of hospitality and tourism workers (n = 3; 7.3%), remote, hybrid, and self-managed careers (n = 3; 7.3%), vocational and adolescent populations (n = 2; 4.9%), and public sector or uniformed services (n = 2; 4.9%). Some other or mixed occupations were studied in three papers (n = 3; 7.3%).

Such diversity of the occupational backgrounds can be considered additional evidence for considering the phenomenon of subjective career success as cross-contextual one. However, different occupational backgrounds might affect definitions and evaluations of career success. For instance, healthcare professionals can pay more attention to calling and contribution to society, while the self-managed people might value more autonomy and personal success. The predominant designs in the included corpus are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4.

Research designs reported for the included studies

Research Design	Studies (n)	Share (%)
Cross-sectional quantitative survey	28	68.3
Longitudinal/time-lagged survey	4	9.8
Qualitative/constructionist	4	9.8
Scale development/psychometric validation	3	7.3
Meta-review/narrative synthesis	2	4.9
Total	41	100.0

There was a heavy reliance on quantitative cross-sectional studies (n = 28; 68.3%) in the methodological characteristics of the corpus examined. Only four studies (9.8%) utilized longitudinal or time-lagged methods, while four others (9.8%) used qualitative or constructionist methods. Also, three studies (7.3%) were scale development or psychometric validation in nature, while two other studies (4.9%) used meta-review or narrative synthesis methods.

This methodological bias is a major limitation of the current body of literature on the subject matter. Cross-sectional study designs are valuable when it comes to examining relationships between psychological resources, organizational factors, and subjective career outcomes, although they do not offer much in terms of providing insight into temporal ordering or causality. This is especially relevant to the current review because meaning, satisfaction, and achievement may affect each other over time. The theoretical approaches identified in the synthesis are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5.

Theoretical frameworks represented in reviewed literature

Theoretical Framework	Core Theoretical Focus	Relevance to SCS Dimensions	Studies (n)
Career Construction Theory	Career adaptation, identity, narrative meaning-making	Meaning; identity; adaptation	8
Social Cognitive Career Theory	Self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, contextual supports	Achievement; contextual resources	6
Protean Career Theory	Self-direction and value-driven career management	Meaning; satisfaction; psychological success	6
Boundaryless Career Perspective	Career mobility across organizational boundaries	Career autonomy; contextual mobility	3
Person–Environment/Person–Career Fit	Correspondence between individual values and career environment	Satisfaction; identity alignment	5
Job Demands–Resources Model	Resources, engagement, demands, and well-being	Satisfaction; contextual resources	4
Social Exchange/Organizational Support Theory	Reciprocity, support, and organizational relationships	Satisfaction; relational resources	4
Identity-Based Perspectives	Career identity and self-definition	Meaning; satisfaction	3
Other/Integrated Frameworks	Mixed or context-specific theories	Multiple dimensions	1
No Explicit Theoretical Framework	Primarily empirical or descriptive studies	Varies	1
Total			41

Discussion and Conclusions

The theories used by the reviewed literature were diverse in nature. Career Construction Theory was particularly applicable for research focused on career identity, adaptation, and meaning-making. Social Cognitive Career Theory guided research focused on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, adaptive behavior, and environmental factors. Protean Career Theory was often useful for self-directed career management, personal values, and psychological success. Boundaryless careers theories guided research on career mobility and changing organizational relations.

Other theories that some researchers utilized included person-environment fit, organizational support, social exchange, identity, and job demands-resources perspectives. However, a number of papers did not use a career theory

explicitly and focused on empirically established relationships between psychological and organizational factors.

Diversity in theories of the reviewed literature is one of the reasons why a conceptual synthesis presented in the current paper can be valuable. Existing theories describe various aspects of career development and success, but they are not consistent in distinguishing three processes of meaning, satisfaction, and success.

Meaning and Purpose: Defining What Counts as Career Success

Many sources in the analyzed literature base their claims that the process of subjective career success formation includes certain meaning-related mechanisms. However, it becomes obvious that there is one more crucial point that needs to be understood (Nexhip et al., 2025). Namely, the role of the meaning of life construct varies greatly depending on the level of analysis. In other words, meaning should be viewed neither as an antecedent nor as a component of SCS but rather depends on the model that is analyzed (Sotto-Mayor et al., 2025).

In the developed conceptualization of SCS, meaning is considered to be one of the interpretable dimensions of SCS, which means that people create their own criteria of successful career. Thus, callings, career identity, purpose, and value congruence are able to contribute to meaning formation (Park et al., 2025). At the same time, calling, career identity, purpose, and value congruence are able to play the role of antecedents, mediators, or moderators of subjective career success perception (Sharma & Sharma, 2024).

