

How collectivism influences college students' job search behavior: A serial mediation model of proactive personality and job search self-efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory, this study investigates how individual-level collectivistic value orientation influences job search behavior by proposing a serial mediation model involving proactive personality and job search self-efficacy. Survey data were collected from 380 students in higher vocational colleges in Heilongjiang Province, and the hypothesized mediation effects were tested using the Bootstrap method with 5,000 resamples. The results show that individual-level collectivistic value orientation exerts no significant direct effect on job search behavior, and its influence is entirely transmitted through indirect pathways. Specifically, individual-level collectivistic value orientation positively predicts proactive personality, which in turn enhances job search self-efficacy and thereby promotes job search behavior. Both the separate mediating effects of the two variables and the serial mediation pathway were statistically significant. In addition, a pattern of competitive mediation emerged, whereby individual-level collectivistic value orientation exerted a positive indirect effect but a negative direct effect on job search behavior, suggesting that collectivism at the individual level may simultaneously facilitate and constrain job search behavior through different psychological mechanisms. Overall, this study integrates individual-level cultural value orientation, personality traits, and cognitive motivational factors into a unified framework, advancing the understanding of culturally embedded job search processes and offering practical implications for career education and intervention programs in collectivist cultural contexts, particularly through the cultivation of proactive personality and job search self-efficacy.

Keywords: Collectivism, job search behavior, proactive personality, job search self-efficacy, vocational college student.

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly uncertain labor market, understanding how individuals actively engage in job search behavior (JSB) has become a central concern in vocational psychology and human resource management. Job search behavior refers to a set of goal-directed activities individuals undertake to obtain employment opportunities, including job information seeking, résumé submission, interview preparation, and career exploration (Kanfer et

al., 2001). Prior research has consistently shown that job search behavior plays a critical role in determining employment outcomes, such as job attainment and job quality, and reflects individuals' psychological adjustment during career transition periods (Saks, 2005; Van hooft et al., 2013).

Accordingly, identifying the factors that promote effective job search behavior remains an important research

objective. Recent studies have increasingly examined job search behavior from an individual-centered perspective, highlighting the role of psychological resources such as personality traits, motivational processes, and self-efficacy beliefs (Koen et al., 2010; Wanberg et al., 2000). Among these factors, proactive personality has consistently emerged as a strong predictor of job search behavior. Proactive personality refers to a relatively stable disposition characterized by initiative-taking, opportunity identification, and efforts to actively shape one's environment (Bateman and Crant, 1993). Empirical evidence from recent research indicates that individuals with higher levels of proactive personality are more likely to engage in intensive, self-directed, and persistent job search activities, including information seeking, networking, and career exploration (Hirschi et al., 2021; Spurr et al., 2019). These findings suggest that proactive personality provides a crucial motivational foundation for sustained job search behavior.

Another key psychological determinant of job search behavior is job search self-efficacy (JSSE), defined as individuals' confidence in their ability to successfully perform job search-related tasks (Betz and Taylor, 2006). Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy beliefs influence individuals' behavioral initiation, effort investment, and persistence when encountering obstacles (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Recent empirical studies have shown that job search self-efficacy is positively associated with job search intensity, job search persistence, and reemployment quality, particularly among young adults and graduates (Lim et al., 2016).

Despite the established importance of both proactive personality and job search self-efficacy, many recent studies continue to treat these variables as parallel predictors, offering limited insight into their sequential relationship (Koen et al., 2020). From a social cognitive perspective, personality traits are expected to influence behavior partly through cognitive-motivational mechanisms such as self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). Individuals with a proactive personality are more likely to take initiative, persist in the face of challenges, and actively regulate their behavior, which may strengthen their confidence in managing job search tasks. Supporting this view, recent research has demonstrated that proactive personality is positively associated with various forms of career-related self-efficacy, including career adaptability self-efficacy and employment-related confidence (Hirschi et al., 2021; Rudolph et al., 2017). Together, these findings suggest that job search self-efficacy may function as a proximal mechanism through which proactive personality translates into actual job search behavior, underscoring the importance of examining their sequential mediating effects.

Beyond individual psychological factors, cultural values constitute an important contextual influence on career-related attitudes and behaviors. Recent cross-cultural

research has continued to highlight collectivism as a core cultural value emphasizing group goals, social harmony, and adherence to social norms (Oyserman and Lee, 2020; Vignoles et al., 2021). In collectivist contexts, individuals tend to define personal goals in relation to family expectations and social responsibilities, which in turn shape their career development processes and employment-related decisions. Empirical studies conducted in recent years have shown that collectivist values are associated with career-related attitudes such as organizational commitment, career planning, and work-role responsibility, particularly among young adults and emerging workers (Farrukh et al., 2017; Li et al., 2021). However, research on job search behavior has often either overlooked collectivism or treated it as a distal contextual factor, leaving the underlying psychological mechanisms insufficiently explored.

Integrating cultural and social cognitive perspectives, collectivism may influence job search behavior indirectly by shaping individuals' psychological resources. On the one hand, collectivist values emphasize fulfilling familial and social expectations, which may motivate individuals to adopt a more active, responsible, and goal-oriented approach to career development. Such value orientations can encourage individuals to engage in initiative-taking and self-regulatory behaviors during employment transitions, thereby fostering proactive career-related tendencies in the job search context (Guan et al., 2013). On the other hand, collectivist environments are typically characterized by strong social support and normative guidance, which may enhance individuals' confidence in their ability to manage job search tasks and cope with employment uncertainty, thus strengthening job search self-efficacy (Lim et al., 2016). Despite these theoretical propositions, few empirical studies have simultaneously examined collectivism, proactive personality, and job search self-efficacy within an integrated analytical framework.

Taken together, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, the psychological mechanisms through which collectivism influences job search behavior have not been sufficiently clarified. Second, the dynamic and sequential relationship between proactive personality and job search self-efficacy has received limited empirical attention. Third, chain mediation models remain underutilized in job search research, particularly in studies that integrate cultural values with individual psychological processes. To address these gaps, the present study proposes and empirically tests a chain mediation model in which collectivism influences job search behavior through proactive personality and job search self-efficacy.

What remains theoretically unresolved is how cultural values translate into concrete job search behaviors through individual psychological processes. Although prior research has acknowledged the importance of cultural values—particularly collectivism—in shaping career-

related attitudes and orientations, existing studies have often treated collectivism as a distal background factor or examined its effects in isolation. As a result, the specific psychological mechanisms through which collectivist value orientations influence job search behavior remain insufficiently theorized. Moreover, within job search research, proactive personality and job search self-efficacy have frequently been examined as parallel predictors of job search behavior. This approach overlooks their potential sequential relationship, despite social cognitive theory suggesting that stable personality traits influence behavior partly through cognitive-motivational mechanisms such as self-efficacy beliefs. Consequently, how cultural values, personality traits, and self-efficacy jointly operate in a dynamic process to shape job search behavior remains theoretically underexplored.

By elucidating this sequential process, the study aims to extend current understanding of job search behavior from a cultural-social cognitive perspective and provide practical implications for enhancing proactive job search among emerging workforce populations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social cognitive theory

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Albert Bandura, emphasizes learning and behavioral development as processes embedded within social contexts. According to SCT, human behavior is shaped by the reciprocal interaction among personal factors, environmental influences, and behavioral patterns (Bandura, 1986). Over recent decades, SCT has been widely applied and extended in fields such as career development, educational psychology, and health behavior, demonstrating strong explanatory power in understanding how contextual and individual factors jointly influence behavior. Core constructs of SCT include self-efficacy, outcome expectations, observational learning, and contextual influences. A central assumption of SCT is that environmental factors do not influence behavior directly but operate through individuals' cognitive and motivational processes, particularly self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). Within the career development domain, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) further specifies that self-efficacy plays a critical role in shaping career-related behaviors, including career exploration, job search behavior, and career choice decisions (Lent et al., 1994; Lent and Brown, 2020). Job search self-efficacy, defined as individuals' confidence in their ability to successfully perform job search-related tasks, directly affects the initiation, intensity, and persistence of job search behavior. From an SCT perspective, cultural values constitute an important form of environmental influence. Collectivism, as a core cultural value orientation, emphasizes group goals,

social norms, interpersonal obligations, and responsibility toward significant others (Triandis, 1995; Hofstede, 2001). Recent studies suggest that collectivism shapes individuals' career cognition and behavior by strengthening social expectations, normative motivation, and a sense of obligation toward family and society (Farrukh et al., 2017; Guan et al., 2013). In collectivist contexts, individuals are more likely to internalize social expectations regarding employment success, which may enhance their motivation to engage actively in job search behavior. According to SCT, collectivism may enhance job search behavior indirectly by fostering stronger self-efficacy beliefs. Individuals embedded in collectivist value systems often perceive higher levels of normative encouragement and social validation, which can increase their confidence in managing career-related challenges (Lent and Brown, 2020). Empirical research has shown that collectivist orientations are positively associated with career-related self-efficacy, career adaptability, and employment confidence among college students (Guan et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Accordingly, collectivism functions as an environmental antecedent within the SCT framework, enhancing job search self-efficacy, which in turn promotes more active engagement in job search behavior.

In addition to cognitive factors, SCT acknowledges the role of relatively stable personal traits in shaping behavior. Proactive personality reflects an individual's tendency to take initiative, act autonomously, and intentionally influence their environment (Bateman and Crant, 1993; Crant, 2000). Individuals with a proactive personality are more likely to engage in self-directed and goal-oriented behaviors, particularly in uncertain or transitional contexts such as job searching. Recent research has consistently demonstrated that proactive personality positively predicts job search behavior, career exploration, and employment preparation (Li et al., 2014; Spurr et al., 2023). Within the SCT framework, proactive personality may further enhance job search self-efficacy. Proactive individuals tend to interpret challenges as opportunities for growth, adopt problem-focused coping strategies, and persist in the face of setbacks, thereby reinforcing their confidence in handling job search tasks. Empirical evidence supports this mechanism, showing that proactive personality is positively associated with various forms of career-related self-efficacy and subsequently promotes job search behavior (Hirschi et al., 2018; Li et al., 2022). Thus, proactive personality serves as an important dispositional driver linking environmental influences to cognitive processes.

Integrating these perspectives, SCT suggests that job search behavior, defined as individuals' active engagement in career exploration and employment-seeking activities, is shaped by the dynamic interaction of environmental values (collectivism), cognitive beliefs (job search self-efficacy), and personality traits (proactive personality) (Lent and Brown, 2020; Frese and Fay, 2001). Specifically,

collectivism operates as a cultural environmental factor that fosters proactive orientations and strengthens job search self-efficacy, while proactive personality further enhances individuals' confidence and persistence in job search behavior. Consistent with SCT's triadic reciprocal determinism model, this integrated framework offers a coherent theoretical explanation for vocational college students' job search behavior by simultaneously accounting for contextual, cognitive, and dispositional influences.

Research model

This integrated model explores the factors influencing vocational college students' job search behavior. This study is based on social cognitive theory, where collectivism can be considered an environmental factor within this theory. Personality traits and job search self-efficacy are personal factors, while job search behavior is a behavioral factor within social cognitive theory. The model hypothesizes that job search self-efficacy directly and indirectly influences job search behavior through mediating variables, as shown in Figure 1.

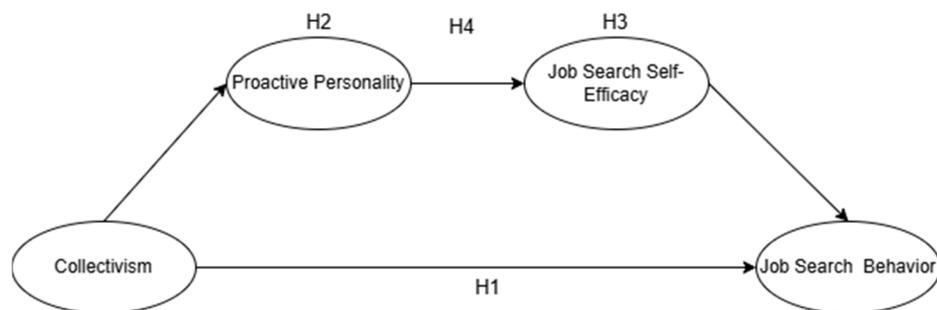


Figure 1. The theoretical model.

Research hypotheses

The influence of collectivism on job search behavior

Cultural values constitute enduring cognitive frameworks that shape how individuals perceive social roles, obligations, and acceptable courses of action across life domains (Triandis, 1995). Among these values, collectivism has been widely conceptualized as an orientation emphasizing interdependence, group goals, and the prioritization of social harmony over individual self-interest (Hofstede, 2001). At the individual level, collectivistic value orientations influence how people define personal goals in relation to family expectations and collective responsibilities, thereby shaping motivation and behavior in career-related contexts.

In collectivist cultural frameworks, employment is often viewed not merely as a personal achievement but as a socially embedded responsibility linked to family honor, economic contribution, and fulfillment of normative role expectations. Prior research suggests that collectivism is associated with stronger endorsement of socially valued goals and heightened sensitivity to external expectations, which may motivate individuals to engage in behaviors perceived as necessary or desirable by significant others (Guan et al., 2013; Mok et al., 2021). For example, studies

in educational and career development contexts have shown that collectivistic orientations are positively related to utility value appraisals and sustained effort toward goal pursuit when those goals align with family or group expectations (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018).

From this perspective, job search behavior—such as career exploration, information seeking, and application activities—may be directly influenced by collectivist values, as these behaviors represent instrumental actions toward achieving socially expected outcomes, particularly stable and respectable employment. Moreover, collectivism emphasizes relational embeddedness and reciprocal obligations, which may encourage individuals to mobilize social networks and engage in networking-related job search activities to meet collective expectations and contribute to group well-being.

At the same time, theoretical accounts caution that collectivism may not uniformly promote proactive behavioral engagement. Strong adherence to social norms and deference to authority may, under certain conditions, reduce individual initiative and autonomous action, potentially constraining self-directed job search behaviors (Oyserman et al., 2002; Vignoles et al., 2021). This duality suggests that collectivism may exert a complex influence on job search behavior, with its direct effects contingent on how normative obligations translate into individual action.

Taken together, existing theory and evidence indicate that collectivism constitutes a meaningful cultural antecedent of job search behavior, although the direction and magnitude of its direct effect remain theoretically open. Accordingly, the present study examines the direct association between collectivism and job search behavior, while further exploring the psychological mechanisms through which this relationship may unfold.

H₁: Collectivism is significantly associated with job search behavior.

The mediating role of proactive personality and job search self-efficacy

From a social cognitive perspective, environmental factors shape individual behavior largely through their influence on personal dispositions and cognitive beliefs (Bandura, 1986). Cultural values, such as collectivism, constitute an important contextual force that affects how individuals regulate their motivation and behavior. Collectivism emphasizes interdependence, social obligations, and responsibility toward significant others, which may encourage individuals to adopt more proactive approaches to managing career development tasks (Triandis, 1995; Guan et al., 2013).

Recent studies suggest that collectivist value orientations are positively associated with proactive behavioral tendencies, particularly in contexts involving role expectations and social responsibility. In collectivist cultures, individuals often perceive career success as a shared goal linked to family honor and collective well-being, which may motivate them to take initiative and actively prepare for employment transitions (Kim et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022). Such value-driven motivation aligns closely with the core characteristics of proactive personality, defined as a stable tendency to initiate change, take responsibility, and influence one's environment rather than passively adapting to it (Bateman and Crant, 1993). Proactive personality, in turn, has been shown to play a critical role in shaping career-related self-efficacy beliefs. Individuals with stronger proactive tendencies are more likely to seek information, accumulate mastery experiences, and persist in the face of obstacles, all of which serve as key sources of self-efficacy according to Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997). Empirical evidence indicates that proactive personality is positively related to various forms of career self-efficacy, including career decision-making self-efficacy and job search self-efficacy (Hirschi et al., 2018; Li et al., 2022). These findings suggest that proactive personality may function as a psychological mechanism through which collectivist values are translated into stronger confidence in one's job search capabilities. Taken together, collectivism may foster proactive personality traits by reinforcing normative

motivation and responsibility toward career outcomes, which subsequently enhances job search self-efficacy. Therefore, proactive personality is expected to mediate the relationship between collectivism and job search self-efficacy.

Social Cognitive Theory posits that self-efficacy beliefs serve as a proximal determinant of behavior by influencing individuals' behavioral choices, effort investment, and persistence in challenging situations (Bandura, 1997). Within the career domain, job search self-efficacy reflects individuals' confidence in their ability to successfully perform job search activities, such as identifying job opportunities, preparing application materials, and handling interviews (Betz and Taylor, 2006). Extensive empirical research has demonstrated that job search self-efficacy is a strong predictor of job search intensity, persistence, and overall job search behavior (Lent and Brown, 2020; Van Hooft et al., 2013). A proactive personality has been consistently linked to active career behaviors, including job search behavior. Proactive individuals tend to take initiative, set challenging goals, and persist in goal pursuit, especially in uncertain contexts such as labor market entry (Brown et al., 2006). However, SCT suggests that the influence of personality traits on behavior is not purely direct but often operates through cognitive mechanisms, particularly self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1986). