

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring Intercultural Career Mobility Attitudes of Post-graduate Students: A Longitudinal Study on Arab World Migrants

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Abstract: The study investigates the factors developing intercultural protean career attitudes (freedom, self-direction, and making career choices based on one's values) among post-graduate students (who later migrated to Arab world countries) and the role of ability-based psychological mechanisms. Specifically, to study the effect of core self-evaluation (CSEs), perceived employability, and network capital on intercultural protean career attitude, and the role of career decision self-efficacy (CDSE) as a mediator in this relationship. Past studies have focused on the consequences of intercultural protean careers. However, none of them identified the antecedents of intercultural protean career mobility orientation of migrant workers. Our study aims to develop a process model for which individuals develop intercultural protean careers. Data was collected from 1,064 post-graduate management students in Kerala, India in two waves. The data was collected for the first wave immediately before the participants completed their graduation degree, and the second wave of data collection was done approximately six months into their employment and migrated to the Arab world countries. Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the hypothesis and the size of the indirect effect using the SPSS PROCESS macro. Individuals with higher CSEs and perceived employability develop intercultural protean career attitudes, whereas socially embedded individuals are less likely to form a protean attitude. Further, for individuals having higher CSEs and perceived employability, the development of intercultural protean career orientation largely happens through the development of CDSE. Career counsellors who are dealing with problems arising out of dynamism in careers could focus on building elements of CSEs and developing career-specific self-efficacy. Organizations that prefer stable career orientations in their employees could look for socially embedded employees.

Keywords: higher education, intercultural migrations, Arab world, intercultural protean career orientation, intercultural employability, career and development

INTRODUCTION

Millions of migrant workers are working in Arab countries. As per the recently published data of 2019 from the International Labour Organization, ILO, more than 24.1 million migrant workers were employed in 12 Arab countries which constituted more than 14 percent of the world's total migrant workers. This signifies the importance of intercultural migrant workers for the Arab world's socio-economic and cultural structure. India, more specifically, Kerala, a southern state in India, accounted for a major section of these migrant workers working in the Arab world. Given the importance of migrant workers from Kerala in the Arab world labour market and its socio-economic and cultural contribution, it becomes imperative to understand the intercultural career mobility orientations of migrants. The present study considered intercultural career mobility orientations of postgraduate management students from Kerala who migrated to Arab world countries and were employed in these countries. Understanding their career mobility orientation would contribute to the understanding of career dynamics and preferences of intercultural migrations.

Individuals make career choices based on their career orientations and personal values (Owusu et al., 2021). In today's world, a traditional career in an organization is

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not an option that is desired by many employees (Arthur, 1994). This is because the current environment is turbulent and competitive and faced with much disruption and could have significant impact on human resource practices (Kim et al., 2022). Understanding the factors influencing work attitudes has grown more important in today's dynamic workplace, as businesses are always adapting to stay competitive (Zhu & Gao, 2024). The intercultural protean career orientation views career as one that is psychologically and physically independent from an organization (Briscoe & Hall, 2006) and is associated with expatriation (Zulkifly et al., 2020). Consequently, came the term of intercultural protean career orientation. Intercultural protean career orientations refer to an attitude of "freedom, self-direction, and making choices based on one's personal values" (Briscoe & Hall, 2006, p. 6) across cultural boundaries. Research has shown to the organization and the individual that intercultural protean careers hold multiple positive benefits which included being proactive, adaptable in a career, open to multiple cultures, achieving psychological well-being, being able to effectively cope with uncertainty of new culture, career, and life satisfaction (Chan et al., 2015; Porter et al., 2016).

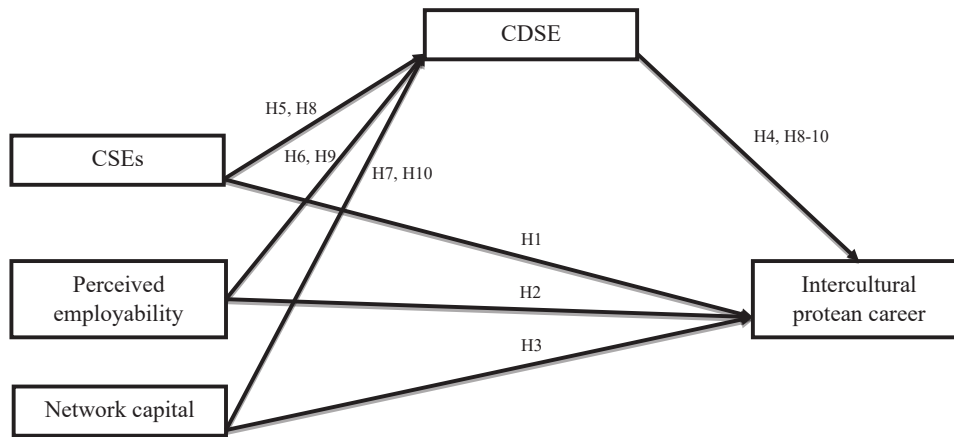
Intercultural protean career attitude, also known as individual career management, involves greater mobility across cultural boundaries (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). These individuals who hold the intercultural protean career attitude are "value-driven" and have a "self-directed attitude" towards career management across cultures (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Individuals contrasted to other individuals who hold intercultural protean career orientations, borrow external standards rather than use internally developed standards. They tend to go forth and seek multicultural assistance and direction and are open and independent in their cultural viewpoints (Porter et al., 2016). Intercultural learning and mobility are important determinants of intercultural protean career orientation. The individual should be willing to learn and move to remain protean. By adopting physical and psychological traits to move in an agile manner, the person may therefore effortlessly traverse the ever-changing job environment (Unhelkar, 2024).