The mechanism of occupational calling seems to have been mentioned in many papers. There are studies that prove that calling can affect career success either directly or indirectly through psychological resources or work experience (Sharma & Akram, 2024). For instance, occupational calling is seen as a mediator of the relationship between institutional or policy alienation and subjective career success among medical professionals. Moreover, some studies consider calling to be an upstream predictor of such aspects as self-efficacy, competence, and satisfaction-related results. These facts prove that calling is able to play the role of both an indicator of SCS meaning and a psychological resource, which affects other dimensions of SCS (Fryczyńska & Pleśniak, 2024).

However, there is the need to pay more attention to the balance of understanding of the role of calling. First of all, it should be admitted that calling is not always useful. It is evident that when people strongly believe that they fulfill their vocational duties, they tend to invest themselves into work too much and find it difficult to detach themselves from work or accept poor working conditions. Thus, there is the need to avoid considering calling as an unconditional positive indicator of SCS perception.

Career identity represented another key meaning-related mechanism. Based on the analysis of reviewed studies, it can be concluded that people with more defined professional identity could assess their career experience based on their own criteria (Ali & Mehreen, 2024; Pujol-Cols & Lazzaro-Salazar, 2025). It has been established that career identity moderated the effect of career commitment on career success and acted as an indirect antecedent of SCS via protean career attitudes and work-life balance. The study of career identity among adolescents has also shown that the development of occupational self-concept takes place before entering the labour market (Blokker et al., 2025; Blokker et al., 2025). Protean and kaleidoscope approaches are focused on the ability of the individual to define his or her career success based on personal criteria of evaluation rather than organizational ones (Casmini & Apriari, 2025). Protean and kaleidoscope career approaches are especially applicable for modern careers, characterized by mobility and flexibility and absence of organizational hierarchy. But they do not necessarily imply the SCS itself; these are rather the orientations defining personal criteria for assessing the experience of career.

Career Satisfaction: Affective Evaluation of Career Experience

The second dimension has to do with affective and evaluative processes by means of which people evaluate their feelings about their career experiences. The literature reviewed above consistently emphasizes the role of leadership, organizational support, psychological safety, work engagement, and social resources in this regard. Nonetheless, one should understand that career satisfaction cannot be solely attributed to organizational factors as otherwise it would become equivalent to job satisfaction. In this review, career satisfaction is viewed as an affective-evaluative

evaluation of a more extended career path, rather than the evaluation of the particular job.

Leadership has been consistently found to have a positive impact on people's evaluations of their careers. Transformational and authentic leadership was found to be associated with subjective career success via psychological safety, mindfulness, employee well-being, and engagement among other mechanisms (Park et al., 2025; Park et al., 2025; Park et al., 2025). Thus, relational context can influence the way in which people interpret and appraise their career experiences. Organizational and social support was another consistent theme identified in the reviewed literature. Organizations providing a supportive environment for employees can offer them resources that help to increase their optimism, flexibility, and confidence in their future careers (Fryczyńska & Pleśniak, 2024). Nevertheless, in some cases, the structure did not appear to be enough to mitigate the impact of institutional constraints including gender inequality or limited career possibilities (Imhanrenialena et al., 2025; Sumaryono et al., 2025).

At the same time, it is worth noting that the dimension in question also depends on individual factors. Aspiration, career values, person-career fit, identity fit, and emotions determine whether objective similar career situations will be positively or negatively evaluated by people (Janeke et al., 2026). Two people working in the similar organizational environment may thus have dissimilar levels of career satisfaction since they have dissimilar aspirations, values, identities, or expectations regarding their career progression (Safin et al., 2025). Person-career fit is crucial when distinguishing career satisfaction from job satisfaction as while the latter relates to the evaluation of current job and work environment, the former relates to a broader evaluation of whether the occupational path matches with individual goals, values, identity, and future development expectations (Lim et al., 2025; Lasmini & Abidin, 2024). Negative interpersonal events also highlight the significance of emotional appraisal. Interpersonal disputes and other conflicts can negatively impact an employee's subjective career success due to their negative emotions (Ma et al., 2025). On the other hand, work engagement, psychological safety, and perceptions of fairness may enhance positive appraisals of one's career through the effect on individual's emotional interpretations of their workplace experience Xia et al., 2025).

