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The moderating effect of expatriate acculturation on career sustainability: Evidence from Chinese University alumni from Africa

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Purpose: To a large extent, the recent global instability is responsible for the rapid structural mutation of the career landscape, thereby affecting individuals' career development, especially expatriates who are subjected to an acculturation process. Even though the cultural element exists in the career development literature, the implications of expatriate acculturation (EA) on individual expatriates' career competence (CC) and career sustainability (CS) remain understudied. Therefore, this study proposes to fill this gap in literature by exploring the intrinsic role EA plays in regulating the CC–CS interactions.

Design/methodology/approach: For a more comprehensive analysis, we attempt to identify the effect on each dimension of CC, thus Reflective, Social, and Behavioural competencies (RC, SC, and BC), in the case of Chinese University postgraduate alumni from Africa. We conducted a double-layer analysis with 389 respondents' data samples.

Findings/results: Results reveal that, at the aggregate level, the positive relationship between CC and CS is weakened by EA in the case of African postgraduates who studied at Chinese universities. The detailed analyses reveal that the negative effect of EA significantly undermines the RC–CS mechanism, but significantly strengthens the BC–CS interaction. Besides, the SC–CS mechanism is not significantly moderated by EA despite the negative acculturation tendencies.

Practical implications: From the perspective of international interdependence, this research elucidates the magnitude and diversity of expatriates' contribution to the host country's career ecosystem.

Originality/value: Investigating from the career construction theory (CCT) perspective, this article aims to fill this gap by finding the moderating effect of EA on the CC–CS mechanisms.

Keywords: career competence; career sustainability; acculturation; career construction theory; career ecosystem theory.

Introduction

The unprecedented volatility in the global career environment today – plagued with continuous economic transformations, accelerating technological changes and deteriorating cross-cultural conflicts (e.g. Chin et al., 2019a) – has resulted in radical mutations in individuals' employability and career development. Such complex occupational conditions may particularly affect the sustainability of careers among expatriates because cultural differences as a typical contextual factor influence the formation of individuals' career considerations. More specifically, given foreign workers need to experience the process of acculturation involving overcoming cultural gaps and assimilating local norms (Berry, 2003; Ding, 2016; Yu et al., 2021), they often face more severe career challenges (Berry, 1997; Bodomo, 2009a; Hodzi, 2020). However, despite the rising career concerns among expatriates in the post-pandemic, hitherto limited research has empirically investigated relevant issues. We thus aim to fill this gap in this article.

Acculturation is deemed a critical contextual variable to explain immigrants' career behaviours (Berry, 2005), as well as the cognition of international students towards their occupational prospects in host societies. According to the career construction theory (CCT) (Savickas, 2013), the variables that can reflect person-environment interactions are central to explaining career-related phenomena. Echoing this, existing studies have highlighted the context in which careers pose constraints on the relationships between individuals' career competence (CC) and various career outcomes (Savickas et al., 2009).

However, despite acculturation embodying a vital learning process for foreign employees to incorporate the values, beliefs and languages of the host countries with their cultures of origin, its role in affecting the career development paths of expatriates has not been well-addressed in the literature. Scholars have indicated that the acculturation process may make expatriates feel frustrated about their local colleagues and work environment, thus impairing their occupational competencies to develop overseas careers (Berry, 2005). Taking together the foregoing arguments, we thus focus on exploring how acculturation intervenes in the career competence – career sustainability (CC–CS) mechanisms herein. Given acculturation has been examined as crucial to international students who start careers in host countries after graduation (Berry, 1997; Bodomo, 2012; Zane & Mak, 2003), we thus use Chinese University postgraduate alumni from Africa as our sample subjects, as China has become the largest host of African students abroad (Bodomo, 2012; Hodzi, 2020).

The primary theoretical relevance of this article is to contribute to the career literature by investigating the intervening role of acculturation in affecting career-related mechanisms, thus adding value to the research at the intersection between career and cultural psychology. Practically, given our sample subjects are Africans who graduated from Chinese universities, we thus provide insightful implications for numerous African students and immigrants in the Chinese context.

Literature review and hypothesis development

Career construction theory

Career construction theory presents a comprehensive perceptive of a life-cycle vocation behaviour in that career choices are made by the individual in order to attain career satisfaction and sustainability (Savickas, 2013; Savickas et al., 2009). It relies on the differential, developmental and dynamic career behaviour perspectives to demonstrate the different aspects of occupational choice depending on work adjustments such as cultural relocation for immigrants (e.g. Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; Biemann et al., 2012). The career development literature is marked with a number of career theories that effectively address different aspects of individual and organisational career behaviour (Savickas et al., 2009). However, the monumental volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) that characterises the career landscape in the 21st century undermines many existing career structures and demands new approaches to the upcoming phenomenon in the career ecosystem (Chin et al., 2019a).

In response to the rapidly changing career environment, CCT specifically provides the ground to retain and reconstruct a theory based on concepts that remain relevant to the current situation. For instance, CCT concentrates on the use of the individual's qualifications and competencies for a specific career demand instead of measuring the personality traits based on socio-cultural background, thus replacing scores with stories (Savickas, 2013; Savickas et al., 2009). Simply put, CCT has it that individuals construct their careers by establishing their own career experience. Career construction deals more with what the individual has accomplished and how he has done it. It does not address the question of why they do, what they do and why they do it the way they do it (Baruch & Sullivan, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Career construction theory emphasises the interpretation of the ability and processes individuals go through to produce outcomes thus in specific career conditions (Hirschi et al., 2015; Savickas et al., 2009). According to the constructionist, past experience, present achievements and future aspirations contribute to the construction of the employee's career identity (Hirschi, 2015; Savickas, 2002). Thus, for sustainability, the present-age career ecosystem must be guided and regulated by the construction of individuals' competencies and psychological capital (Savickas et al., 2009).

Career competence and career sustainability

Career sustainability (CS) is defined as the periodic renewability, continuity and security features of a career (Zhang et al., 2022) that harmoniously fit an individual's skills, interests and values (Akkermans et al., 2013). While the research development literature is already littered with CS studies (Chin et al., 2019a; Ren et al., 2020), little is known about expatriates' CS, in particular, the case of African students who graduated from Chinese universities (Bodomo, 2012; Hodzi, 2020). Career sustainability has been a crucial issue in recent times, more so for expatriate employability. Arguably, viewing the importance of the African diaspora in a global career landscape (King, 2014; Lan, 2016) and the recent influx of African students in China (Sautman et al., 2009), this study, on the basis of CCT and CC argument, also aims to investigate African postgraduates' assimilation into the Chinese career ecosystem after graduation. This study is important for its contribution to the Sino-Africa relations discussion.

As stated earlier, CC refers to the composite construct of ability, knowledge and skills necessary for CS relative to specific career needs (Akkermans et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Though there is a considerable number of existing studies that analysed CC in block (Blokker et al., 2019), recent studies are of the view that it is more appropriate to consider CC as a composite measure. Thus, the relevance of investigating the impact of each composite of CC on CS is to present a holistic interpretation of the mechanism (Akkermans et al., 2018; Chin et al., 2021). Hitherto as proposed by Akkermans et al. (2013), the three dimensions of CC (Reflexive Competence [RC], Social Competence [SC] and Behavioural Competence [BC]) will be used for this research; thus, RC highlights the intellectual significance of a person. Taking RC can be considered as the basis of self-motivation required to

achieve CS, in this case, African postgraduates' perceptions of their CC are likely affected in China under high CS uncertainty elicited by Chinese policy complexities regarding expatriate employability. Social competence defines the relevance of social connection in order to gain career guidance from the interaction with others (Chin et al., 2019a, 2019b). However, as an immigrant in the dominant society, the graduate student is restrained from natural socialisation (Lan, 2016), at least according to the individual's acculturation level. The reduced social contact within the host career ecosystem will naturally reduce the opportunities for career development; therefore, a student with a strong social competence stands relatively in an advantageous position for career success in the host environment. In this vein, SC is deemed essential to build strong social networks within the host society in order to secure a sustainable career. Behavioural competence (BC) is an individual's ability to be proactive in taking action to build his or her career. With all the challenges facing immigrants, it has become evident that foreign students find it difficult to identify career opportunities they are eligible for. As a result, an individual with BC may be helpful for a better adaption to the career opportunities available for foreigners. Generally, these CC characteristics are very well identifiable with international postgraduates globally (Lan, 2016). Moreover, the African scholar and professional brilliance around the world is well documented in the literature (Bodomo, 2009a; Hodzi, 2020; King, 2014), and the CC of African graduates from Chinese universities could not be any less (Lan, 2016). Ceteris paribus, African graduates in China with more developed CC will be in a position of more sustainable careers everywhere around the world as well as in China. Therefore, the direct correlation between CC and CS should be able to offer African graduates an avenue to integrate a variety of career orientations (Forrier et al., 2009; Savickas, 2002; Parker et al., 1994). Therefore, we hypothesise:

H1: CC is positively related to CS.

H1a: RC is positively related to CS.

H1b: SC is positively related to CS.

H1c: BC is positively related to CS.

Expatriate acculturation as a moderator

The chronic global career insecurity necessitates a career exploration within as well as beyond the immediate career ecosystem (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). In their career ecosystem concept, Kindsiko and Baruch (2019) capture this tendency by arguing that given the degree of job volatility, employees may need to develop relationships both within and outside their cultural background. At the backdrop of this, the capacity to reflectively assess one's professional potential creates a robust social framework and empowers individuals to guide their career behavior independently of the unpredictable nature of the career environment, which will be considered as the employees' CC (RC, SC and BC). Even though literature has identified the influence of culture on the CC–CS interaction, little is known about the implication of cross-cultural

differences on expatriate employability (Akkermans et al., 2018; Seibert et al., 2013). For expatriates' employability, cross-cultural difference constitutes an unavoidable parameter in the CC–CS interaction. Based on their findings, Akkermans et al. (2013) and Berry (1997) argue that the outcome of the CC–CS interactive mechanism is conditional on the level of cultural integration attained within the society.

Drawing from the aforementioned argument, we assume that positive acculturation will buttress the positive CC–CS relationship. In fact, in some cases, expatriate acculturation (EA) constitutes a pivotal parameter of CS, presumably expatriates' employability in China. Taken together, we propose that the CC–CS mechanism will be significantly moderated by EA. Given that acculturation is paramount for expatriate CS, the expectation is that the effect of EA should be significant for African postgraduates' career development after they graduate from Chinese universities (Ahmad & Shah, 2018). In summary, we advance a moderation model that the positive CC-CS mechanism is significantly moderated by EA (Figure 1); therefore, we hypothesise:

H2: The interaction between CC and CS is significantly moderated by EA.

H2a: EA moderates the RC–CS interaction such that a higher EA would strengthen the positive relationship between RC and CS.

H2b: EA moderates the relationship between SC and CS such that a higher EA would strengthen the positive relationship between SC and CS.

H2c: EA moderates the relationship between BC and CS such that a higher EA would strengthen the positive relationship between BC and CS.

Methods

For an in-depth analysis of the effect of acculturation in the career domain, this study adopts a double layer of a qualitative and a quantitative research approach (Creswell, 2014). At the first layer, this study uses a qualitative investigation to establish the fundamental construction for a holistic interpretation of the CC-CS-EA mechanism. The second phase was a quantitative computation of the hypothetical interactions of the variables as predicted by the hypothesis (Venkatesh et al., 2013). To accomplish this,
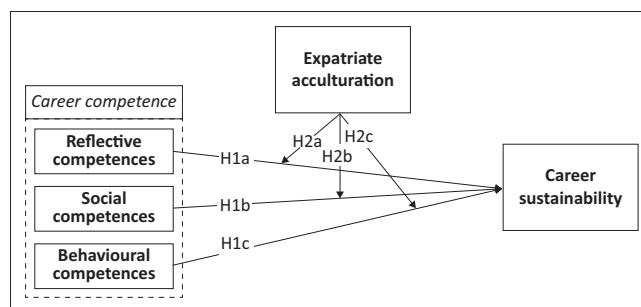
H, hypothesis.

FIGURE 1: Expatriate acculturation moderation on the career competence–career sustainability mechanism.

the first section of a pilot-base interview was conducted to acquire a primary understanding of the scope of our determinants, questions and respondents. Then, based on the results of this first phase interview, the hypothetical model of the research was evaluated. Then before the quantitative analysis proper, a questionnaire sample was sent online to a selected number of HR personnel and employees to ascertain the appropriateness and clarity of the measurements and hypotheses. As established in the literature, the double-layer analysis gives diversified tools for data examination for more robust outcomes.

Study 1: Qualitative analysis

In September 2022, interviews were conducted online with 10 respondents of which 5 were working in different organisations in Africa, 2 in China, 1 in the United States (US), 1 in the United Kingdom (UK) and 1 in Canada. All respondents understood the research project and willingly agreed to participate, and the detailed demographics are illustrated in Table 1. To maintain simplicity and ethics questionnaire, we wrote 'Respondent (Resp.) + a number' in the place of names because of the consideration of ethical issues. The interview used the following questions:

1. How do you perceive the interaction between CS with each of the three components of Career Competence?
2. What impact could an individual's RC (reflection on motivation and qualities) have on CS?
3. What impact could an individual's SC (socialisation and self-profiling) have on CS?
4. What impact could an individual's BC (work exploration and career control) have on CS?
5. During your study times in China, how did your acculturation into the Chinese society influence the interaction between CS with each of the three components of Career Competence?
6. What influence does EA have on the RC-CS relationship?
7. What influence does EA have on the SC-CS relationship?
8. What influence does EA have on the BC-CS relationship?

Key findings of Study 1

The outcomes of interviews show that acculturation plays a significant role in career decisions and career development. For instance, Respondent 3 stated:

'I found it difficult to interact with the Chinese community and it was a major hindrance to my career objectives in China. Cultural barriers constituted an obvious gulf between education and immediate career considerations in China right after graduation.' (Resp. 3)

Respondent 6 said:

'Even though I was well experienced in the robotic industry before pursuing my Ph.D. in China because I could not read the characters, neither could I speak the Chinese language; I felt like a stranger throughout my years of study in China and never explored career opportunities in China.' (Resp. 6)

Respondent 5 said:

'Besides being a very sociable person, I stayed in Singapore for a few years and can speak a little Mandarin, but the Education system in China, unlike that in Singapore has a little allocation for expatriate career development. After theoretical courses, I came to China expecting to acquire some practical training in Information technology. After many attempts to get a part-time job, it was clear that the entire information sector in China is closed to foreigners.' (Resp. 5)

Respondent 1 also told a story of how his colleagues who tried to get an internship job after school almost got their student status revoked. Respondent 3 stated that because he spends most of his time with graduate fellows from his country in the school, he does not put much effort into navigating within the local Chinese community, mainly shying away from cultural difference issues. Respondent 10 said:

'After staying in China for more than a decade and owning my own company, I still need to renew my visa every year. Even though, emotionally I feel I belong to the Chinese society, according to the policies, I have a temporal residency, so as my career.' (Resp. 10)

Respondent 9 said:

'I am grateful for the scholarship the Chinese scholarship council offered me for my master's degree. It was a great academic experience, especially with the significant improvement in my Chinese language which helped me secure a good job back in my country.' (Resp. 9)

Respondent 8 said:

'I admire the application of regulations, especially in the financial and banking sector. How policies change swiftly according to the

TABLE 1: Demographic information of respondents.

Respondent	Gender	Age	Degree in China	Current job institution	Position	Current job country
Resp. 1	M	31–40	PhD	National Institution	Lecturer	Tanzania
Resp. 2	F	41–50	PhD	Private Institution	Neurosurgeon	United States
Resp. 3	M	31–40	Masters and PhD	Private Institution	Postdoc Fellow	Canada
Resp. 4	F	31–40	PhD	National Institution	Postdoc Fellow	China
Resp. 5	M	≤ 30	Masters	Private Institution	Telco. Engineer	Kenya
Resp. 6	M	31–40	PhD	National Institution	Project Manager	United Kingdom
Resp. 7	M	41–50	Masters and PhD	National Institution	Ass. Professor	South Africa
Resp. 8	F	31–40	PhD	Private Institution	Bank Manager	Ghana
Resp. 9	F	41–50	Masters and PhD	Self-employed	Consultant	Tanzania
Resp. 10	M	≤ 30	Masters	Self-employed	CEO	China

Resp., respondent; M, male; F, female; PhD, doctor of philosophy; Postdoc, postdoctoral; Telco., telecommunications; Ass., assistant; CEO, chief executive officer.

pressing situation occurrence and how they are implemented with a relatively immediate effect. Even though the policy regulations in the financial sector were not taught in class, I advised the implementation of such regulations upon my return to the financial institution where I was working before going to China to further my education.' (Resp. 8)

Respondent 4 stated:

'[A]fter her brilliant achievement during the doctorate was enrolled as a post-doctorate fellow in the department. According to her, even though in China, she did not have much to do with Chinese society because she spent much time corresponding with international journals, specifically for publications. Moreover, her research topics have little to do with China; therefore, she had very minimal interaction with Chinese society. She did not put much effort into learning the Chinese language.' (Resp. 4)

Respondent 1 said:

'I was already teaching in the first national University of my country before coming to China for my doctorate education. Upon graduation I tried to postulate for a teaching position at my University to no avail, therefore I went back to the country. Because during my education in China, I did not have many connections within the Chinese community, so I did not have anything to fall on within the Chinese society when I could not secure a position in my department.' (Resp. 1)

Finally, Respondent 2 said:

'Being a medical practitioner, I spent most of my time in hospitals therefore I did not learn much about Chinese Culture, since it did not have to do with my job. Even though I developed much interest in Chinese traditional medicine, I did little to integrate Chinese Culture to research the rapport between this culture and medicine during my studies in China.' (Resp. 2)

Generally, respondents acknowledged that the level of their acculturation into the Chinese socio-cultural tissue significantly impacted their career objectives, especially pursuing a career development agenda in China. Meanwhile, individuals with strong reflexive, social and behavioural competencies acquired more knowledge for their career development, which was useful for them later in their professions. Respondents 1, 2 and 6 also admitted that because of their inability to integrate the Chinese sociocultural system, their career experiences and competencies were almost useless for the career ambitions they had before coming to China. In conclusion, the findings point to the fact that our hypothesis development is rational and consistent with the feedback from our interviews. In other words, the outcome of the preliminary interviews is consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2 to prove that the qualitative analysis is reasonable and corresponds with the feedback from the interviewees. Besides, the interviewers attest that acculturation impacts the relationship between CS and CC in different measures. However, the significance of the interaction between the different parameters as proposed in Hypothesis 1a, 1b, 1c and 2a, 2b, 2c could not be obtained from the interview sections; therefore, the quantitative analysis was carried out to validate the hypotheses.

Study 2: Quantitative analysis

Instrument designing and measures

In this research, we considered CC and CS as the independent and dependent variables respectively while EA is employed as the moderating variable. Moreover, this research went beyond the aggregate impact of CC to investigate the details effects of the three components (RC, SC and BC) on CS. Independent variables, notably the three dimensions of CC were measured with a 21-item scale (7 items per dimension each) following Akkermans et al. (2013).

Career competence items were estimated with the six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). For example, for RC, sample items used were: 'I am certain about the important things I need to do to sustain my career' and 'I am very clear about the shortcomings I commit on the job'. As for SC, the sample items were: 'I can easily approach the people in my network for advice any time i need it' and 'My team mate clearly know the strength i bring to the table'; and for BC, we used sample items such as: 'I have no doubt the avenues I need to use to develop my area of expertise' and 'I am able to plainly demonstrate my strengths vis-a-vis in my career'.

To measure the dependent variable CS, a 12-item scale and a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree) from Chin et al. (2021) were used. We used sample items such as 'My career gives me the confidence of a bright future', 'I have a good level of flexibility in my career', 'I can easily upgrade my skill with the opportunities i have in my career' and 'My career gives me the allowance to assimilate information and grow in knowledge'.

The moderating variable EA was estimated with the 24-item scale developed by Berry (2005). The author originally developed a 16-item scale comprising four strategies which could be rearranged into the two poles of positive and negative acculturation. We followed Wagstaff et al. (2020) and Marin and Gamba (1996) and chose to utilise both positively and negatively phrased items to differentiate between negative acculturation (separation and marginalisation) and positive acculturation (integration and assimilation). Here, samples such as 'I can consider pursuing a long-term career in China' are evaluated using the six-point Likert scale to measure all the items of acculturation.

Sample and data collection

Between September and December 2022, we conducted an online survey using 'Formally; www.formaloo.net', an international survey platform. The questionnaire link was sent through social media to African alumni who are currently working in different parts of the world. The target respondents are Africans who already obtained their first degree before getting admission to a Chinese university. Again, the database provided the option to outline career opportunities in China, especially for African graduates. The scope of this research and the current working and

residential location of the respondents are not relevant. The survey questionnaire was sent out at a two-time points of a month interval in 2022, to avoid common method bias (Kock, 2015). A total of 398 respondents returned the questionnaire through email. No response was discarded because those who responded provided a useful dataset, except for negligible missing data. We believe the respondents were motivated by nostalgia for their cross-cultural experiences in China. Moreover, we believe because the respondents are well experienced in research, there was no challenge with understanding or interpreting the questions.

Demographics

The detailed content of respondents in the survey is as follows. Ninety-nine per cent of the responses were valid. Per the age group, 48% of the respondents are below 30, 42% are between 31 and 40, 8% are between 41 and 50 years, and 2% of them have between 51 and 60 years. Sixty-nine per cent of the respondents are male while 31% are females. Seventy-five per cent of them are single while 25% are married. In terms of their academic status, 45.8% were Master's degree holders, 49.1% were PhD degree holders and 5.1% are Post-Doctorate fellows. Our figures show the same percentage of 31% working in national and/or private institutions, with a similar percentage self-employed, while 7% were working in public–private joint ventures and only 5% of them got a job in China. In order to minimise the common method variance (CMV) discrepancies because of the same rating scale used throughout, the questions and the pages were clearly numbered to help respondents differentiate between pages (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Results

For the quantitative analysis, we used SPSS and Smart PLS 3.0 to analyse the demographic data and evaluate the reliability and validity of the structural model, respectively, after which the proposed hypotheses were tested (Ringle et al., 2014). Also, in order to address the reversal questionnaires of acculturation, before Cronbach's alpha factor analysis, code items that are negatively worded were reversed, where a high value will obtain the same type of feedback on each item.

Common method variance

The single-factor approach was used for the primary analysis to test the standard method variance. The CMV was employed for the self-reported data following Lindell and Whitney (2001). Basically, the occurrence of common variance bias happens when the data are collected with the same method, resulting in a potential artificial commonality of relationships between variables. The first exploratory factor analysis revealed that 1.543 explained the first factor of the variance, thus lesser than the 3.3 threshold value. Therefore, no important common method bias occurred in the data (Kock & Lynn, 2012).

Reliability and validity

As the practice dictates, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) were estimated to check the reliability and validity of the three dimensions of the independent variable as seen in Table 2. Reflection competence includes Reflection on Motivation and Qualities, SC includes Social connection and Social Self-Proficiency, and BC includes Behavioural Exploration and Behavioural Control. Cronbach's α coefficients measuring the dimensions fall within the range of 0.885 and 0.948, above the acceptable value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019). Besides, composite reliability (CR) ranges between o.571–0.708, above the 0.5 threshold. Moreover, for a correct measured structure estimate, We introduced the rhoA indicator to the test. As Table 2 shows, rho A is in the range of 0.882 and 0.952, above the 0.7 acceptable threshold (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2014; Hair et al., 2017). Therefore, the results suggested that our measurement attained a satisfactory internal consistency.

The convergent validity was evaluated to see if the factor loading and average variance extracted (AVE) values were respectively above 0.7 and 0.5 or not (Hair et al., 2017). Figures in Table 2 reveal that all factor loading values range between 0.531 and 0.890, and AVE ranges between 0.530 and 0.708, thus confirming an acceptable convergent validity of our models. Moreover, there is no collinearity problem as the values of the variance inflation factor (VIF) were less than 5.

TABLE 2: Confirmatory factor analysis.

Construct	Items	Factor loading	α	Rho-A	CR	AVE	VIF
Career sustainability	CS1	0.745*	0.941	0.944	0.952	0.627	1.626
	CS2	0.694*	-	-	-	-	-
	CS3	0.744*	-	-	-	-	-
	CS4	0.728*	-	-	-	-	-
	CS5	0.869*	-	-	-	-	-
	CS6	0.735*	-	-	-	-	-
	CS7	0.890*	-	-	-	-	-
	CS8	0.864*	-	-	-	-	-
	CS9	0.861*	-	-	-	-	-
	CS10	0.827*	-	-	-	-	-
	CS11	0.798*	-	-	-	-	-
	CS12	0.832*	-	-	-	-	-
Reflective competence	RC1	0.830*	0.880	0.952	0.903	0.571	2.147
	RC2	0.690*	-	-	-	-	-
	RC3	0.850*	-	-	-	-	-
	RC4	0.684*	-	-	-	-	-
	RC5	0.768*	-	-	-	-	-
	RC6	0.723*	-	-	-	-	-
	RC7	0.727*	-	-	-	-	-
Social competence	SC1	0.837*	0.852	0.886	0.888	0.538	1.436
	SC2	0.623*	-	-	-	-	-
	SC3	0.758*	-	-	-	-	-
	SC4	0.531*	-	-	-	-	-
	SC5	0.677*	-	-	-	-	-
	SC6	0.796*	-	-	-	-	-
	SC7	0.889*	-	-	-	-	-
Behavioural competence	BC1	0.890*	0.864	0.901	0.906	0.708	1.100
	BC2	0.882*	-	-	-	-	-
	BC3	0.864*	-	-	-	-	-
	BC4	0.716*	-	-	-	-	-
	BC5	0.684*	-	-	-	-	-
	BC6	0.844*	-	-	-	-	-

CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted; VIF, variance inflation factor.
*Factoring loading > 0.5.

For the discriminant validity, threshold, the analysis, the analysis revealed that the square root values of the average variance extracted (AVE) surpassed all the coefficients. Hence, we can assert the discriminant validity of our measurements as seen in Table 3.

Structural model and results analysis

In order to assess the hypotheses, the PLS results were evaluated using the bootstrap resampling technique in SmartPLS, with the responses being resampled 5000 times (Hair et al., 2017). The overall R^2 value (0.647) shows a significant explanatory power of the research model, thus 64.7% of the variance in the dependent variable. As shown in Table 3, CC positively relates to CS (H1, β = 0.717, p = 0.000); RC is negatively but insignificantly related to CS (H1a, β = 0.051, p = 0.529); SC and BC are significantly and positively related to CS (H1b, β = 0.281, p = 0.016; H1c, β = 0.321, p = 0.000), thus supporting H1, H1b and H1c, but rejecting H1a.

Furthermore, we also investigated the moderating effect of EA on the RC-SC-BC and CS nexus. The results showed that EA is significantly and negatively moderating the RC-CS mechanism (H2a, β = −0.380, p = 0.007) but positively moderating the BC-CS mechanism (H2C, β = 0.321, p = 0.000). On the contrary, EA is insignificantly moderating the CC-CS and SC-CS mechanisms (H2, β = 0.235, p = 0.059; H2b, β = −0.123, p = 0.527), thus supporting H2a and H2c, but rejecting H2 and H2b (Table 4).

Further, we conducted a graphical presentation of our results to interpret the moderating effects of EA on RC-CS and BC-CS mechanisms. According to Figure 2, EA negatively moderates the RC-CS mechanism in such a fashion that the higher EA the weaker the RC-CS relationship, while it positively moderates the BC-CS mechanism such that a higher EA would strengthen the positive relationship between BC and CS.

TABLE 3: Discriminant validity analysis (Fornell and Larcker).

Construct	CS	CC	EA
Career sustainability	0.783	-	-
Career competences	0.804	0.672	-
Expatriate acculturation	0.615	0.655	0.355

CS, career sustainability; CC, career competences; EA, expatriate acculturation.

TABLE 4: Hypothesis constructs.

Hypothesis	Mean	SD	*T*-stats	*p*	Result
EA→CS	-0.340	0.121	3.296	0.001	Accepted
H1: CC→CS	0.717	0.735	0.043	0.000	Accepted
H1a: RC→CS	-0.051	0.089	0.630	0.529	Rejected
H1b: SC→CS	0.281	0.108	2.421	0.016	Accepted
H1c: BC→CS	0.321	0.088	3.660	0.000	Accepted
H2: EA → CC-CS	0.235	0.178	0.124	0.059	Accepted
H2a: EA → RC-CS	-0.380	0.153	2.708	0.007	Accepted
H2b: EA → SC-CS	-0.123	0.191	0.633	0.527	Rejected
H2c: EA → BC-CS	0.321	0.088	3.660	0.000	Accepted

EA, expatriate acculturation; CS, career sustainability; CC, career competence; RC, reflection competence; BC, behavioural competence; SC, social competence; SD, standard deviation.

Discussion

As demonstrated earlier, the goal of this research work is to demonstrate the moderating impact of EA on the interaction between CS and the three components of CC. From establishing the existence of a relationship between the variables in Study 1, the discussion continued with an empirical analysis in Study 2 to evaluate the significance of the various interactions between the variables. According to the literature, empirical findings proved that career competence functions as a leading element in the career construct theory (Savickas, 2013; Savickas et al., 2009), with evidence of how each dimension of CC exerts an important impact on CS (Akkermans et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). All our results in Figure 3, point to the fact that one's level of infusion into the host culture is a fundamental factor in translating the individual's occupational competencies into career fulfillment, meanwhile, different competencies respond with different levels of intensity and orientation.

Reflection competence–career sustainability mechanism

The findings of our research reveal that EA significantly moderates the RC-CS mechanism (Baruch & Sullivan, 2022). However, in this case, the EA moderation effect has a negative orientation (Blokker et al., 2019), which is further supported by the direct RC-CS interaction. In conformity with the negative moderating role of EA on the RC-CS relationship, Blokker et al. (2019) used the case of young professionals to demonstrate how negative acculturation shocks prevent expatriates from establishing long-term occupational security despite their clear self-concept competencies and career skills. According to the authors, even though well-reflexive employees have a clear vision of their careers and cannot easily be distracted by challenging work conditions, the inability to emerge into the host culture will perpetually keep them as foreigners, thus sidelined from the predominant career ecosystem.
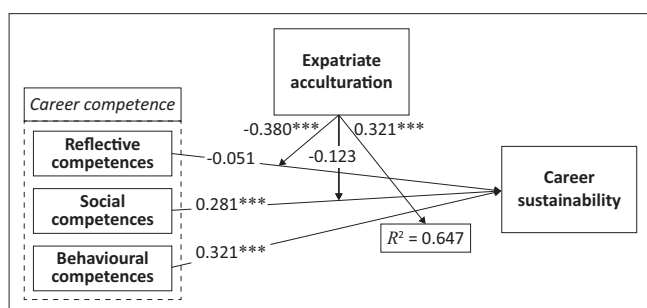
Social competence–career sustainability mechanism

Our results also demonstrated a negative moderation effect of EA on the SC-CS mechanism, while different analyses yielded different levels of significance of this effect. As clearly established in the literature, social networking and communication have proven to determine expatriates' acculturation process (Berry, 1997, 2005) and therefore its effect on related career outcomes (Akkermans et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2022). The adverse impact of EA on the relationship between SC and CS was previously illustrated in Study 1 of this research. African students have shared their experiences of encountering social barriers during their studies in China, which in turn hindered their ability to navigate the Chinese job market. Moreover, the irrelevance of individuals' personal, social and communicative competence to yield positive CS, in this case, can be explained by other factors such as policies and regulations vis-a-vis foreigners' occupations (Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Lan, 2016).
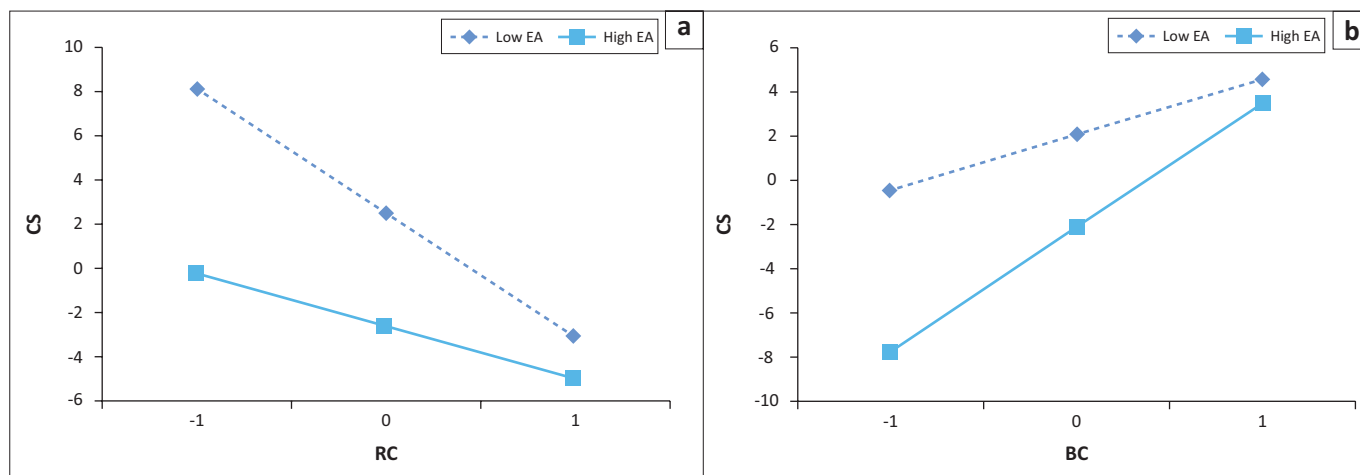
EA, expatriate acculturation; CS, career sustainability; RC, reflection competence; BC, behavioural competence.

FIGURE 2: The moderating effects of expatriate acculturation.

***f^2 = 0.256 > 0.15.

FIGURE 3: Partial Least Square (PLS) path size affects expatriate acculturation.

Behavioural competence–career sustainability mechanism

The BC–CS link shows a constant significantly positive direct as well as moderated interactions. Expatriates' career decision is inevitably determined by their proactive action-taking ability. Obviously, a behavioural competent postgraduate is relatively clear on the future career orientation and can adapt or change between career ecosystems, especially in terms of acculturation challenges (Bodomo, 2009a; Hodzi, 2020; Lan, 2016) as seen in Study 1.

Generally, these CC characteristics are very well identifiable with international postgraduates globally (Lan, 2016). In addition, the effect of CC on CS is well-established in the literature, whereas, other factors such as EA could overshadow the translation of CC into CS (Barthauer et al., 2019). This is an additional confirmation of the importance of the study of CC dimensions (Zhang et al., 2022), while scant studies have studied the interaction between individual dimensions of CC and CS. Further, Blokker et al. (2019) in their study, demonstrate that career resources do not translate directly into employability. They found that negative acculturation shock completely undermines career development, similar to the case of Africans' career perspective in China. Our findings are in line with prior studies (Berry, 2005; Blokker et al., 2019; De Cuyper et al., 2011; Nauta et al., 2009) to establish that the CC-CS mechanism is not straightforward, directly applicable to the

assimilation of African postgraduates into the Chinese career ecosystem after their graduation.

Overall, the contribution of our study is multifold. Firstly, the double layer, qualitative and quantitative approach used in the research has enriched the literature on career development. To a large extent, the outcome of this study provides a more holistic image to better understand the influence of EA in the relationship between CC and CS. This specifically fills the gap by using non-aggregate methodologies in organisational behaviour (Venkatesh et al., 2016). Secondly, this study has also contributed significantly to the acculturation literature. The acculturation literature has not been empirically explored. Moreover, its connection with the career construct concept of the career development literature is totally nonexistent. Thirdly, the practical investigation aims to explore the career development stories of Africans who graduated from Chinese universities and are now working in various organisations around the world. The outcomes of the study establish how acculturation has impacted the career development prospects of Africans who studied in Chinese universities, thereby offering an insight into the transformation process of career qualities and competencies as far as African international diplomacy is concerned, especially the Sino-Africa relations in this case.

Theoretical implications

Following the aforementioned discussions, the moderating effect of acculturation from a cross-cultural perspective on the link between CC and CS is to understand the mixed effects of acculturation on expatriate CS, particularly in the case of Africans who were graduate students in China. However, as adaptable as an expatriate could be in the host country (Baruch, 2015), the above effects could not merely be analysed without considering their cross-cultural encounters in the foreign career environment. As advanced in career construct concepts (Savickas, 2013), CC provides vital insights in terms of the parameters that influence CS. The individual's career perspective can be an appropriate reflection of his cultural background in this context as it

determines one's capability to blend comfortably with the career environment (Briscoe et al., 2006). A cross-cultural mindset, seen from a cross-border perspective, can edge individuals to identify opportunities and create means to cooperate with others from different cultural backgrounds (Agbanyo et al., 2022, 2023; Briscoe et al., 2006). While CC can discover and explore internal and external opportunities, a cross-cultural setting within every particular career ecosystem provides important determinants to career development outcomes. This suggests that the cultural setting within each career ecosystem significantly influences expatriates either to explore more internal career opportunities or rather orient towards the labour market outside the host society. When expatriate employees encounter a culturally narrow career ecosystem, they prefer to take advantage of their CC to explore wider opportunities externally. Therefore, by applying acculturation negatively, employees promote CC and generate CS possibilities outside the host culture. This comes to buttress respondent 6's explanation in Study 1 earlier. Despite his technical expertise, failure to speak the Chinese language constituted a negative acculturation experience, a major barrier for his integration into the Chinese career ecosystem. In contrast, employees who lack CC may also not be motivated enough to be internally seeking. They perceive a relatively higher career security retreating to their culture of origin; therefore, they are more willing to move back home where their experiences acquired abroad are in high demand.

Practical implications

Prior research on study abroad and socio-cultural adaptation reveals that international students who easily adapt to the ups and downs involved in living in a new cultural setting quickly develop a favourable attitude towards embracing the new learning experience, and are able to go through important personal transformation through acculturation. They are prone to adjusting to a bicultural identity by integrating a new culture into their previous cultural self-concept. The easy adaptations involve behavioural transformation, cognitive development and a broader adaptation. For a successful adjustment, an individual requires a level of flexibility vis-a-vis the different socio-cultural systems, involving competencies related to strong self-reflection, good social communication, and considerable behavioural and reasoning self-management abilities, especially within a foreign cultural setting (Jawahar et al., 2008, 2016). As well articulated in the literature, despite the history of cross-cultural discrimination and segregation (Lan, 2016; Sullivan, 1994), there is no doubt about Africans' career competence, viewing their contributions to global development in various fields (Barnes et al., 2022, Bodomo, 2009a; Hodzi, 2020; King, 2014). The African diaspora has significantly impacted the economic, sociocultural and political climate of many countries (Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Sautman & Hairong, 2009). Undeniably, many writers talk about brain drain, but many others underline the scale of the contribution of the African diaspora to their home countries,

thus, cross-cultural interactions across the globe are inevitable (Yu et al., 2021). But, in China, Africans have to navigate more complex and restrictive migration policies (Lan, 2016; Sautman & Hairong, 2007). On several occasions, aspects of the 1949 immigration law have been adjusted to revise entry regulations for foreign nationals travelling to China. Moreover, a new migration law that came into force in 2013 also focuses on public security and social stability and underscored the distinction between an immigrant and a native-born (Chin et al., 2022; China Consular Affairs, 2014).

However, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, China is strengthening its relationship with Africa (Bhandari & Blumenthal 2011; Chin et al., 2023a). As a result, China now has the largest number of African international students in the world, more than traditional study-abroad destinations such as the US or UK (Ding, 2016). In less than a decade, China has moved from being the least popular study-abroad destination for African students to the world's largest home for African students (Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Lan, 2016). Consequently, on the other hand, the presence of Chinese traders in Africa has also been increasing. Statistics show China-Africa FDI cash flow between 2010 and 2020 to be increased by 2.7 billion US dollars higher than the previous year. As of 2020, overall Chinese trade with African countries has increased in the last two decades (Bodomo, 2009b; Chin et al., 2023b; King, 2014). Therefore, given the international interdependence today, this research work tries to exhibit the faith and the potential of Africans to contribute to the Chinese career ecosystem and Sino-Africa relations.

Limitations and future research

Despite the important findings of this study, we are aware of some of the important aspects we failed to cover which are potential research directions for future research. Firstly, the moderating variable EA has not been adequately utilised empirically in the past (Zane & Mak, 2003). This article, one of the few empirical analyses, might have some conceptual flaws that could be found in the future. Secondly, this research uncovered the effect of EA on the CC-CS mechanism without considering time. According to existing studies, the cultural setting of the host country is directly related to time, thus cultural situations, especially in terms of expatriate living conditions do change with time (Agbanyo & Wang, 2022). Obviously, the impact of EA will change in orientation and intensity with changing times. Another limitation of this research work is that the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) global meltdown on EA and CS is completely absent in the discussion. Indeed, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic would have produced a completely different outcome of the research. However, even though the research project was launched after the pandemic, the respondents had graduated from their various Chinese universities and started working before the pandemic. Even though the pandemic might have an impact on their career at the time of the interview, we decided to simply focus the research on the situation without involving the COVID-19 ramifications. Hence,

future studies could investigate the chronological transformation of acculturation pre-, during- and post-COVID-19 for the same target sample.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

G.K.A., T.C. and X.L. equally contributed to the design of methodology, formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims, and conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Zhejiang University of Technology on 10 July 2023. The ethical clearance number is 2023080901.

Funding information

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article (and/or its supplementary materials).

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