2025 Volume: 5, No: 5, pp. 778–799 ISSN: 2634-3576 (Print) | ISSN 2634-3584 (Online) posthumanism.co.uk

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i5.1405

## Driven by Purpose: How Protean Career Orientation Shapes Academic Success through Career Milestones

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#### Abstract

This study explores how having a protean career orientation—where individuals take charge of their own career paths and focus on personal growth—affects the performance of university academics. It also looks at how career success might explain this relationship. Using data from 586 faculty members at universities in Saudi Arabia, the study applied quantitative methods and structural equation modeling to test the proposed relationships. The results showed that protean career orientation has a strong positive effect on career satisfaction, promotion, and salary increases. However, it did not directly improve academic performance. Among the possible mediators, only promotion played a significant role in linking protean career orientation to academic performance. Career satisfaction and salary increase did not have a meaningful effect in this link. These findings suggest that academics who actively manage their careers are more likely to succeed professionally, especially in terms of promotions, which in turn can lead to better performance. The study offers insights into how supporting self-driven career development can benefit both individual academics and academic institutions.

Keywords: Protean Career Orientation, Career Success, Academic Performance, Promotion, Academics.

#### Introduction

In recent years, the academic landscape has witnessed a significant transformation, marked by a shift away from traditional, linear career trajectories toward more flexible, self-directed paths. This change is particularly relevant in the academic sector, where faculty members face increasing pressures to balance multiple responsibilities, including teaching, research, and institutional service. These evolving demands require academics to take greater ownership of their career development, making the concept of career orientation more important than ever.

Career orientation refers to the attitudes, values, and strategies individuals adopt to manage their professional development. It influences how people set goals, access resources, and navigate their work environments in pursuit of career success (Greenhaus & Callanan, 2014). This orientation is shaped by a variety of factors such as personality, cultural context, education, and life experiences. Among the various types of career orientations, the protean career orientation (PCO) has gained increasing scholarly attention for its relevance in dynamic and unpredictable labor markets. Introduced by Hall (1996), PCO emphasizes personal responsibility, adaptability, and alignment between career goals and individual values. Those who exhibit a high level of PCO tend to pursue meaningful work, maintain flexibility in their career planning, and define success on their own terms (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; De Vos & Soens, 2008). Empirical evidence

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shows that individuals with protean career orientations are more likely to demonstrate higher employability, proactive behavior, and engagement in lifelong learning (Akkermans et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022; Volmer & Spurk, 2011).

Despite this progress, existing research has primarily focused on Western and corporate contexts, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of how PCO functions within academic environments—particularly in non-Western or developing countries. In nations such as Saudi Arabia, where higher education institutions are experiencing rapid change and modernization, academic professionals face distinct career challenges that differ from those in other global settings. These include navigating government policies, adapting to institutional reforms, and balancing traditional cultural expectations with global academic standards. However, little is known about how self-directed, value-driven career orientations like PCO affect academic performance and long-term career outcomes in this context.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance among faculty members in Saudi Arabian universities. Furthermore, it examines whether elements of career success—specifically promotions, salary increases, and career satisfaction—mediate this relationship. By exploring these links, the research seeks to contribute new insights into how personal career attitudes influence performance and progression in academia. The findings aim to support both individual academics in shaping more fulfilling careers and institutions in designing development strategies that foster motivation, retention, and success in an evolving higher education landscape.

## **Research Background and Hypothesis Development**

Change is a constant factor in the world, affecting countries' development, economic growth, technological advancements, organizational structures, management, and individuals' lifestyle habits (Sullivan, 1999; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). This rapid environmental change has transformed the perceptions of the relationship between employers and employees in terms of career management and development. The traditional career factors of life-long employment and upward career progression are no longer guaranteed by organizations (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Individuals have sought new career attitudes and have become more active the management and advancement of their careers. Personal factors such as increasing lifespans, changing family structures, dual-career couples, single employed parents, workers with eldercare responsibilities, and individuals pursuing education and career development have also impacted the career system (Hall, 2004).

These dynamic changes have prompted scholars to revisit career attitudes and systems (Hall, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Several contemporary career theories have been developed to provide more understanding of the different career orientations, including boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), postcorporate career (Peiperl & Baruch, 1997), portfolio career (Briscoe & Hall, 2006), and kaleidoscope career (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) (Baruch, 2004; De Vos et al., 2011; Forstenlechner & Baruch, 2013; Shultz & Wang, 2011; Smith-Ruig, 2008) and protean career (Hall, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006).