It would be apt to discuss the changing paradigm of protean career in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly altered the career pathways of migrant workers globally. It has disrupted the

conventional and well-established structure of migration and re-delineated the employability in the global context. Various studies have reported the enhanced job insecurities, agreement terminations, and constant need for reskilling of migrant workers to remain competitive in the post pandemic labour market (Gamage et al., 2022). Travel restrictions, closure of workplaces, and abnormal shifts in work demands have accentuated the importance of cross-cultural adaptability, resilience, and self-directed career management, particularly among Gulf-bound South Asian migrant workers (Kumar & Bhagat, 2021). The COVID pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital networking and distant skill acquisition among migrant workers, further affecting their perceived employability and protean career trajectories. These advancements provide our study a significant modern context, highlighting the necessity of looking at psychological tools like core self-evaluations (CSEs) and career decision self-efficacy (CDSE) in order to manage such extraordinary upheavals.

Given the importance of intercultural protean careers in today's changing world where careers are no longer seen as stable, it becomes imperative to understand the factors that develop an attitude towards intercultural protean careers. Past studies primarily focused on the consequences of protean careers, considering their positive and negative aspects both (Culie et al., 2014; Rodrigues et al., 2015). Apart from a few exceptions, there are hardly any studies on the antecedents of intercultural protean career (Rodrigues & Dias, 2024). Though these exceptions considered the antecedents, none of them has developed a process model through which individuals develop intercultural protean careers. Our study aims to fill this gap in the literature on the protean career by deriving from the theory on the development of career orientation and new careers. Specifically, to answer; What are the aspects related to protean careers, and what are the factors leading up to it? What is the role of the ability-based psychological mechanism through which these factors exert their effect? These are some of the research questions explored by the study. More specifically, the present study aims to:

1. Study the effect of CSEs, perceived employability, and network capital on having a protean career view
2. Study the role of CDSE as a mediator in this effect

Figure 1*Research Model Depicting the Relationship Among Variables**Note:* Author's own creation.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

CSE and protean careers

According to researchers, there are three antecedents towards the development of protean career orientations. The first being individual dispositions. CSEs are those traits held by an individual on a personal level where the individual themselves evaluates their self, abilities, and to what extent they have control over their abilities (Judge et al., 2003). However, the significance of common objectives cannot be overstated because individuals' work attitudes are shaped by the extent to which organisational and personal goals overlap (Bazine & Freour, 2024). The presence of common objectives fosters a sense of cohesion and purpose as well as an environment where employees find significance in their efforts (Hussain et al., 2025). People with higher CSE are generally always more confident about themselves and view themselves in a positive light (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011). The opposite, people with a low CSEs lack the confidence that people with a higher CSEs portray. Therefore, it is a person's evaluation that may be subconscious about themselves and their abilities. The following are the different dimensions of CSEs.

Self-esteem: A person may ask the following questions such as – Is he/she good? Are they valuable? Are they worth? These questions generally deal with self-esteem. It is the value a person gives themselves. People with

higher self-esteem are satisfied with what they do with in their abilities.

Self-efficacy: This has to do with a particular individual's evaluation of how they can cope with a particular situation. It is either strong or weak. A person who takes up challenging tasks, can get better quicker from distressing situations and shows commitment has a strong self-efficacy (Judge et al., 2003). But an individual who runs away from tasks and takes a pessimistic view on things has a weak self-efficacy. It can be concluded that it is an assessment of how an individual can perform across a variety of situations or handle life challenges.

Locus of control: LOC is a trait within a person's personality which helps to determine the extent to which people in general agree or disagree that they can handle events in the environment that affect them (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011). It is a belief held by a person that the causes of events in a person's life are internal or external (Judge et al., 2003). A person who holds an internal locus of control feels that they are able to influence events and their outcomes, while a person with an external locus of control blames outside forces for every situation.

Neuroticism: Neuroticism is defined as a person's tendency to portray emotional states that are negative (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011). It can be used interchangeably with emotional instability and is

contrasted with self-esteem. Individuals who have a high score on neuroticism are generally the ones who portray anger, depression, anxiety, and other such emotions more than other individuals. Individuals with a high level of neuroticism are often seen to be acting nervously, less confident, and depressed.

A study by Koumoundourou et al. (2011) done on high school students, found that CSEs were positively associated with career identity and CDSE. People pursuing self-directed independent careers face uncertainty and ambiguity as they manoeuvre their careers (Baruch & Vardi, 2016). The past research has argued that individuals who are high in CSEs can handle well the vagaries of ups and downs in their careers and face the uncertainty and ambiguity in their careers (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011).

According to researchers, there are three antecedents towards the development of protean career orientations. The first being individual dispositions. People who undertake independent careers have to cope with a certain level of uncertainty, instability, and certain ambiguous situations every now and then in the uncertain labour market. Therefore, in order to survive, they require the needed psychological resources to help them develop and sustain a protean career orientation (Baruch & Vardi, 2016).

This is reflected in the CSE concept. Persons with positive CSE generally own their careers and are able to cope better with uncertainty in the turbulent labour market than individuals with low CSE. It can be concluded that CSEs are positively associated with the development of new career orientations.

H₁: CSE is positively associated with an intercultural protean career.

Perceived employability and protean careers

The second antecedent is perceived employability. Employability constitutes “employment” and “ability” which means the “ability to be employed”. How employable is a person? This has been studied in multiple disciplines by researchers and scholars alike from education to psychology. Employability is the individual’s perception of their possibilities of obtaining and maintaining employment (Vanhercke et al., 2014).

This focuses on the individual as the centre of attraction and highlights the subjective importance through the individual’s perceptions. Originally, employability was only looked at from a macro level, but now it has come down to the micro level. During the post-World War II period, the macro level was considered as the country

wanted to activate the disabled and disadvantaged. This was also called the manpower policy employability.

In the 1980s, employability was looked at from a meso-level or an organizational viewpoint. In the present day, it is the individual and no longer the organization that carries forth the responsibility for their career. The modern career has taken over the traditional career. In a traditional career context, the individual was bound by organizational binds and hierarchical ladders. Loyalty and performance brought forth job security. Whereas, the modern career views career as protean, where the employee shapes their own career across organizational, departmental, and functional boundaries.

Perceived employability is generally subjective in nature. It is a subjective assessment of one’s employability, a personal construct (Williams et al., 2019) and thus has a psychological rather than a real notion of employability. It differs from person to person depending on profiles, the labour market, motivational factors, and networking. Perceived employability deals with the possibilities of employment. Possibilities could be very broad that it deals with the integration of personal factors, structural factors, and their interactions. Personal factors are experienced at the “individual level”, whereas structural factors are at the “broad policy level or at the level of the organization”. Something that is unique to perceived employability is the interaction of personal and structural factors.

Perceived employability also encompasses internal labour market movement (career progression within the current organization) and external labour market movement (job opportunities with new employers). It is influenced by both the availability and quality of job opportunities (Vanhercke et al., 2014). Essentially, employability refers to both retaining one’s current job and securing desired employment. Achieving employability involves factors such as knowledge, skills, learning capacity (Baird & Parayitam, 2019), career management abilities, job search expertise, and professional knowledge (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). Job displacement can significantly impact well-being (Song et al., 2018) and may leave lasting effects on the unemployed (Shi et al., 2018), making perceived employability a crucial factor in successfully re-entering the workforce.

Scholars who have advanced new career theories argue that employment is no longer defined by permanent jobs within a single organization. Instead, it is seen as a temporary phase or a reflection of long-term employability (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, p. 74). Workers are encouraged to take ownership of their careers, market

themselves effectively, and enhance their employability to navigate their professional paths. Research indicates that perceived employability is strongly linked to career mobility, making it a vital prerequisite for individuals adopting new career orientations.

Another aspect of employability is with regards to obtaining and maintaining employment. In this context, the structural barriers which are beyond the individual dispositions and psychological resources also play a very decisive role. As underscored by Jureidini and Hassan (2019), the visa sponsorship systems like *Kafala* in the Arab Gulf region, significantly curtail job-switching and hinder career autonomy. It is truer for low and mid-skilled migrant workers. Such systems create dependencies on employers which affects both employment stability and liberty to choose desired career pathways. Gender disparities further intersect with these institutional restrictions, with female migrants typically confronting segregated labour markets, restricted vocational options, and extra cultural hurdles in host communities (Saeidi et al., 2025). These sort of structural constraints not only hampers the fuller expression and exploration by protean career-oriented individuals with high perceived employability but also restrict their mobility alternatives. Consideration of these structural constraints is vital to unfold the dynamic and complicated interplay of individuals and institutional contexts that shape the career outcomes of migrant workers.

Therefore, perceived employability is different for different labour groups. With regards to the individual career, perceived employability is crucial in the many phases of exploration of the labour market, consolidation and maintenance of their current employment, and in making transitions between jobs, inter-organization or intra-organization.

Perceived employability also refers to internal labour market movement with the current employer or in the external labour market with an external employer. It also has to do with the number of jobs available and the quality of the jobs available (Vanhercke et al., 2014). Employability is “the ability to keep the job one has or to get the job one desires”. This has to do with not just getting the job but also maintaining the position one desires for success. Employability is also built on several attributes such as knowledge and skills, capacity for learning (Baird & Parayitam, 2019), mastery of career management and job search, and professional knowledge (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). Job displacements could severely hamper subjective well-being (Song et al., 2018) and could leave a scarring effect on unemployed (Shi et al., 2018), therefore, the perception of employability becomes important for a person to find another job.