Personal Achievement: Perceived Competence, Growth, and Mastery

In relation to personal achievement, the reviewed literature highlights self-efficacy, resilience, career commitment, adaptability, agency, and mastery as mechanisms involved in positive perceptions of career success (Koekemoer et al., 2023; Sharma & Akram, 2024; Koekemoer et al., 2023). However, it is important to make a distinction between psychological and objective aspects of personal achievement and career success. In the context of the suggested synthesis, the concept of personal achievement should not be associated with salary, promotions, occupational status, and any other career advancements (Gaile et al., 2024). Such indicators may serve as evidence that individuals have made some progress in their careers, yet this progress may not necessarily be considered as personal achievement. The main point is that personal achievement represents self-reference to competence, progress, mastery, and personal development. Thus, the key aspect is not about getting a promotion or earning more money, but about making significant progress towards career success according to personally defined criteria (Sharma & Akram, 2024).

Self-efficacy was identified as one of the most widespread proximal mechanisms of achievement-based SCS. Specifically, there are many cases when career commitment enhances self-efficacy and resilience, which results in positive career success perceptions (Chang et al., 2023; Sharma & Akram, 2024). Therefore, it can be said that the concept of achievement is not associated with receiving external benefits, but with internal perception of one's capabilities and professional development (Kim et al., 2023).

Other research works have considered such areas as social capital, networking, salary, and career advancement. The results obtained should be interpreted very carefully. Network and social capital can be seen as resources facilitating external career mobility whereas salary and promotion are the objective measures of success. However, within the TPM-SCS model such things are viewed as external factors, which can help in the process of personal achievement; nevertheless, they cannot be called achievement in itself. The person might get an external promotion without obtaining any personal mastery and satisfaction whereas the other person might have achieved a lot psychologically but not made any salary advancements (Kim & Jee, 2025; Zhao et al., 2025; Zhao et al.,

2025). Another example illustrating the dynamics of achievement is career shock or adversity. A career shock might disrupt one's perception of progress; however, it can also motivate the person to adapt, become resilient, reconstruct his/her identity and form new career goals (Sharma & Sharma, 2024).

Cross-Dimensional Synthesis

It can thus be argued that meaning, satisfaction, and achievement represent analytically distinguishable but interconnected processes. The results do not allow one to conclude that these constructs represent fully independent dimensions and/or operate in a particular causal sequence. Meaning refers to the interpretative framework that people use to assess their careers (Safin et al., 2023). Individuals' beliefs about meaning involve identifying criteria of success. Satisfaction is defined as affective evaluation of congruence between current and past career experiences and individual expectations. Achievement is self-referential judgement related to competence and mastery (Alkal et al., 2025). The processes may relate to each other in various ways. First, meaning may affect satisfaction since individuals tend to evaluate their careers more positively if their occupational experiences match their value system and identity (Yılmaz & Ece, 2026). Second, satisfaction may be affected by perceived achievement as people feel satisfied with their career experience when there is evidence of progress and competence. Third, satisfaction helps people stay motivated which, in turn, leads to future achievement. Fourth, achievement experience may change career meaning as people modify their aspirations over time.

Toward a Tripartite Psychological Model of Subjective Career Success

Findings suggest the possibility of developing a conceptual basis for a Tripartite Psychological Model of Subjective Career Success (TPM-SCS). It is necessary to emphasize that TPM-SCS should not be perceived as a proven empirically valid model but rather as a theoretical framework based on systematic literature review (Teow et al., 2024). The purpose of the framework is to synthesize contemporary scattered evidence and formulate propositions for further empirical research. According to the proposed model, subjective career success may be understood through three interconnected psychological processes. First of all, meaning stands for the motivational and interpretive process whereby individuals create definitions of career success for themselves (Schultheiss et al., 2023). The key mechanisms involved in this process include calling, career identity, purpose, personal values, and perceived consistency between career and self-concept. Secondly, satisfaction stands for the affective-evaluative process whereby individuals judge their feelings about their career path. This process is affected by such factors as emotional appraisal, career expectations, fit between person and career, identity congruence, leadership, organizational support, psychological safety, and work-life conditions (AŞKUN & Volkan, 2024; Özsoy & Turan Yilmaz, 2025).

In turn, TPM-SCS proposes the following theoretical propositions for further empirical investigation:

Proposition 1: Meaning-Satisfaction Alignment Proposition.

The closer fit between the person's career identity, values, and occupation will result in stronger affective evaluations of career satisfaction.

Proposition 2: Achievement-Satisfaction Reinforcement Proposition.

Competence, mastery, and career advancement are expected to make positive contributions to career satisfaction, while positive satisfaction will reinforce engagement and persistence, leading to further achievement.

Proposition 3: Contextual Resources and Adversity Proposition.

Organizational resources, social support, cultural expectations, structural opportunities, and career adversity will moderate relationships between meaning, satisfaction, and achievement.

These propositions cannot be treated as causal relationships proven by scientific evidence. They are theoretically plausible ways suggested by researchers based on patterns in the reviewed literature. The proposed framework and its contextual influences are organized in Table 6. Figure 2 depicts these proposed relationships; they remain untested propositions.

Table 6.

Proposed conceptual architecture of TPM–SCS

Component	Central psychological question	Psychological function	Principal mechanisms	Contextual influences
Meaning	What does career success mean to me?	Defines personally relevant criteria of success	Calling, career identity, values, purpose, career coherence	Culture, autonomy, career stage, family expectations
Satisfaction	How do I feel about my career?	Affective and evaluative appraisal	Emotional appraisal, expectations, person-career fit, identity alignment, support	Leadership, psychological safety, work-life conditions
Achievement	Am I progressing and developing competence?	Self-referential evaluation of growth and mastery	Self-efficacy, resilience, adaptability, agency, mastery	Resources, labour-market opportunities, discrimination
Career shocks	What disrupts my career trajectory?	Triggers reappraisal and adaptation	Identity reconstruction, coping, resilience	Job loss, crises, organizational change
Structural context	What opportunities and constraints exist?	Shapes the opportunity structure for career development	Access to resources and advancement	Gender, class, institutions, labour-market structure
Culture	What forms of success are socially valued?	Shapes socially legitimate success criteria	Norms, collectivism, status, family expectations	National and institutional culture

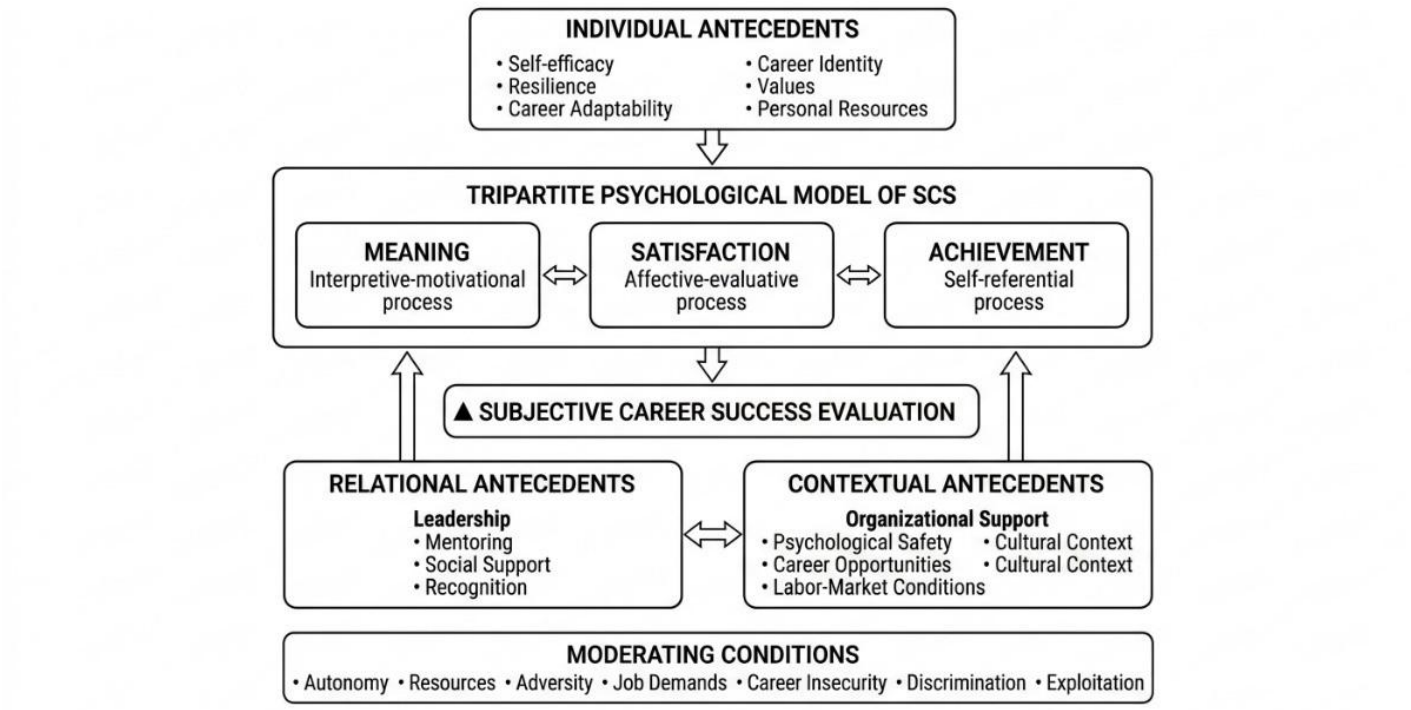


Figure 2.