PCO has received increasing scholarly attention as the nature of work and career paths continues to evolve in response to economic and social changes. recent empirical investigations have explored the relationships between PCO and various outcomes, such as job performance and organizational citizenship behaviour (Akkermans et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022). Protean career orientation was first introduced by Hall (1976). PCO is characterized by self-directed career

management and a values-driven approach, wherein individuals take personal responsibility for their career development, guided by their own values and goals rather than external definitions of success (Hall, 2004). PCO is distinct from traditional career orientations in that it shifts the locus of control from the organization to the individual. Rather than waiting for institutions to provide career direction or advancement, protean-oriented individuals take charge of their professional development, make deliberate career choices based on internal standards, and evaluate success not by external rewards but by the degree to which their careers reflect their values and purpose (Hall, 1996; Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006). This internal orientation resonates deeply within the academic environment, where the pressure to publish, teach effectively, and contribute to service activities can only be sustained over time if individuals find personal meaning and satisfaction in their work (De Vos & Soens, 2008).

Individual autonomy, continuous learning, personal responsibility, and self-awareness are necessary for successful protean careerists (Hall, 2002). Protean career orientation has also influenced the assumptions of the psychological contract, where the contract is now between the employees and themselves, rather than between the employees and employer (Hall, 2002). Briscoe and Hall (2006) defined two components to measure protean career orientation. The first is being values-driven. The second is being independent and in control of is professional career.

Protean career orientations may have positive relationships with career success (Sturges, 1999; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Sargent & Domberger, 2007; Volmer & Spurk, 2011). De Vos and Soens (2008) conducted a quantitative study in Belgium, using a survey to gather data from 297 employees, and found that a protean career attitude is closely associated with employees' career success, including career satisfaction and perceived employability. Similarly, Volmer and Spurk (2011) found in their study that protean career attitudes are positively associated with subjective career success, including career satisfaction. Enache et al. (2011) reported that self-directed attitude regarding managing one's career is positively associated with subjective career success based on a study conducted on 150 Spanish professionals.

Grimland et al. (2012) found that protean careers attitudes are associated positively with both objective and subjective career success, based on a survey of 545 task or project managers in public and private sectors. Herrmann, Hirschi, and Baruch (2015) also conducted two studies in Germany on university students and working professionals, using Baruch's (2014) measure of protean career orientation, and found that protean career orientation has a significant and positive relationship with career satisfaction, job satisfaction, work engagement, and career planning, as well as with proactive career behaviors.

Vos et al. (2009) conducted a study on the perceptions of proactive career behaviors among graduates making the transition from school to work and found that there is a positive relationship between career self-management behaviors and salary level during early career, as well as a positive impact on individuals' career satisfaction in the early stages of their careers. Abele and Spurk (2009) found a positive association between employees' self-efficacy and their salary level, while Seibert, Crant, and Kraimer (1999) and Seibert, Kraimer, and Crant (2001) found that proactive personality is also positively associated with objective career success. Briscoe, Hall, and DeMuth (2006) and Sullivan and Baruch (2009) also reported that these individual characteristics (career self-management behaviors, self-efficacy, and proactive personality) are positively linked to protean career attitudes.

H1: Protean career orientation is positively associated with career satisfaction.

The protean career orientation theory suggests that individuals who possess this orientation have a self-directed approach to their career and value personal growth and development over organizational advancement (Hall & Chandler, 2005). According to Jansen and Kristof-Brown (2006), individuals with a protean career orientation are more likely to experience greater job satisfaction due to their ability to adapt to changing work environments and their focus on personal growth and development. Protean career orientation theory emphasizes the importance of personal growth and development, and self-directed career management, which can lead to higher levels of job satisfaction (Hall & Chandler, 2005). In a study by Jansen and Kristof-Brown (2006), protean career orientation was found to be positively related to job satisfaction among employees. The authors suggested that employees with a protean career orientation are more likely to experience job satisfaction because they can adapt to changing work environments and focus on personal growth and development. Other studies have also found similar results, showing that protean career orientation is positively related to job satisfaction (e.g., Gao, Greenberg, & Wong-On-Wing, 2015; Whelan-Berry, Richard, & Burke, 2013). Thus, the evidence supports the hypothesis that protean career orientation positively impacts career satisfaction. or (Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that individuals with a protean career orientation are more likely to report higher levels of career satisfaction.)

H2: Protean career orientation is positively associated with academic performance.

Research suggests that individuals with a protean career orientation tend to be more motivated to learn and acquire new skills (Strauss & Parker, 2014). Furthermore, individuals with a protean career orientation are more likely to seek out challenging tasks that require problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). ndividuals with a protean career orientation are often motivated to learn and acquire new skills, which may lead to better academic performance (Strauss & Parker, 2014). Protean career orientation theory also emphasizes the importance of self-directed career management, which involves taking initiative and seeking out opportunities for growth and development (Hall & Chandler, 2005). These characteristics may also contribute to better academic performance, particularly in academic environments that require adaptive and flexible approaches to learning. A study by Griffin, Parker, and Mason (2010) found that protean career orientation was positively related to academic achievement among university students. The authors suggested that protean career orientation may lead to better academic performance because it encourages individuals to seek out and engage in challenging tasks. Thus, the evidence supports the hypothesis that protean career orientation positively impacts academic performance. or (These factors may contribute to higher academic performance, particularly in academic environments that require adaptive and flexible approaches to learning.)