Researchers who have put forth new career theory have argued that employment no longer means holding a permanent job within an organization. They have said that it is rather a temporary state, or the current manifestation of long-term employability (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, p. 74), where the workers are encouraged to partake in the management of their own careers by developing ownership and marketing themselves to increase their own employability to manage and pave the road for their career. Research has shown that perceptions of employability are also crucial to increased career mobility. Employability is, therefore, an essential prerequisite for those developing new career orientations.

***H₂*:** Perceived employability is positively associated with intercultural protean career.

Network capital and protean careers

The third antecedent is network capital. Network capital refers to the strength or number of bonds or ties an individual has. It refers to assets invested to generate profit. It refers to relationships that are trustworthy, resource-rich, and reciprocal in nature, which is not only an asset but which can empower an individual (Forrier & Sels, 2003). People who own their own network capital can benefit from it by accessing the information they need, which can be both helpful and harmful, as well as the necessary support.

Researchers say that bonding capital connects people who share similar characteristics or values. The network capital does have a positive influence on career success (Gautam et al., 2023).

Network capital is broadly defined as any aspect of a social structure that helps in creating value through the reciprocal actions of individuals with each other in a particular social structure. Just as the creation of physical capital involves “changes in materials to facilitate production”, and human capital involves “changes in an individual’s skills and capabilities”. Network capital is created when the “relations among people change in ways that facilitate instrumental action” (Seibert et al., 2001). The pattern of ties linking individuals together and evoking reciprocal behaviour is called a network. Each person can be described in terms of his or her links with other people in the network. The focal person in such an analysis is referred to as “ego,” and those he or she is tied to are “alters”.

Weak tie theory takes a closer look at the strength of a particular social tie a person utilizes in order to attain gainful employment (Granovetter, 1973). Ties among member of a particular social circle are strong as argued by researchers. The information that is held by one

person of a social circle may help an individual attain gainful employment depending on how strong or weak it is. The weaker the further they are from the social circle. The structural hole approach takes a look at the pattern of relationships among alters in the ego's social circle or network rather than the ego's direct tie. A network or connection that has optimal richness in the structural hole theory helps provide an individual with a few benefits for the individual—timely access to information; bargaining power over resources and outcomes; and greater visibility and career opportunities.

The weak tie theory examines the strength of social connections an individual utilizes to secure employment. Researchers argue that ties within a close social group are typically strong, meaning that the information possessed by one member may help another in finding employment (Barbulescu, 2015). However, weaker ties—connections further removed from one's immediate social circle—can often provide access to new and diverse opportunities.

Social resources theory provides a framework for understanding network capital by exploring the availability and nature of resources within a social network. According to this theory, individuals rely on social ties to connect with those who possess specific resources necessary for achieving their objectives (Hobfoll et al., 1990). Researchers suggest that a person who has particular characteristics or controls key resources that contribute to goal attainment possesses essential social resources (Lin et al., 1981). The social resources theory is a theory that focuses on the conceptualization of network capital. This theory takes a look at what is the extent and nature of particular resources that are within a social network. Researchers argue that ties are required to reach someone with a particular resource to attain certain objectives that are instrumental to the individual (Hobfoll et al., 1990).

An individual who possesses certain characteristics or controls important resources useful for the attainment of their goals is considered to have the necessary social resources (Seibert et al., 2001). Network capital is the very goodwill that is fabricated through the social network and relations that can help towards mobilizing action. It consists of the very networks that people utilize to attain certain benefits.

The role played by strong social ties is different in collectivist South Asian culture as compared to individualistic Western culture. Though the network capital is found to have a career enforcing role in Western countries, the same strong familial and kinship values are found to reinforce traditional career fields and desire for stable employment (Seibert et al., 2001) avoiding exploration of uncertain and self-directed unbounded

career options (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). In such a closely knitted social and cultural environment, career decisions are generally guided and decided by family values and expectations, cultural norms, uncertainty avoidance, and perceived security of conventional career pathways, which may hamper the willingness of individuals to pursue protean careers even after having strong network capital. This pronounces that in a collectivist cultural context, network capital acts a double-edged sword by acting as both an enabler, by opening job accessibility, and as a constraint, by reinforcing the culturally accepted career norms. The empirical findings, exhibiting an insignificant relationship between network capital and protean career attitudes is in conformity with the nuanced interpretation and underscore the requirement of redeliberation of network capital within the collectivist cultural context (Shuib, 2019).

H₃: Network capital is positively associated with intercultural protean career.

CDSE as the link

Every student at one point or more whilst in their university-level education, develops confusion regarding important career choices or a concrete decision for the same. For an individual to make a particular career decision, which is fairly difficult, and involves a complex process of balancing various factors and deciding on various aspects of the job and other related factors. This makes it hard for them to make concrete decisions about their future careers. The issue that many academicians and career counsellors agree is a widespread issue today.

A framework was developed on career decision-making difficulties that people face during the career decision-making phase. The taxonomy includes lack of readiness, lack of information, and inconsistent information. Lack of readiness (LoR) is experienced by a person before making a decision and includes a low level of motivation to go forth with the career decision-making process (Santos et al., 2018).