Conceptual Tripartite Psychological Model of Subjective Career Success (TPM–SCS)Theoretical Implications

The principal theoretical contribution of the TPM-SCS is not the claim that meaning, satisfaction, and achievement are entirely new constructs (Coetzee et al., 2023). Rather, the framework proposes a conceptual distinction among psychological processes that are often combined under the broad label of subjective career success. This distinction can be situated in relation to several established career theories (Yang et al., 2025).

Career Construction Theory (CCT) highlights the importance of identity construction and meaning construction throughout the life span. In terms of meaning and identity, TPM-SCS fits well within this perspective but moves beyond it in making a distinction between meaning construction and affective satisfaction/perceived achievement (Coetzee et al., 2023). Thus, CCT is a useful theoretical underpinning of the meaning component but not a rival theory. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) focuses on self-efficacy, outcome expectancy, goals, and context-based support/barriers (AŞKUN & Volkan, 2024). In terms of achievement, TPM-SCS is heavily influenced by SCCT in conceptualizing achievement as a self-referential developmental process of perceived competence and agency. However, the TPM-SCS tripartite structure differentiates psychological achievement from the general process of meaning construction and affective satisfaction (Koekemoer et al., 2023).

Protean Career Theory highlights self-direction and value-based career orientation. This perspective is highly pertinent to the meaning dimension since protean careers promote value-driven definitions of success in contrast to organizationally dictated definitions of success (Teow et al., 2024). Nevertheless, protean orientation represents a type of career orientation/self-management rather than the complete psychological architecture of subjective career success evaluation. Existing Career Success Frameworks distinguish between objective and subjective career success and discuss many predictors at individual, relational, and organizational levels. TPM-SCS does not replace these frameworks. Instead, it focuses on the narrower aspect of subjective career success evaluation in terms of its internal psychological processes (Yılmaz & Ece, 2026).

Future empirical studies must thus explore whether meaning, satisfaction, and achievement display discriminant validity as separate yet connected dimensions of subjective career success. Longitudinal study must also be conducted to uncover the relations between them and possible reciprocal causality (Alkal et al., 2025). Cross-cultural study must be conducted to determine whether there is any variation in the relative importance of the three dimensions between collectivist and individualist cultures, occupational sectors, career stages, and labor market structures (Smale et al., 2019; Safin et al., 2023). Finally, the TPM-SCS must be viewed as a theoretical model to test in future rather than a validated theory. The value of the TPM-SCS lies in its provision of a theory-based integration of contemporary empirical literature on subjective career success and generation of more specific questions on its psychology (Sharma & Sharma, 2024).

The current systematic literature review summarises recent findings in the field of SCS and introduces a new conceptual framework termed the Tripartite Psychological Model of Subjective Career Success (TPM-SCS), including three related psychological dimensions of meaning, satisfaction, and personal achievement. By meaning is meant how people interpret the sense and meaning of their careers; satisfaction refers to evaluative and affective assessments of career experiences and their consistency with value systems, whereas personal achievement pertains to the perception of competence, growth, mastery, and progression rather than external career outcomes like remuneration or advancement. It seems that these three dimensions may be affected by different factors, both individually and in interaction, contributing to the overall perception of SCS.

The results have to be treated cautiously since the systematic literature review included only publications released between 2023 and 2026 and used a single database, namely, Scopus. Thus, many other significant and relevant studies, especially those that provide the theoretical foundations for the current one, may be missing. Also, the prevalence of cross-sectional studies hinders making any assumptions about causality or establishing the order of the three dimensions. Therefore, the TPM-SCS should be seen

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more as a concept for further empirical investigation. Further longitudinal, cross-cultural, mixed-method, and intervention studies are required to examine the suggested relationships and determine whether enhancing meaning, satisfaction, or achievement can lead to better SCS.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

This manuscript is a theoretical and conceptual synthesis. It did not involve human participants, animals, interviews, surveys, experiments, clinical procedures, or analysis of individual-level social-media data.

Data availability

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