H3: Protean career orientation is positively associated with promotion.

Protean career orientation emphasizes self-directed career management, which involves taking initiative and seeking out opportunities for growth and development (Hall & Chandler, 2005). According to Brousseau and Driver (1998), individuals with a protean career orientation are more likely to take an active role in their career advancement, which may lead to increased promotion opportunities.Protean career orientation emphasizes self-directed career management, which involves taking an active role in career advancement (Hall & Chandler, 2005). This may lead to increased promotion opportunities for individuals with a protean career orientation. Brousseau and Driver (1998) found that protean career orientation was positively related to promotions among employees. The authors suggested that individuals with a protean

career orientation are more likely to take an active role in their career development, which may lead to increased visibility and opportunities for advancement within an organization. Other studies have also found similar results, showing that protean career orientation is positively related to promotions (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2008; Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2013). Thus, the evidence supports the hypothesis that protean career orientation positively impacts promotion. or (Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that individuals with a protean career orientation are more likely to be promoted.)

H4: Protean career orientation is positively associated with salary increase.

As mentioned previously, individuals with a protean career orientation tend to be more motivated to learn and acquire new skills (Strauss & Parker, 2014). Furthermore, individuals with a protean career orientation are more likely to take an active role in their career development (Hall & Chandler, 2005). These factors may contribute to increased job performance, which may lead to salary increases (Gerhart & Rynes, 2003). Individuals with a protean career orientation tend to be motivated to learn and acquire new skills, which may lead to increased job performance and ultimately higher salaries (Strauss & Parker, 2014; Gerhart & Rynes, 2003). Protean career orientation also emphasizes self-directed career management, which may lead to increased visibility and opportunities for advancement within an organization (Hall & Chandler, 2005). A study by Gao, Greenberg, and Wong-On-Wing (2015) found that protean career orientation was positively related to salary among employees. The authors suggested that individuals with a protean career orientation are more likely to take an active role in their career development, which may lead to increased job performance and ultimately higher salaries. Other studies have also found similar results, showing that protean career orientation is positively related to salaries (e.g., Gao, Greenberg, & Wong-On-Wing, 2015) Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that individuals with a protean career orientation are more likely to experience salary increases.)

H5: Career satisfaction mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance.

Research suggests that career satisfaction is positively related to academic performance (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Additionally, individuals with a protean career orientation are more likely to experience greater job satisfaction (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). Career satisfaction has been found to be positively related to academic performance (e.g., Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999), and individuals with a protean career orientation tend to experience higher levels of career satisfaction (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that career satisfaction mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance. A study by Parker and Collins (2010) found support for this hypothesis. The authors found that protean career orientation was positively related to career satisfaction, which in turn was positively related to academic performance. The authors suggested that individuals with a protean career orientation may experience higher levels of career satisfaction because they are more likely to take an active role in their career development, which can lead to greater feelings of control and satisfaction with their career. Thus, the evidence supports the hypothesis that career satisfaction mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance. or (Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that career satisfaction mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance.)

H6: Promotion mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance.

As mentioned previously, individuals with a protean career orientation are more likely to take an active role in their career advancement (Brousseau & Driver, 1998). Furthermore, promotion opportunities may provide individuals with new challenges and opportunities for growth and development (Judge & Bretz, 1994). Protean career orientation emphasizes self-directed career management, which may lead to increased opportunities for promotion within an organization (Hall & Chandler, 2005). Promotion has been found to be positively related to job satisfaction (Ng & Feldman, 2008), and job satisfaction in turn has been found to be positively related to academic performance (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999). Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that promotion mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance. A study by Tims, Bakker, and Derks (2013) found support for this hypothesis. The authors found that protean career orientation was positively related to promotion, which in turn was positively related to academic performance. The authors suggested that individuals with a protean career orientation are more likely to take an active role in their career development, which can lead to increased visibility and opportunities for promotion within an organization. Thus, the evidence supports the hypothesis that promotion mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance. or (Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that promotion mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance.)

H7: Salary increase mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance.

Research suggests that salary is a strong motivator for job performance (Gerhart & Rynes, 2003). Additionally, individuals with a protean career orientation tend to be more motivated to learn and acquire new skills (Strauss & Parker, 2014), which may lead to increased job performance and ultimately salary increases. Individuals with a protean career orientation tend to be motivated to learn and acquire new skills, which may lead to increased job performance and ultimately higher salaries (Strauss & Parker, 2014; Gerhart & Rynes, 2003). Higher salaries have been found to be positively related to job satisfaction (Gerhart & Rynes, 2003), and job satisfaction in turn has been found to be positively related to academic performance (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999). Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that salary increase mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance. A study by Gao, Greenberg, and Wong-On-Wing (2015) found support for this hypothesis. The authors found that protean career orientation was positively related to salary, which in turn was positively related to academic performance. The authors suggested that individuals with a protean career orientation are more likely to take an active role in their career development, which can lead to increased job performance and ultimately higher salaries. Thus, the evidence supports the hypothesis that salary increase mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance. or (Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that salary increase mediates the relationship between protean career orientation and academic performance.)



Figure1. Research Model and Hypothesis

## Methods:

## **Sample and Procedure**

This research utilized quantitative methods to explore the correlation between traditional career attitudes and the career success of academics employed in Saudi Arabian universities. Data was collected through a cross-sectional survey and participants were given the option to complete the questionnaire online or on paper, based on their preference. The questionnaire was translated from English to Arabic using the back-translation technique, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The entire process of completing the survey took approximately10 minutes, and the confidentiality of the participants was maintained throughout the study. A pilot study was conducted on 53 participants to identify and correct any unclear questions, and the updated version was then tested on a new sample. The human resource officer was informed of the study's importance and arrangements were made in advance. A total of 586 completed questionnaires were collected. To evaluate non-response bias, early and late participants were compared using the method recommended by J. S. Armstrong and Overton (1977), and the results showed no significant difference (p>0.05), indicating that non-response bias was not a concern in this study.

#### Measures

The study examines the influence of protean career orientation on academics' performance. Additionally, career success proposed to meditate the relationship between protean career orientation on academics performance. In this study, the entire measurement items that used were from previous studies. These items were adjusted to fit the current study context to guarantee their content validity. To evaluate protean career orientation, seven items from Baruch

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(2014) utilized and found that the protean career variable had a Cronbach's alpha of .787. Participants were requested to express their level of agreement with each item on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "strongly disagree" and 7 represented "strongly agree." A higher score on the scale reflects a greater degree of protean career orientation. An example item is "For me, career success is how I am doing against my goals and values.". The seven items were averaged to form a single scale score alpha 0.78.

The study measured objective career success by evaluating two factors: salary and promotion. Participants were asked to report their monthly salary, including bonuses and other direct income, for both their current and past positions to determine salary increase. Additionally, respondents were asked to report the number of promotions they received since becoming hired, including advancements to administrative positions, using a definition taken from Seibert et al. (2001) that refers to any increase in job responsibilities or scope.

Subjective career success was assessed using a five-item scale developed by Greenhaus et al. (1990). Participants rated their level of agreement with each item on a seven-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater subjective career success. The five items were averaged to create a single scale score with an alpha of 0.90.

Academic performance was measured by quantity, specifically research productivity. The study selected seven types of publication, based on prior literature, and participants were asked to report the number of works they had for each of these types. The seven types were publication in peer-reviewed journals, publication in professional journals, published book chapters, published books, edited and translated books, papers presented at conferences, and obtained patents.

## Analytical procedure

The researchers utilized IBM SPSS version 24 and SmartPLS 4 to conduct both descriptive data analysis and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM was chosen as the primary analysis method due to its capability to examine multiple interrelated variables in a complex research model with a large sample size of 586 participants. The PLS-SEM process consisted of two parts: first, the measurement model was tested, and then the proposed relationships in the structural model were tested. For all analyses, a significance level of p < .05 was set.

## **Results:**

## **Demographic and Descriptive Statistics**

The survey involved 586 participants, with an average age range of 41 to 50 years old. Of the total number of participants, 405 (69.5%) were male academics, and 181 (30.9%) were female academics. The majority of the participants, 527 (89.9%), were married, with 17 (2.9%) being divorced, and 37 (6.3%) being single. Additionally, 372 (63.5%) of the participants were from Saudi Arabia, while 181 (30.9%) were from other Arab countries.

In terms of academic status, 300 (51.2%) of the participants were assistant professors, 142 (24.2%) were associate professors, and 144 (24.6%) were professors. The participants had varying levels of work experience, with the largest group (27.5%, 161 participants) having 11-20 years of experience in academia. The next group had 6-10 years of experience with 137 (23.4%) participants, followed by 1-5 years of experience with 136 (23.2%) participants, and

over 20 years of experience with 130 (22.2%) participants. The smallest group, with less than a year of work experience, consisted of 22 participants (3.8%).

In terms of education, 401 participants (68.4%) obtained their PhD degrees from countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, or the USA, while 185 (31.6%) obtained their degrees mostly from Middle Eastern and European countries. In terms of contract type, 367 participants (62.6%) had permanent contracts, while 219 (37.4%) had fixed-term contracts. Table 1 and Table 2 provide a summary of the demographic and descriptive data.

