

Professional Identity and Life Satisfaction in Early Career Adults: The Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy

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Abstract

Background: Professional identity — the degree to which individuals integrate their occupational role into their broader self-concept — has been theorized as a key determinant of subjective well-being. Yet the psychological mechanisms through which professional identity translates into life satisfaction remain underexplored, particularly among early career adults navigating the complex transition from education into the labor market.

Aim: The present study examined whether general self-efficacy mediates the relationship between professional identity and life satisfaction in a sample of early career adults.

Design and Sample: A cross-sectional online survey design was employed with a convenience sample of $N = 181$ early career adults (M age = 27.6 years, $SD = 4.9$; 56.9% female). Measures included the Professional Identification Scale (PIS; $\alpha = .91$), the General Self-Efficacy Scale ($\alpha = .88$), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; $\alpha = .89$).

Results: Pearson correlations revealed significant positive associations among all three constructs (professional identity–life satisfaction: $r = .62$, $p < .001$; professional identity–self-efficacy: $r = .55$, $p < .001$; self-efficacy–life satisfaction: $r = .48$, $p < .001$). Mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2018) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples indicated a significant indirect effect of professional identity on life satisfaction through self-efficacy ($\beta = .15$, 95% CI [.07, .25]), alongside a significant direct effect ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$), supporting partial mediation.

Conclusion: These findings suggest that while professional identity directly contributes to life satisfaction, a meaningful portion of this effect operates indirectly through enhanced self-efficacy beliefs.

Keywords: *professional identity, life satisfaction, self-efficacy, early career adults, mediation analysis*

1. Introduction

Imagine a 26-year-old social worker, recently graduated from university, sitting in her small apartment on a Tuesday evening after her first year of full-time employment. She has spent the day conducting home visits, navigating bureaucratic barriers, and supporting families in crisis. As she reflects on the day, she feels a quiet but unmistakable sense of coherence — a feeling that who she is as a professional is inseparable from who she is as a person. Her work is not merely a job; it is, in a meaningful sense, herself. This phenomenological fusion of occupational role and personal identity — what scholars have called professional identity — stands as one of the more consequential but theoretically underappreciated predictors of psychological flourishing in early adulthood.

The transition from higher education into professional life constitutes one of the most complex and identity-laden developmental passages in modern adulthood. During this period, individuals are not merely acquiring professional competencies; they are actively constructing and consolidating an understanding of who they are as workers, citizens, and persons (Arnett, 2000; Ibarra, 1999; Savickas, 2002). Sociological analyses have documented that in contemporary labor markets — characterized by increasing precarity, career non-linearity, and demands for continuous self-reinvention — the stabilization of occupational identity has become both more challenging and more psychologically significant than in previous generations (Sennett, 1998; Kalleberg, 2009). Young adults who successfully integrate their professional role into their self-concept are believed to experience greater existential continuity, goal clarity, and a sense of purpose — conditions widely associated with subjective well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Seligman, 2011).

Life satisfaction, understood as the cognitive-evaluative dimension of subjective well-being, reflects the degree to which individuals judge their lives to be close to their ideal (Diener et al., 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993). Extensive empirical literature has established robust associations between occupational variables and life satisfaction, including job satisfaction (Judge & Watanabe, 1993), work engagement (Harter et al., 2002), and perceived career success (Ng et al., 2005). Yet the specific contribution of professional identity — as a structural self-concept variable rather than a momentary affective state — has received considerably less empirical attention, particularly in samples of early career adults who are still actively forming this identity.

A growing body of research in organizational and career psychology has begun to document positive associations between professional identity strength and indicators of well-being (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). However, the psychological mechanisms through which professional identity exerts its influence on life satisfaction remain poorly understood. A particularly promising mediating construct is general self-efficacy — the global belief in one's capacity to execute the behaviors required to produce specific outcomes across diverse domains (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Individuals with strong professional identities are theorized to develop more consolidated competence beliefs, as the occupational self-schema provides cognitive structure for interpreting performance feedback and setting adaptive goals (Luthans et al., 2007; Scherer et al., 1982). In turn, robust self-efficacy beliefs have been consistently linked to higher life satisfaction through their effects on goal pursuit, resilience, and the experience of personal mastery (Bandura, 1997; Judge & Bono, 2001).

Despite the theoretical plausibility of this mediation pathway, no prior study has empirically examined self-efficacy as a mediating mechanism in the professional identity–life satisfaction relationship within a sample of early career adults. Previous research has examined these constructs in relative isolation or within specific professional populations such as nurses or teachers, leaving open the question of whether findings generalize to the broader early career population. The present study thus addresses not merely whether professional identity relates to life satisfaction — an association for which reasonable theoretical grounds already exist — but rather how this relationship operates, and specifically whether self-efficacy constitutes a significant psychological pathway through which occupational self-concept shapes global life appraisals.

The present investigation employed a cross-sectional online survey design with a community sample of $N = 181$ early career adults and tested the hypothesized mediation model using Hayes's (2018) PROCESS macro. Three hypotheses were formulated: (H1) professional identity would positively predict life satisfaction; (H2) self-efficacy would positively predict life satisfaction; and (H3) self-efficacy would partially mediate the relationship between professional identity and life satisfaction. From a practical standpoint, evidence supporting this model would carry direct implications for career counseling practitioners, organizational onboarding programs, and policy initiatives aimed at supporting the well-being of the growing population of young adults in career transition.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Professional Identity: Concept, Theory, and Empirical Evidence

Professional identity refers to a relatively stable and coherent sense of self organized around one's occupational role, including the values, commitments, competencies, and social affiliations that one attributes to oneself as a professional (Ibarra, 1999; Savickas, 2002). It represents a domain-specific instantiation of the broader construct of personal identity as theorized within Eriksonian developmental frameworks (Erikson, 1968), adapted to the vocational sphere. Crucially, professional identity is distinct from job satisfaction or work engagement in that it constitutes a structural aspect of the self-concept rather than a transient evaluative or motivational state.

The theoretical foundation for understanding professional identity draws most prominently on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-esteem and sense of meaning from membership in social groups. In the professional context, occupational groups — whether defined by discipline, organization, or role — constitute powerful social categories through which individuals define themselves and experience a sense of belonging and distinctiveness (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Identification with a professional group provides not merely a cognitive self-categorization but also a normative framework that guides behavior, regulates affect, and structures goal hierarchies. Accordingly, the strength of professional identification is theorized to covary with indices of psychological health and subjective well-being (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011).

Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2002), which conceptualizes vocational development as a process of constructing a career narrative that integrates one's past, present, and anticipated future, offers a complementary framework. From this perspective, a well-articulated professional identity reflects the successful authoring of a coherent vocational self-narrative — a process associated with adaptability, purposiveness, and psychological well-being. Super's (1990) developmental theory similarly emphasizes the centrality of self-concept crystallization during the establishment stage of career development, precisely the developmental period that characterizes early career adults. Empirical studies have supported the association between professional identity clarity and outcomes such as career commitment (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011), intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and reduced burnout (Maslach et al., 1996), though fewer studies have examined life satisfaction as an outcome variable specifically.

2.2 Self-Efficacy: Theory, Mechanisms, and Well-Being Associations

Self-efficacy — the belief in one's capacity to organize and execute courses of action required to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1977, p. 2) — constitutes one of the most extensively validated psychological constructs in contemporary social-cognitive and organizational psychology. Bandura's (1977, 1997) Social Cognitive Theory identifies four principal sources of efficacy information: enactive mastery experiences, vicarious modeling, verbal persuasion, and physiological/affective arousal. General self-efficacy, as distinguished from domain-specific efficacy beliefs, represents a stable and cross-situational disposition reflecting one's global confidence in one's coping capabilities (Scherer et al., 1982; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995).

The relationship between self-efficacy and life satisfaction has been documented across multiple meta-analytic reviews. Judge and Bono (2001) demonstrated that core self-evaluations — of which self-efficacy is a central component — constitute robust predictors of both job and life satisfaction, with effect sizes exceeding those of more specific occupational predictors. Luthans et al. (2007) embedded self-efficacy within the broader psychological capital (PsyCap) framework alongside hope, resilience, and optimism, demonstrating that composite PsyCap scores predict not only job performance but also employee well-being. The theoretical mechanism proposed involves the role of efficacy beliefs in sustaining goal-directed behavior in the face of obstacles, enabling individuals to derive satisfaction from the process of striving as well as from successful outcomes (Seligman, 2011). Individuals high in self-efficacy tend to appraise their life circumstances more favorably, attribute setbacks to situational factors, and maintain engagement with personally meaningful goals — all of which are theorized to contribute to global life satisfaction assessments.