Lack of information and inconsistent information are faced when making a career decision. Students often experience this lack of information through inadequate knowledge about the decision-making process, lack of information about who they are, what they are capable of, what works for them and a general lack of information about the occupation they want and what it takes to positively gain the required information (Almemari et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2018). Often, there is a mismatch between who the individual is and the job they seek. Difficulties arising from inconsistent information are based on unreliable information. To help

them overcome these difficulties, students may approach career counselling services.

Career counselling centres at universities and colleges play a crucial role in helping students make decisions. Career counsellors themselves need to understand that there is an array of factors that are associated with difficulty in decision-making on a suitable career (Alromaihi et al., 2023).

CDSE is defined as “an individual’s belief or confidence that he or she is able to carry out tasks specific to making career decisions” is useful in reducing career indecisiveness and difficulties (Taylor & Betz, 1983). The CDSE deals with internal causes of emotion psychologically which requires a different approach than providing information. Awareness of a person’s emotions is required to make a career decision. Three reasons for doing so are that emotions drive actions, modulate actions, and assist the formation of narratives about careers (Almemari et al., 2023).

Some individuals are able to make quick, precise decisions regarding tough career choices while others are not so much. There is also difference in the way they do things. Due to their upbringing in the era of information and communication technology, Gen Z students investigating changes differ from earlier generations in their traits and methods of operation (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Ray et al., 2025; Schroth, 2019). Therefore, an individual’s self-belief and knowledge that they can carry out decisions regarding careers with confidence helps. CDSE comprises task-related domains which concern optimal levels of self-appraisal, information gathering, career-related goal selection, planning, and problem-solving. CDSE could impact positively on the career-related and other decision-making processes. (Santos et al., 2018). Indecision is generally of two different types. One would be a more developmental or information-gathering form. When we look at the latter type, it represents an avoidance of pain in making a positive decision. Researchers generally argue that it is the fear of absolute failure or that of the very person being so much in awe and frightened by the end decision or finality of a specific plan or process contribute heavily towards the avoidance from that.

Researchers have provided a very thorough and in-depth distinction between undecided and indecisive persons (Mellema, 2015). An individual who is undecided is quoted as having a normal or so as common occurrence as in the case for a person purchasing an automobile or a teenager deciding on their party list and with regards to this paper a college youth pondering over career decisions or majors. It is to be noted that most often, the undecided individual is so because they haven’t had the opportunity towards gathering enough relevant

information to develop surety or reach a consensus to decide on their career.

Indecisive individuals, on the other hand, are characterized as persons who fail to make important decisions because of certain psychological factors that hold them back from making a positive decision and taking a course of action (Mellema, 2015). An indecisive individual usually, cannot or won’t make a positive decision, even after having the resources to do so; Indecisive individuals are defined as those who struggle to make significant judgments due to psychological issues that impede their ability to reach a favourable conclusion and take action.

Lack of readiness (LoR) is highly associated with emotional-based aspects like mistrust, confusion about career decisions. Research has found that career indecision is associated with emotional problems and psychological well-being. It is said that individuals with views that are pessimistic in nature, and who hold high anxiety and low CSE have difficulty in forming a career goal. While, individuals with high psychological well-being were found to be more decisive in their career choices, had better control and were more knowledgeable about their future careers (Viola et al., 2016).

Past research conclusively says that CDSE is associated with multiple aspects of adaptive career decision in the form of career indecision, adaptive career beliefs, and career exploration (Betz et al., 1996; Blustein, 1989; Luzzo & Day, 1999). Therefore, CDSE removes indecisiveness, increases adaptive decision making, and exploration in protean careers.

H_4 : CDSE is positively associated with intercultural protean career.

H_5 : CSEs is positively associated with CDSE.

H_6 : Perceived employability is positively associated with CDSE.

H_7 : Social network is positively associated with CDSE.

From the above arguments, one can safely conclude that CSEs, perceived employability and network capital exerts its influence on protean career attitude through CDSE.

H_8 : CDSE mediates the positive relationship between CSEs and intercultural protean career.

H_9 : CDSE mediates the positive relationship between perceived employability and intercultural protean career.

H_{10} CDSE mediates the positive relationship between network capital and intercultural protean career.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and procedure

In order to test the relationships between the variables in the study, the data was collected from management students (post-graduate students pursuing their program in management from business schools in Kerala, India) at two times. Only those students who had migrated to Arab countries for employment were included for data analysis. The data collection procedure followed the steps recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003) to minimize common method variance (CMV). After taking clearances, the data were collected twice from the same students, first on the independent variable and then on the dependent variable. The purpose of the study was explained to them seeking their voluntary participation in the study. Further, they were assured that their responses will be kept confidential and would be used solely for the research purpose. This helps in reducing social desirability which is the main source of CMV.