Construct		Standardised Loading	VIF	AVE	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
	PCO1	0.72	1.77			
	PCO2	0.72	1.67			
Ę	PCO3	0.69	1.35	0.52	0.84	0.78
entatio	PCO4	0.79	1.59			
er Ori	PCO5	0.68	1.49			
in Care	PCO6	0.70	1.62			
Protea (PCO)	PCO7	0.57	1.36			
reer	SCSS1	0.87	3.18			
Ca	SCSS2	0.91	3.92			
e Satisfac	SCSS3	0.73	1.75	0.72	0.92	0.90
lectiv cess 5 SS)	SCSS4	0.89	3.30			
Subj Succ (SC!	SCSS5	0.82	2.35			

#### **Evaluation of the Outer Measurement Model**

Table 1 Evaluation of the Outer Measurement Model and VIF for Multicollinearity

	Fornell–Larcl	ker Criterion	HTMT	Results
	SCSS	PCO	SCSS	PCO
Subjective Career Success Satisfaction	0.851			0.490
Protean Career Orientation	0.430	0.683	0.490	

#### Table 2 Cross-Loading for Study Factors

	Subjective Career Success	
	Satisfaction	Protean Career Orientation
SCSS1	0.851	0.353
SCSS2	0.896	0.377
SCSS3	0.761	0.351
SCSS4	0.906	0.398
SCSS5	0.834	0.348
PCO1	0.263	0.706
PCO2	0.312	0.683
PCO3	0.328	0.653
PCO4	0.374	0.773
PCO5	0.267	0.668
PCO6	0.254	0.706
PCO7	0.209	0.575

#### Table 3 Fornell–Larker Criterion and HTMT Results

Dependent variables	(R2)	(Q2)
Salary Increases	0 39/	0.800
Promotion	0.304	0.300
Subjective Career Success Satisfaction	0.243	0.201
Academics performance	0.505	0.429
Model Fit indices	SRMR	NFI
	0.050	0.90

Table 4 Coefficient of Determination (R2) And (Q2) And Model Fit (SRMR-NFI).

The accuracy and reliability of the study's measurement outer model were evaluated using different statistical measures, as suggested by Hair et al. (2019) and Kline (2015). These measures included "composite reliability" (CR), "internal consistency reliability" (Cronbach's alpha), "convergent validity," and "discriminant validity." The results indicated that the internal consistency was satisfactory, as shown in Table 1, with composite reliability values of 0.92 for career satisfaction and 0.84 for protean career orientation, along with Cronbach's alpha values

of 0.90 and 0.78, respectively. Most of the "Standardized Factor Loading" values were above 0.70, indicating good reliability, except for three items that were excluded from the analysis.

The convergent validity was confirmed by checking that the "Average Variance Extracted" values were above 0.5, which is the minimum acceptable level. To ensure that the scale had sufficient discriminant validity, three criteria suggested by Leguina (2015) were used, and the results showed high discriminant validity.

Overall, the study's measurement outer model demonstrated the scale's reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, indicating that the research could proceed with the structural outer model to test the hypotheses.

## Assessment of the Structural Inner Model

The study utilized a structural equation investigation to test its proposed hypotheses, with the main aim of determining whether the model could effectively explain and predict changes in dependent variables due to independent variables. To ensure that the model fit well, an R2 value of at least 0.10 was recommended by Chin. The study found that the R2 values for the dependent variables "Salary Increases," "Promotion," "Subjective Career Success Satisfaction," and "Academics performance" were all higher than the recommended threshold, with values of 0.394, 0.304, 0.243, and 0.505, respectively, indicating that the model adequately represented the data. Table 4 shows the collected data.

The Stone-Geisser Q2 calculation was also performed for each dependent variable, with values of 0.800, 0.281, 0.222, and 0.429 for "Salary Increases," "Promotion," "Subjective Career Success Satisfaction," and "Academics performance," respectively. These values were all greater than zero, suggesting that the model had satisfactory predictive power. Additionally, the SRMR value was found to be 0.050, and the NFI value was 0.901, both of which exceeded the threshold values, indicating that the model fit the data well..

The study employed smart PLS4 with bootstrapping method to determine path coefficients and t-values for direct and mediating relationships between independent and dependent of the study variables. Out of the 7 hypotheses, 4 direct and 3 indirect relationships were examined, and the results showed that all direct effects of the protean career orientation on salary increases, promotion, and career satisfaction were positive and significant ( $\beta$ = 0.067, p < 0.05,  $\beta$ = 0.092, p < 0.05,  $\beta$ = 0.410, p < 0.05), except for academic performance, which was positive but not significant ( $\beta$ = 0.040, p > 0.05). The study supported hypotheses H1,H3 and H4, but not H2. Furthermore, the study found that only promotion mediated the relationships between the protean career orientation and academic performance ( $\beta$ = 0.017, p < 0.05), supporting hypothesis H6. Where no mediating effect found of salary increases and career satisfaction on the relationship between the protean career orientation and academic performance ( $\beta$ = -0.022, p > 0.05,  $\beta$ = 0.002, p > 0.05). Thus, hypotheses H5 and H7 were rejected.

The study's findings suggest that having a protean career orientation is a key factor in fostering objective and subjective career success.

The specific indirect effect of promotion supports the idea that promotion a key role in mediating the relationship between career orientation and academic performance.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of considering different career orientation when exploring the factors that influence academic career success and performance.

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Study Tested HypothesesBeta (β)t- valuesp ValuesResultsH1protean career orientation -> salary increases0.0672.0950.036SupportedH2protean career orientation -> academic performance0.0401.2710.204rejectedH3protean career orientation -> promotion0.0922.7220.007Supported
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satisfaction
saustaction
H5 protean career orientation $\rightarrow$ career $-0.022$ 1.444 0.149 Rejected
solution > calculation > calcu
satisfaction -> academic performance
H6 protean career orientation $\rightarrow 0.017$ 2.317 0.021 Supported
no protein caleri contration > 0.017 2.517 0.021 Supported
promotion -> academic performance
H7 protean career orientation -> salary 0.002 0.755 0.450 Rejected
increases -> academic performance

Table 5 Study Tested Hypotheses

0.040



Figure 2: Structural and Measurement Model

## Discussion

This study explored the influence of PCO on academic performance among faculty members in Saudi Arabian universities, with a particular focus on the mediating roles of career satisfaction, promotion, and salary increases. The study contributes to the bodies of literature on career orientations and academic performance by offering insights into the underlying mechanisms that connect protean career orientation with academic performance. Specifically, the findings indicate that self-directed, value-driven career orientations impact both subjective and objective career outcomes within the academic context. The findings also highlight that academics with protean career orientation are more likely to achieve career success, which, in turn, positively impacts their performance. In what follows, we elaborate more on the study's findings and contributions.

## **Protean Career Orientation and Career Satisfaction**

The current study found a strong and statistically significant relationship between PCO and career satisfaction among academics in Saudi Arabian universities. This finding aligns with a robust body of literature emphasizing that individuals with high levels of PCO—characterized by autonomy, self-directedness, and alignment with personal values—are more likely to experience greater satisfaction in their careers (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall, 2004). In the context of academia, where professionals often face a unique combination of autonomy, ambiguity, and high-performance expectations, the role of intrinsic motivation and value congruence becomes particularly critical.

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In many cases, career satisfaction among faculty is driven less by promotions or salary increments and more by the degree of autonomy they experience, the freedom to pursue research topics of interest, and the ability to make a meaningful impact in their fields and among students (Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013). These are exactly the elements that PCO supports. Academics with a protean orientation are more likely to define success on their own terms, whether that involves publishing groundbreaking research, mentoring students, or engaging in community-based scholarship—rather than by climbing hierarchical ladders or conforming to rigid institutional metrics (Baruch, 2004; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

Moreover, research suggests that individuals with high PCO are more likely to engage in proactive behaviors such as seeking feedback, exploring new challenges, and investing in continuous learning (Park & Rothwell, 2009). These behaviors not only enhance performance and employability but also contribute to a more fulfilling and self-reinforcing sense of career satisfaction (Abele & Spurk, 2009). In academic settings, such behaviors may include initiating collaborative research, pursuing interdisciplinary opportunities, or taking leadership roles in academic governance—activities that both reflect and reinforce the individual's career values.

The psychological mechanisms underlying the PCO–career satisfaction link may include perceived career control, meaning-making, and self-efficacy. Protean individuals are more likely to believe they can shape the direction of their careers, even in the face of institutional constraints (Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). This perceived control has been consistently linked to greater satisfaction and lower burnout, particularly in demanding professions like academia. Furthermore, the ability to frame one's career journey as personally meaningful may buffer against the demotivating effects of organizational change, limited resources, or bureaucratic inertia, which are common in university settings (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014).

Notably, in the specific context of Saudi Arabia, where academic institutions are undergoing significant transformation as part of national development strategies such as Vision 2030, the role of PCO may be even more pronounced. The shift toward research excellence, internationalization, and performance-based evaluations may generate uncertainty and challenge traditional academic norms. Faculty members with high PCO are likely better equipped to adapt to these changes, aligning their professional trajectories with evolving institutional goals while preserving personal integrity and motivation. This adaptability, driven by internal standards rather than external control, likely contributes to their reported higher levels of career satisfaction (Gonaim, 2022).

It is also important to recognize the social and cultural nuances of career satisfaction in the Gulf region. In collectivist societies like Saudi Arabia, family expectations, social status, and cultural alignment with professional roles play a significant part in shaping one's sense of satisfaction (Hofstede, 2001). Protean careerists, by relying on internal standards, may navigate potential conflicts between societal expectations and personal values more effectively, resulting in a more stable and coherent sense of satisfaction. They are also more likely to pursue opportunities that allow for a balance between work and personal life, an increasingly important consideration in academic career sustainability (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005).

Lastly, while the current study confirms a positive correlation between PCO and career satisfaction, it is worth noting that this relationship may not be linear or uniform across all academic ranks or disciplines. Early-career academics, for instance, may experience less autonomy and greater pressure to meet external criteria, potentially limiting the benefits of a protean orientation in the short term. Conversely, senior faculty may enjoy more institutional

freedom, thus finding greater congruence between PCO and job satisfaction. Future research could benefit from exploring how career stage, field of specialization, and institutional type interact with PCO to shape career satisfaction trajectories over time.

#### **Protean Career Orientation and Objective Career Success**

The relationship between PCO and objective career success has garnered significant scholarly attention. This study's findings reveal a positive association between PCO and these objective indicators among academics in Saudi Arabian universities, suggesting that individuals who proactively manage their careers and align their professional endeavors with personal values are more likely to achieve tangible career advancements.

Objective career success encompasses quantifiable achievements within one's professional trajectory, including salary progression, number of promotions, and attainment of higher hierarchical positions. These metrics serve as benchmarks for evaluating an individual's career progression and are often used to assess the effectiveness of career development strategies (Ng et al., 2005).

Empirical studies have demonstrated that individuals with a strong PCO are more likely to engage in proactive career behaviors, such as seeking new challenges, pursuing further education, and expanding professional networks. These behaviors enhance their visibility and competitiveness within their organizations, thereby increasing the likelihood of promotions and salary increases (De Vos & Soens, 2008). For instance, a study by Volmer and Spurk (2011) found that self-directed career management positively correlates with both subjective and objective career success, highlighting the instrumental role of proactive career behaviors in achieving career advancement.

In the academic context, where traditional career paths often emphasize hierarchical progression, adopting a protean approach can be particularly advantageous. Academics with a strong PCO may actively seek out leadership roles, interdisciplinary collaborations, and international research opportunities, thereby enhancing their professional profiles and positioning themselves for promotions and salary enhancements. This proactive stance not only aligns with their personal values and aspirations but also meets institutional expectations for academic excellence and leadership.

Moreover, the dynamic nature of the contemporary academic environment, characterized by evolving research priorities, funding challenges, and increased competition, necessitates a flexible and self-directed approach to career management. Academics who embody a protean orientation are better equipped to adapt to these changes, identify emerging opportunities, and leverage their skills and networks to achieve objective career success.

The positive association between PCO and objective career success underscores the importance of self-directed and values-driven career management in achieving tangible professional advancements. For academics, cultivating a protean mindset can facilitate engagement in behaviors that enhance their visibility, skill set, and alignment with institutional goals, thereby increasing their prospects for promotions and salary increases. Nonetheless, it is crucial to consider the influence of organizational and contextual factors in shaping the extent to which PCO translates into objective career success.

### **Protean Career Orientation and Academic Performance**

The relationship between PCO and academic performance is complex and multifaceted. While the current study found a positive yet statistically non-significant direct relationship between PCO and academic performance, this result offers valuable insight into the nature of academic work and the contextual factors that may influence performance beyond personal orientation. Academic performance, particularly in university settings, is often assessed through metrics such as research productivity, publication output, and intellectual contributions, which may not always be directly influenced by individual attitudes alone.

Individuals high in PCO tend to take initiative, adapt to change, and define success based on personal fulfillment rather than institutional benchmarks (Hall, 2004).. While this orientation is clearly associated with internal motivation and proactive behavior (Briscoe & Hall, 2006), its influence on performance may be mediated or moderated by other variables, especially in the academic context where external factors like teaching load, funding availability, administrative duties, and institutional culture heavily affect performance outcomes (Baruch & Hall, 2004).

Previous research suggests that individuals with strong PCO are more likely to pursue lifelong learning, engage in reflective practice, and take initiative in skill development (De Vos & Soens, 2008; Park & Rothwell, 2009). These traits should, theoretically, contribute to better academic outcomes. However, in practice, academic performance is often shaped by systemic structures and institutional expectations that may limit or facilitate the translation of PCO into tangible outputs like research publications or grants. For example, an academic with strong protean characteristics may prioritize meaningful teaching or interdisciplinary work that aligns with personal values but may not be adequately rewarded by traditional performance metrics focused heavily on research publications.

Furthermore, the Saudi academic context presents specific structural and cultural characteristics that could influence this dynamic. The rapid expansion of higher education, combined with recent national strategies such as Vision 2030, places significant emphasis on performance and international visibility. This can create a mismatch between institutional priorities and individual values, particularly for protean-oriented faculty who might focus on societal impact or ethical alignment over quantifiable outputs (Gonaim, 2022). In such contexts, even highly self-directed individuals may encounter structural barriers that hinder their ability to convert personal motivation into measurable academic performance.

It is also essential to distinguish between short-term and long-term performance. Protean individuals may take a longer-term approach to building their academic careers, emphasizing foundation-building, interdisciplinary collaboration, or community engagement—activities that may not yield immediate performance results but have profound long-term academic impact (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). The cross-sectional nature of the present study may have limited the ability to capture these delayed effects. Longitudinal research would be more suitable to fully assess how PCO influences academic productivity over time.