The relationship between professional identity and self-efficacy has received less direct empirical examination, though theoretical grounds for a positive association are well established. The Social Identity framework suggests that a strong professional identification provides a stable reference group against which individuals can benchmark their competencies, receive identity-consistent feedback, and accumulate domain-relevant mastery experiences — precisely the conditions under which Bandura (1997) predicted that efficacy beliefs would be consolidated. Conversely, identity diffusion or professional identity confusion — common among early career adults who have not yet fully internalized their occupational role — may disrupt efficacy development by introducing ambiguity about which competencies are relevant, meaningful, or valued.

2.3 Integrative Model and Hypotheses

The integrative theoretical model advanced in the present study proposes that professional identity exerts both a direct and an indirect effect on life satisfaction, with the indirect pathway operating through self-efficacy. Specifically, a stronger professional identity is posited to provide the experiential and cognitive substrate through which efficacy beliefs are cultivated: the occupational self-schema organizes performance feedback, structures mastery experiences, and channels attention toward role-relevant competencies, thereby enhancing general self-efficacy. In turn, elevated self-efficacy contributes to life satisfaction through goal-regulatory and appraisal mechanisms as elaborated in Social Cognitive Theory and the positive psychology literature (Bandura, 1997; Seligman, 2011).

This model is consistent with the broader body of work on positive organizational psychology, which has documented cascading effects from identity-level resources to motivational and well-being outcomes through mediating psychological processes (Luthans et al., 2007). It also aligns with theoretical integrations of Social Identity Theory and Social Cognitive Theory, which together suggest that group-based identity resources and individual-level competence beliefs operate as complementary and mutually reinforcing contributors to psychological health. Based on this theoretical synthesis, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Professional identity positively predicts life satisfaction in early career adults.

H2: Self-efficacy positively predicts life satisfaction in early career adults.

H3: Self-efficacy partially mediates the positive relationship between professional identity and life satisfaction.

3. Methodology and Approach

3.1 Study Design

The present investigation employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. Cross-sectional designs, while precluding causal inference, are well suited for examining mediation models in which the temporal ordering of variables is theoretically specified and where the constructs of interest are conceived as relatively stable dispositional characteristics rather than as dynamic states subject to rapid fluctuation (Podsakoff et al., 2003). All data were collected simultaneously through a self-report online questionnaire administered to a convenience sample of early career adults. Within the action research orientation adopted in this work, this

survey constitutes the systematic diagnostic (reconnaissance) phase of a larger practice-improvement cycle: it establishes empirically the mechanism that a subsequent intervention phase is designed to target, as elaborated in Section 4 (Lewin, 1946; Susman & Evered, 1978).

3.2 Sample and Recruitment

Participants were recruited via anonymous online surveys distributed through social media platforms, university alumni networks, and online research platforms. Eligibility criteria required participants to be between 18 and 40 years of age, currently employed or having been employed within the past six months, and to have graduated from a higher education program within the past seven years. The final sample comprised $N = 181$ participants (M age = 27.6 years, $SD = 4.9$; 56.9% female, 42.0% male, 1.1% diverse gender identity). Mean work experience was 3.2 years, and 78.5% of participants were employed full-time at the time of data collection. The survey was voluntary and anonymous, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Survey completion required approximately 15–20 minutes.

3.3 Measures

Professional identity was assessed using the Professional Identification Scale (PIS; Brown et al., 1986), a 10-item self-report instrument employing a Likert response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Derived from social identity theory and widely adapted to occupational contexts, the scale assesses the degree to which individuals have integrated their occupational role into their self-concept and the extent to which professional membership constitutes a salient and valued aspect of personal identity. Internal consistency in the present sample was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$, McDonald's $\omega = .92$; $M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.69$). A representative item reads: “Being a professional in my field is central to my self-concept.”

Self-efficacy was assessed using an 8-item adaptation of the General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). Items employ a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and assess global beliefs about one's capacity to handle challenging situations across diverse domains. Internal consistency was good ($\alpha = .88$, $\omega = .89$; $M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.63$). A representative item reads: “I can manage difficult situations effectively.”