The first wave of data collection on independent variables was done immediately before the participants completed their graduation degree. The second wave of data collection was done from the same participants on the dependent variable (protean career) approximately six months after they were employed and migrated to the Arab world countries. Only those participants who were in some type of employment in the Arab world were considered for the final analysis. The advantage of having post-graduate and employed migrant students is that they are more likely to form protean career orientations due to their exposure and experience towards different career options. The final analysis had data from 1,064 participants. The sample comprised of 79% males. The mean age of the participants was 25.48 years ($SD = 2.73$). We used various procedural remedies suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003) to reduce the possibility of self-report bias. These included separating the assessment of independent factors (Wave 1) from dependent variables (Wave 2) by six months, guaranteeing respondents' confidentiality, and stressing that there were no correct or incorrect responses. In order to lessen response patterns, we also changed the scale anchors and item ordering.

Study measures

Validated measures of all constructs were used. Unless otherwise stated, responses to all items were obtained using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*.

Core self-evaluation - CSEs represent a stable personality trait which encompasses an individual's subconscious, fundamental evaluations about themselves, their own abilities and their own control. The measure is taken from Judge et al. (2003). The sample item included was "I am confident I get the success I deserve in life".

Perceived employability - The perceived employability approach provides an overall scan as it integrates all possible personal and structural factors and their interactions. As such, it provides information about the individual's general feeling of perceived control over his/her career. The measure is taken from De Witte's (1992). The sample item included was "I will easily find a job, even if I lose a job".

Network capital - The networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively. The measure is taken from Seibert et al. (2001) and Moran's (2005). The sample item included was "How do you rate your friends, co-workers, classmates in shaping your career?".

Intercultural protean careers - The intercultural protean career is a name given to describe a career that is driven by the individual and not by the organization, across cultural geographies. The measure is taken from Briscoe et al.'s (2006). The sample item included was "Overall, I have a very independent, self-directed career".

CDSE - CDSE is measured using a scale from Betz et al. (1996). The sample item included was "Persistently work at your major or career goal even when you get frustrated".

Reliability and validity of the measures

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients were found to be above .75 for all the variables ranging from .841 to .792, which indicate good reliability for all the measures used in the study. CFA (Confirmatory Factor Analysis) was carried out to test the factorial validity of all measures. The model fit indices considered were chi-square/df, Goodness-of-Fit Index (*GFI*), Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (*AGFI*), Tucker-Lewis Index (*TLI*), Root Mean Square Residual (*RMR*), and Normed Fit Index (*NFI*) (for example, Mittal et al., 2019). The chi-square/df value is less than 3; *GFI*, *AGFI*, *TLI*, *NFI* values above .90 and *RMR* value less than .08 are regarded as acceptable (Brown, 2014). The results of the original measurement model (five-factor model) considered in the study showed a good fit for the data. The model fit indices for the full measurement model were within the recommended cut-

Table 1*Measurement Model and Nested Model Fit Indices*

Model and structure	χ^2/df	GFI	AGFI	TLI	RMR	NFI
Original model: all factors separate	1.87	.98	.97	.95	.052	.95
Nested model 1: CDSE and perceived employability combined in single factor	3.84	.6	.59	.57	.078	.57
Nested model 2: CSE and perceived employability combined in single factor	3.91	.59	.58	.55	.082	.54
Harman single-factor test: all factors combined	5.99	.38	.38	.41	.097	.42

Note. GFI: goodness of fit Index; AGFI: adjusted goodness of fit index; TLI: Tucker-Lewis index; RMR: root-mean-square residual; NFI: normed fit index.

Source: Author's own analysis.

off values (chi-square/*df*: 1.87, GFI= .98, AGFI= .97, TLI=.95, RMR= .052, and NFI= .95).

Discriminant validity was tested by comparing the fit indices of opposing nested models with the original model. The calculated fit indices (Table 1) showed the fit prevalence of the hypothesized model (original model) over nested models (Alfes et al., 2013). All standardized factor loadings were above .60 and statistically significant ($p < .001$). Discriminant validity was supported, and no evidence of multicollinearity was detected ($VIF < 1.6$ for all variables). Variance inflation factor (*VIF*) scores for all the variables were found to be less than 1.6 ranging from 1.102 to 1.548, which confirms the absence of multicollinearity.

ANALYSIS

A series of hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between the variables. To fully explore the statistical significance of these relationships, the four-step process of mediation analysis as outlined by Frazier et al. (2004) which is the extension of the three-step process of Baron and Kenny (1986) was adopted. To ascertain the size of the indirect effect and separate the individual indirect effects of two mediators, the bootstrapping mediation approach using SPSS PROCESS macro V3.0 was employed, with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) based on a bootstrap sample of 5,000 (Preacher & Kelly, 2011). This approach is a more robust test and helped to offset the weaknesses of the causal steps approach (Hayes, 2009). Numerous studies have adopted this approach in the analysis for example Sengupta and Mittal (2022) and Mittal et al. (2019).

RESULTS

Descriptive results (Table 2) show mean, standard deviation, reliability, *VIF*, and intercorrelation of variables. A multiple hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the study hypotheses. To make sure that the demographic factors do not influence the study the effects of age, gender, educational level (all the participants were post-graduate), and major were controlled.

All predictors checked using variance inflation factor (*VIF*) values, ranging from 1.10 to 1.55, below the conventional threshold of 10. The results of the *VIF* rule out the multicollinearity concern. Breusch-Pagan and White's tests are run to check for heteroscedasticity and found insignificant, indicating homoscedastic error variances. These results are useful in terms of evidence of the stability of coefficients. For brevity, detailed robustness check outputs are not included in the manuscript.

Testing main effect

The main effects are presented in Table 3. H_1 , H_2 , and H_3 respectively stated that CSEs, perceived employability and network capital are positively associated with protean career. CSEs ($\beta = .448$; $p < .001$), perceived employability ($\beta = .255$; $p < .001$) were found to be significantly and positively associated with protean career. However, network capital ($\beta = -.043$; n.s.) was found to have an insignificant association with the protean career. Therefore, findings indicated the support for H_1 and H_2 but not for H_3 . H_4 stated that CDSE is positively associated with protean career. CDSE ($\beta = .398$; $p < .001$)

Table 2*Mean, Standard Deviation, Reliability, VIF And Intercorrelation of Variables Scale*

Variables	Variables				
	CDSE	CSEs	Perceived employability	Network capital	Protean careers
CDSE	.841				
CSEs	.388**	.81			
Perceived employability	.412**	.401**	.829		
Network capital	.196**	.257**	.282**	.792	
Protean careers	.423**	.407**	.421**	.152*	.835
Mean	3.408	3.516	3.225	3.054	2.948
SD	.819	.799	.824	.887	.905
VIF	1.412	1.407	1.548	1.102	na

Note. Author's own analysis.

Values in the diagonal (in bold) are the Cronbach alpha reliabilities.

* $p < .1$. ** $p < .05$.

was found to be positively and significantly associated with protean career.

H_5 , H_6 , and H_7 respectively stated that CSEs, perceived employability and network capital are positively associated with CDSE. CSEs ($\beta = .196$; $p < .01$), perceived employability ($\beta = .424$; $p < .001$) were found to be significantly and positively associated with CDSE. However, network capital ($\beta = -.02$; n.s.) was found to have an insignificant association with CDSE. Therefore, findings indicated the support for H_5 and H_6 but not for H_7 .

Testing the mediation effect

Mediation results are presented in Table 3. H_8 , H_9 , and H_{10} state that CDSE mediates the relationships of CSEs, perceived employability and network capital with the protean career. In this regard extant literature (Frazier et al., 2004; Ray et al., 2024) suggests the following four steps to check for the mediation. These steps are the necessary and sufficient conditions to ascertain mediation and are the extension of Baron and Kenny's (1986) three-step process.

1. Significant relationship between the independent and mediating variable
2. Significant relationship between mediating and dependent variable
3. Significant relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable
4. The strength of relationship between independent and dependent variable should decrease significantly on adding mediator variable.

Results of H_1 confirmed that CSEs ($\beta = .448$; $p < .001$) and perceived employability ($\beta = .255$; $p < .001$) were significantly and positively associated with protean career. However, network capital ($\beta = -.043$; n.s.) had an insignificant association with the protean career. Therefore, except network capital, the other two variables fulfil the first condition of mediation.

As condition one was not fulfilled for network capital it was not considered for subsequent steps. Results of H_5 and H_6 confirmed that CSEs and perceived employability

were positively and significantly associated with CDSE. Therefore, condition two of mediation is fulfilled for CSEs and perceived employability.

H_4 confirmed that CDSE is positively associated with protean career. This confirms the condition three of mediation. Checking for condition four, as the main variables are added to the mediator variables, the beta-value of perceived employability (reduced from .255*** to .074) reduced significantly and became insignificant, indicating full mediation; whereas CSEs (reduced from .448*** to .152*), beta values reduced but remain significant, indicating partial mediation. Therefore, results confirm the support for H_8 and H_9 but not for H_{10} , implying the significant role of CDSE as a mediator between CSEs, perceived employability and protean career.

To ascertain the size of the indirect effect and separate the individual indirect effects of mediators, we also used the SPSS process of Hayes and Preacher (2014). (PROCESS) macro results of mediation analysis are presented in Table 4. The indirect relationship through CDSE as mediator of CSEs (indirect effect = .135, 95% CI [.05, .18]) and perceived employability (indirect effect = .246, 95% CI [.14, .32]) with protean career was found to be significant except for network capital (indirect effect = .013, 95% CI [-.008, .017]). Thus, all the statistical tests showed support for the significant and positive indirect relationship of CSEs and perceived employability with the protean career through CDSE. Further, the indirect relationship between perceived employability and protean career is full mediation through CDSE and the indirect relationship between CSEs and the protean career was partial mediation through CDSE.

Table 3

Hierarchical Linear Regression Results for Investigation of Mediation

Independent variable	CDSE	Protean career (Step 2)	Protean career (Step 1)
Step1			
CDSE			.398***
Step2			
CSEs	.196**	.448***	.152*
Perceived employability	.424***	.255***	.074
Network capital	.02	-.043	.022

Note. Author's own analysis.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Bootstrap Results for Indirect effects (95% CI)

Independent variable	Indirect effects of IV on DV through proposed mediators (ab paths)	
	CDSE	
Perceived employability	.246	
	[.14 .32]	
Network capital	.013	
	[-.008 .017]	
CSE	.135	
	[.05 .18]	

Note. Author's own analysis.

The first value is the indirect effect and the values within brackets are the lower and upper range of 95% CI.

DISCUSSION

The past two decades saw major changes happening in the way people perceive their careers. It is no longer considered as a definite and lifetime employment entirely shaped by the organizations and labour markets. Young people no longer perceive careers as given and stable; rather careers for them are self-directed endeavours of exploration and self-realization. Therefore, the emergence of this new landscape makes it imperative to understand the protean careers and factors affecting its development. Nonetheless, the structural constraints such as visa regime like *Kafala* system, gender based occupational segmentation, sector-specific work permits, and dependencies on employers in Arab Gulf region need to be considered for a holistic understanding of the psychological preparedness of the individual and employment mobility. These structural limitations restrict the career mobility of protean career-oriented individuals with high perceived employability. Moreover, the unique cultural dynamics of the Arab region like hierarchical structures, high power distance, and strong adherence to religious values are reflected in the workplace which may require a balancing act on the part of individuals with self-directed career behaviours. They need to adapt and balance their personal career goals with local communication style, gender norms, and relationship-building practices, which have bearings on career advancement opportunities (Tran et al., 2019). This understanding could have important implications for career practitioners, organizations, individuals, and policy makers alike.

Drawing from career orientation literature, the present study broadly aims at establishing the linkage of CSEs, employability, and network capital with CDSE and protean careers. Through empirical testing, this study has found that the relationships of CSEs and employability with CDSE and protean careers are significant and positive. Individuals with higher CSEs and perceived employability develop protean career attitudes. Further, when they are high in CSEs and employability, the development of a protean career attitude largely happens through the development of CDSE.

The findings suggested that CSEs and perceived employability are positively associated with intercultural protean career (H_1 and H_2) whereas network capital was found to have an insignificant association with the protean career. As hypothesized, findings further revealed that the relationships are not direct; rather they are fully or partially dependent on CDSE. Findings confirm that CDSE act as a full mediator in the relationship between employability and protean career and as a partial mediator

in CSEs and protean career (H_3 and H_4). CDSE acts as a career-specific and relatively proximal factor in the development of protean careers. On the other hand, CSEs and perceived employability being generic qualities or traits of the person, they are relatively distant factors (Van Iddekinge et al., 2009) of protean career attitude. These distant and generic factors (CSEs) give rise to more career-specific and proximal factors (CDSE) which in turn develop protean attitudes (Van Iddekinge et al., 2009).

Further, H_5 and H_{10} talk about the role of network capital in building a protean career and its indirect relationship with protean career respectively. Neither of hypotheses was supported. Findings reveal an interesting pattern that socially embedded individuals who take career advice from their friends and relatives and have strong ties with them are less likely to form a protean attitude. Given, the cultural background of India, the findings are not very surprising. Indian parents and family members (especially the pre-liberalization era of 1991) still have an inclination towards more stable careers. These findings are true for the larger South Asian migrants who go to Gulf countries for employment. The family and collectivist values shape the career decision-making and influence the interplay of CSE, perceived employability, and CDSE. Therefore, being a part of a collectivistic culture, socially embedded people are more likely to be influenced by the advice of their friends and family (Peng & Nisbett, 1999) and become less inclined to form protean careers.

Implications and future research directions

The findings have important and significant practical implications for career professionals, organizations, and individuals who are in the job market. The findings have important advice for career professionals and individuals who have the inclination to pursue protean careers. Career counsellors who are dealing with problems arising out of dynamism in careers could focus on building elements of CSEs and developing career-specific self-efficacy. These elements provide a psychological resource for individuals to handle the dynamism of protean careers. Even this line of advice would be beneficial for those who are not able to cope well with the dynamism in their careers. Further, those organizations that prefer stable career orientations could look for employees who are socially embedded with their family and friends. Similarly, for organizations that prefer employees who are comfortable with dynamism in careers could look for employees who have higher CDSE and perceived employability. The talent management strategies of the organisations should be aligned with the career orientation of employees in order to enhance engagement, reduce employee turnover,

and fully utilise the workforce's potentials. Future studies could improve upon various aspects of the study. This study has considered postgraduate management students, while migrants from other academic or vocational backgrounds like trade, healthcare, and domestic work may face different barriers in terms of autonomy and career mobility structure. Future research can explore and identify whether these findings can be generalised by identifying psychological factors operating in different sets of migrant groups. Though the present study took a longitudinal approach with 6-month interval between the two attempts of data collection, future study can extend the observation period to 2-5 years incorporating multiple measurement points. Such designs can help in assessing the stability or transformation of protean career attitudes over time together with their interaction with structural, cultural, and organisational factors. Future studies could be designed with a longer time horizon. Further, instead of taking the protean as an attitude, future studies could track individuals who have actually adopted protean careers.

Availability of data and material: As the data is primary survey data of individual participants, it is covered under the confidentiality clause. However, partial data (disguised) could be shared on case-by-case basis by taking permission to do so from the concerned university/colleges.

Competing interests: The author doesn't have any competing interests in the study. The study has been conducted in an utmost impartial manner and the study results in no way compete or align with personal interests or views of the author.

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