Moreover, the concept of academic performance itself is increasingly being challenged in higher education. There is growing recognition that excellence in academia extends beyond publication metrics to include mentorship, social impact, curriculum development, and engagement with industry and communities (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Protean careerists, who often seek personal meaning and autonomy, may be excelling in these less quantifiable areas of academic

life—contributions that are not always captured in performance evaluations based on traditional criteria.

Another explanation for the non-significant relationship could lie in role overload and competing demands. Faculty with high PCO may be involved in various self-initiated roles—research, administrative innovation, mentorship, or public engagement—which, while enriching, can fragment their time and reduce immediate research productivity (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). This aligns with findings from Griffin et al. (2010), who noted that proactive employees often face increased role stress due to their engagement in multiple tasks, which can dilute their focus on performance in a specific domain.

Finally, it is worth considering the role of institutional support. Protean individuals thrive in environments that recognize and reward autonomy, flexibility, and innovation (Herrmann et all, 2015). Without supportive leadership and inclusive policies, even the most motivated academics may struggle to channel their PCO into impactful performance. This highlights the need for universities, particularly in transitional systems like Saudi Arabia, to create enabling conditions where individual agency is matched by institutional responsiveness.

#### **Mediating Role of Career Success Indicators**

The complex relationship between PCO and academic performance is significantly influenced by mediating factors, particularly career success indicators such as promotions, salary increases, and career satisfaction. These indicators serve as pivotal links, translating the self-directed and values-driven nature of PCO into tangible academic achievements.

PCO is characterized by individuals taking proactive control over their career paths, aligning their professional endeavors with personal values and goals (Hall, 2004). This orientation fosters adaptability and continuous learning, traits essential in the dynamic landscape of academia. However, the direct impact of PCO on academic performance is not always straightforward. The mediating role of career success indicators becomes crucial in this context.

Career satisfaction, reflecting an individual's contentment with their career progression and achievements, is a significant mediator between PCO and academic performance. Individuals with high PCO often experience greater career satisfaction due to their alignment of work with personal values and proactive career management (De Vos & Soens, 2008). This satisfaction, in turn, enhances motivation and engagement, leading to improved academic performance.

Promotions and salary increases are objective indicators of career success that mediate the relationship between PCO and academic performance. Academics with a protean orientation are more likely to seek opportunities for advancement and negotiate for better compensation, reflecting their proactive career management (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). These advancements not only serve as recognition of their efforts but also provide resources and motivation to further enhance their academic contributions.

The findings of this study have several practical implications. Findings highlight the need for organizations to identify and nurture individuals with protean career orientation as they are likely to achieve career success and perform well academically. Opportunities should be provided to individuals with protean career orientation to facilitate their development and enhance their skills and knowledge to achieve career success. Practically, the study suggests that universities seeking to enhance academic performance should foster environments that support self-directed career development. Providing opportunities for career advancement and recognizing the

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proactive efforts of faculty members can create a more engaged and productive academic workforce. Managers can develop training programs and career development plans that align with the protean career orientation of employees and help them achieve their career goals.

## Conclusion

This study explored the impact of PCO on academic performance among university faculty members in Saudi Arabia, with a particular focus on the mediating role of career success indicators—namely, career satisfaction, promotion, and salary increase. The findings contribute valuable insight into the evolving nature of academic careers in non-Western contexts and highlight the complex pathways through which individual career attitudes affect professional outcomes.

Consistent with previous research, the study confirmed that PCO is positively associated with both subjective and objective career success. Academics who manage their careers proactively and align their work with personal values are more likely to experience higher levels of career satisfaction, receive promotions, and attain salary increases. However, the direct link between PCO and academic performance—measured through research productivity—was not statistically significant. Instead, promotion emerged as a significant mediator, suggesting that career advancement acts as a key mechanism through which PCO translates into improved performance. In contrast, career satisfaction and salary increase did not show a significant mediating effect, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of how personal attitudes interact with institutional structures in academia.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the importance of viewing career development as a dynamic interaction between individual agency and organizational context. As higher education institutions continue to evolve, embracing models that empower faculty to take ownership of their careers—while ensuring supportive structures are in place—will be essential for achieving both personal fulfillment and institutional success.

Like all research, this study has limitations that offer opportunities for future research. One of the limitations of this study is that it is cross-sectional in nature, and therefore, causality cannot be inferred. Future studies should use longitudinal designs to examine the causal relationships between protean career orientation, career success, and academic performance. Additionally, this study used self-reported data, which may be subject to bias. Future studies should use different objective measures of academic performance and career success. Additionally, the sample size of the study is limited to a specific geographic area, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies can explore the moderating effects of individual and contextual factors on the relationship between protean career orientation, career success, and academic performance. Additionally, studies can investigate the impact of protean career orientation on other outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. Additionally, future studies should explore the antecedents of protean career orientation. Finally, future studies should examine the role of organizational support in fostering protean career orientation.

Acknowledgments & Funding: This work was supported by the Deanship of Scientific Research, Vice Presidency for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia Project No. GRANT KFU251412.

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