Life satisfaction was assessed using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), a widely used 5-item measure of the cognitive-evaluative component of subjective well-

being. Items employ a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The SWLS has demonstrated excellent psychometric properties across diverse populations and languages (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Internal consistency in the present sample was good ($\alpha = .89$, $\omega = .90$; $M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.76$). A representative item reads: “In most ways my life is close to my ideal.”

3.4 Statistical Analysis

Data analyses proceeded in four sequential steps. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and internal consistency estimates (Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega) were computed for all scales. Second, Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated among all study variables to assess the zero-order associations among professional identity, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction. Third, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with life satisfaction as the dependent variable and professional identity and self-efficacy as simultaneous predictors, yielding standardized regression coefficients and overall model fit statistics. Fourth, the hypothesized mediation model was tested using Hayes's (2018) PROCESS macro (Model 4) implemented in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28), employing 5,000 bootstrap resamples to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals for the indirect effect. Mediation was inferred when the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect excluded zero (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Common method variance was assessed following the procedures recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003).

4. Action and Intervention

Consistent with the action research orientation adopted in this study, the empirical investigation reported above constitutes the systematic diagnostic phase of a practice-improvement cycle (Lewin, 1946; Susman & Evered, 1978). Action research is conventionally understood as an iterative sequence of diagnosing, planning, taking action, and evaluating, undertaken in partnership with the practice setting and oriented simultaneously toward the generation of knowledge and the improvement of practice. The present manuscript reports the first two phases of this cycle: a quantitative diagnosis of the mechanism linking professional identity to life satisfaction, and the derivation of a theoretically and empirically grounded intervention plan. Implementation and outcome evaluation are conceived as the subsequent phase and are described here at the level of design rather than reported as completed results; this scope is stated explicitly so that the diagnostic claims of the study are not overextended into intervention claims that the present data cannot support.

The diagnostic finding that self-efficacy partially mediates the professional identity–life satisfaction relationship carries a specific and actionable implication for intervention design. A program that seeks to improve the well-being of early career adults should not target either construct in isolation, but should address professional identity as the distal driver and self-efficacy as the proximal, modifiable mechanism through which a meaningful portion of its benefit is transmitted. Because the mediation was partial rather than complete, the design also retains a direct, identity-focused pathway rather than treating efficacy enhancement as a sufficient substitute for identity work. This dual logic directly structures the intervention outlined below.

The proposed intervention is a structured eight-week transition-support program delivered to cohorts of early career adults within the first two years of labor-market entry, situated in the applied settings identified as most actionable by the present data: university-to-work transition services, organizational onboarding programs, and career counseling practice. The program comprises two interlocking components. The first, an identity-strengthening component, draws on narrative career counseling (Savickas, 2002) and structured professional socialization (Saks et al., 2007; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979); it includes guided autobiographical reasoning, articulation of occupational values, connection to professional communities of practice, and explicit naming of the social significance of the participant's role. The second, an efficacy-building component, operationalizes the four sources of efficacy information specified by Bandura (1997): graduated mastery experiences and structured early successes, vicarious learning through peer and mentor modeling, targeted verbal persuasion and constructive feedback, and the reappraisal of physiological and affective arousal during role-relevant challenges.

The reflection mechanism that distinguishes action research from a one-off intervention is built into the design through a pre–post and iterative measurement strategy. Professional identity (PIS), general self-efficacy (GSE), and life satisfaction (SWLS) are administered at baseline, at the conclusion of the program, and at a three-month follow-up, permitting an empirical test of whether change in self-efficacy mediates change in life satisfaction — thereby subjecting the diagnostic mediation model to a more stringent, change-based examination than a cross-sectional design allows. Structured reflection sessions with participants and facilitators at the midpoint and conclusion of each cohort generate the practice-based feedback through which the program is refined in successive cycles.

In this way, the present diagnostic study functions not as a terminal correlational exercise but as the evidentiary foundation for a cyclical, theory-guided, and practice-embedded intervention whose effects are to be evaluated and progressively improved. The contribution of the current manuscript is to establish, with sufficient rigor, the mechanism at which that intervention should be aimed; the planned action and evaluation phases will determine whether targeting this mechanism produces the well-being gains the diagnostic model predicts.

5. Findings and Outcomes

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics and internal consistency estimates for all scales are presented in Table 1. Scale means ranged from 3.58 (SWLS) to 3.81 (self-efficacy), indicating moderately high levels of professional identity, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction in the present sample. Standard deviations ranged from 0.63 (self-efficacy) to 0.76 (life satisfaction), suggesting adequate score variability. All scales demonstrated acceptable to excellent internal consistency (α range: .88–.91; ω range: .89–.92), supporting their suitability for subsequent analyses.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency Estimates for Study Measures

Scale	Items (n)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
Professional Identification Scale (PIS)	10	3.74	0.69	.91
General Self-Efficacy Scale	8	3.81	0.63	.88
Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)	5	3.58	0.76	.89

Note. All items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). α = Cronbach's alpha.

5.2 Correlational Analysis

Pearson correlations among all study variables are presented in Table 2. All inter-scale correlations were statistically significant and in the theoretically predicted directions. Professional identity showed a strong positive correlation with life satisfaction ($r = .62, p < .001$) and a moderately strong positive correlation with self-efficacy ($r = .55, p < .001$). Self-efficacy was significantly positively correlated with life satisfaction ($r = .48, p < .001$). These associations provided support for the prerequisite conditions of the mediation model, namely

that the independent variable correlates with both the mediator and the outcome, and that the mediator correlates with the outcome.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Professional Identity (PIS)	—		
2. Self-Efficacy	.55***	—	
3. Life Satisfaction (SWLS)	.62***	.48***	—

Note. N = 181. ***p < .001.

5.3 Main Analysis: Mediation Model

The multiple regression analysis with professional identity and self-efficacy as simultaneous predictors of life satisfaction yielded a significant overall model ($R^2 = .44$, Adjusted $R^2 = .43$, $F(2, 178) = 69.9$, $p < .001$). Professional identity emerged as the stronger predictor ($B = 0.51$, $SE = 0.07$, $\beta = .46$, $t = 6.89$, $p < .001$), followed by self-efficacy ($B = 0.34$, $SE = 0.08$, $\beta = .28$, $t = 4.20$, $p < .001$). Together, the two predictors explained 44% of the variance in life satisfaction, indicating a substantial and theoretically meaningful model. Because these two coefficients derive from the same simultaneous regression, they correspond exactly to the direct (c') and mediator-to-outcome (b) paths reported in the mediation analysis below.

The formal mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap resamples revealed the following pathway coefficients: the a-path from professional identity to self-efficacy was statistically significant ($\beta = .55$, $p < .001$), as was the b-path from self-efficacy to life satisfaction, controlling for professional identity ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$). The direct effect of professional identity on life satisfaction, after controlling for self-efficacy (c'-path), remained significant ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$), indicating that the mediation was partial rather than complete. The indirect effect — representing the portion of the professional identity–life satisfaction association transmitted through self-efficacy — was $\beta = .15$, 95% CI [.07, .25], which excluded zero, thereby confirming the significance of the indirect pathway. Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Mediation Analysis Results: Professional Identity → Self-Efficacy → Life Satisfaction

Pathway	β	<i>p</i>	95% CI
a-path: Professional Identity → Self-Efficacy	.55	< .001	—
b-path: Self-Efficacy → Life Satisfaction	.28	< .001	—
c'-path: Professional Identity → Life Satisfaction (direct)	.46	< .001	—
Indirect effect (PI → SE → LS)	.15	< .001	[.07, .25]

Note. N = 181. PROCESS Model 4, 5,000 bootstrap resamples. CI = bias-corrected confidence interval. PI = professional identity; SE = self-efficacy; LS = life satisfaction. All coefficients are standardized.

In summary, H1 was supported: professional identity significantly and positively predicted life satisfaction ($\beta = .46, p < .001$). H2 was supported: self-efficacy significantly and positively predicted life satisfaction ($\beta = .28, p < .001$). H3 was supported: self-efficacy partially mediated the positive relationship between professional identity and life satisfaction, with a significant indirect effect ($\beta = .15, 95\% \text{ CI } [.07, .25]$).

6. Reflection and Implications for Practice

6.1 Summary and Theoretical Integration

The present study examined whether self-efficacy mediates the positive relationship between professional identity and life satisfaction in early career adults. Consistent with all three hypotheses, the results demonstrated that professional identity was a robust positive predictor of life satisfaction, that self-efficacy independently predicted life satisfaction, and that self-efficacy functioned as a partial mediator through which professional identity exerted its influence on global life appraisals. The overall model accounted for a substantial proportion of the variance in life satisfaction, a result that compares favorably with other cross-sectional mediation models in the career well-being literature (cf. Ng et al., 2005; Luthans et al., 2007).

The strong direct association between professional identity and life satisfaction observed in the present study is consistent with Social Identity Theory's proposition that group-based self-categorizations provide a framework through which individuals derive self-esteem, meaning, and a sense of continuity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Early career adults who have successfully integrated their occupational role into their self-concept appear to experience their life as more coherent, purposeful, and fulfilling — qualities that translate

directly into higher scores on cognitive life evaluations such as the SWLS. This finding resonates with Career Construction Theory's (Savickas, 2002) emphasis on narrative coherence as a marker of career adaptability and well-being, and with Super's (1990) theoretical account of self-concept crystallization as a developmental achievement associated with subjective satisfaction.

The partial mediation finding warrants particular theoretical attention. The fact that self-efficacy accounted for a significant but not complete portion of the professional identity–life satisfaction association suggests that multiple psychological mechanisms are likely involved. Beyond self-efficacy, other potential mediators may include sense of purpose, social belonging, role clarity, and identity-based motivation — constructs that future research might profitably explore within this framework. The indirect pathway through self-efficacy is theoretically interpretable within Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory as reflecting the competence-building function of a well-articulated professional identity: individuals who have internalized clear professional standards and role expectations are better positioned to accumulate mastery experiences, interpret performance feedback in efficacy-enhancing ways, and maintain confidence in their general coping capabilities. These enhanced efficacy beliefs, in turn, support the sustained goal pursuit and positive self-appraisal that contribute to life satisfaction (Seligman, 2011).

The finding that the model accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in life satisfaction when professional identity was positioned as a cognitive-structural self-concept variable — rather than a situational or motivational state — underscores the importance of examining stable identity-level resources in well-being research. This perspective aligns with Diener's (1984) early theoretical account of subjective well-being as shaped by stable dispositional factors and with the later positive psychology literature's emphasis on character strengths, identity resources, and values-based living as foundations of flourishing (Seligman, 2011).

6.2 Practical Implications

Building on the intervention design presented in Section 4, the present findings carry several broader implications for career counseling, organizational practice, and educational policy. Most directly, the data suggest that interventions aimed at strengthening early career adults' professional identity — whether through mentoring programs, peer communities of practice, professional socialization initiatives, or narrative career counseling approaches (Savickas, 2002) — may yield downstream benefits for life satisfaction, at least partially through the

enhancement of self-efficacy beliefs. Career counselors working with early career adults navigating identity transitions may thus be advised to attend not merely to skill acquisition and vocational exploration but also to the identity-level processes through which young professionals construct coherent and valued occupational self-narratives.

Organizational onboarding programs represent a particularly actionable arena for applying these findings. Research on organizational socialization has demonstrated that structured onboarding processes can significantly accelerate the development of organizational identification and role clarity (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Saks et al., 2007). The present results suggest that onboarding interventions explicitly designed to foster professional identity — for example, by connecting new employees with professional communities, articulating the social significance of the role, and providing early mastery experiences — may contribute not only to organizational commitment but also to the broader life satisfaction and psychological well-being of early career employees. Such investments are likely to yield returns in terms of reduced turnover, enhanced performance, and lower rates of burnout (Luthans et al., 2007).

From a policy perspective, the data speak to the importance of supporting meaningful vocational transitions for early career adults, particularly in an era of increasing labor market precarity. If professional identity integration and efficacy development are proximal determinants of life satisfaction, then policies that facilitate stable, meaningful employment — including investment in vocational training, reduction of involuntary part-time employment, and support for occupational socialization — may carry psychological well-being benefits beyond their economic rationale.

6.3 Limitations

Several limitations of the present study must be acknowledged. First and most fundamentally, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Although the mediation model is theoretically specified and the PROCESS analysis provides a formal test of the hypothesized pathway, the observed associations are correlational, and alternative causal orderings — including bidirectional relationships and reverse causation — cannot be ruled out on the basis of the present data. Longitudinal designs in which professional identity, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction are measured at multiple time points would be necessary to substantiate the temporal ordering assumed in the mediation model; the pre–post and follow-up evaluation built into the intervention described in Section 4 is intended to address precisely this limitation in the next phase of the research.

Second, the exclusive reliance on self-report measures introduces the possibility of common method variance, which may artificially inflate observed correlations among constructs measured on the same survey and from the same respondent (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Although Harman's single-factor test was conducted and no single factor accounted for the majority of variance, the limitations of this test are well documented, and the possibility of method-related bias cannot be entirely excluded. Future studies should consider incorporating multi-source or multi-method designs, for example by including informant reports or behavioral indicators of professional identity and efficacy.

Third, the study relied on a convenience sample recruited through online platforms and social networks, which raises concerns about sampling representativeness. Although the sample was reasonably diverse with respect to gender and work context, systematic recruitment biases may mean that the sample disproportionately includes individuals with higher internet access, stronger educational credentials, or particular occupational profiles. Replication with probability samples and nationally representative data would strengthen the generalizability of the findings.

Fourth, the relatively modest sample size of $N = 181$, while adequate for the main analyses, may have limited statistical power for detecting smaller effects and may have introduced instability in the bootstrap confidence interval estimates. Future studies with larger samples would permit more precise parameter estimation and would support the use of structural equation modeling for simultaneous examination of multiple mediation pathways.

Fifth, the study did not include potential confounders that might account for the observed associations, including objective employment conditions (income, job security, occupation type), broader life circumstances (relationship status, health), and psychological variables such as neuroticism or dispositional optimism that are known to relate to both efficacy beliefs and life satisfaction. Future research should incorporate comprehensive control variable batteries to ensure that the observed associations reflect the theorized constructs rather than confounded background variables.

6.4 Outlook and Conclusion

Future research should extend the present findings in several directions. Longitudinal studies tracing the co-development of professional identity, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction from late education through the early career period would offer crucial insights into the temporal

dynamics of these relationships. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs in which professional identity is manipulated — for example, through identity-focused career counseling interventions of the kind outlined in Section 4 — would provide the most direct test of the causal hypotheses implicit in the present mediation model. Cross-cultural replication studies are also warranted, as both professional identity salience and the normative expectations surrounding occupational role integration are likely to vary substantially across cultural contexts with different labor market structures and individualism-collectivism profiles.

The present findings also invite theoretically motivated extensions of the mediation model. Beyond self-efficacy, future research might examine whether variables such as sense of purpose, social belonging, career adaptability (Savickas, 2002), psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007), or occupational commitment constitute additional pathways through which professional identity influences life satisfaction. Multi-mediator models incorporating these variables would provide a more complete account of the psychological mechanisms involved. Moderation analyses examining whether gender, cultural background, or job type moderate the strength of the identity–efficacy–satisfaction pathway would also be of both theoretical and practical relevance.

In conclusion, the present study contributes to the empirical literature on professional identity and subjective well-being by demonstrating that self-efficacy constitutes a meaningful mediating mechanism through which occupational self-concept shapes global life satisfaction appraisals in early career adults. Professional identity exerted both a significant direct effect on life satisfaction and a significant indirect effect operating through self-efficacy, with the two together explaining a substantial share of the variance in life satisfaction. These findings underscore the psychological importance of occupational identity integration during the early career period and suggest that fostering professional identity strength — through mentoring, socialization, and narrative counseling approaches — may constitute an underutilized avenue for promoting the well-being of young adults in contemporary labor markets. The present results call for continued investigation of identity-level psychological resources as foundations of flourishing across the life course.

Statements and Declarations

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This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval

The study was conducted as an anonymous online survey in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013 revision). All procedures were voluntary and anonymous. Institutional review board approval was not required under applicable national guidelines for anonymous survey research.

Informed Consent

Prior to participation, all respondents received written information about the study's purpose, procedure, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Completion of the survey was treated as implicit informed consent.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

S. Pazer is the sole author and was responsible for the conceptualization and design of the study, data collection, statistical analysis, interpretation of the results, and the writing and revision of the manuscript.

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Use of Generative AI

Generative AI tools were used to assist with language editing and proofreading of the manuscript. All scientific content, conceptual framing, statistical analyses, and interpretations are the sole responsibility of the author. AI tools did not contribute to study design, data collection, or the formulation of conclusions.

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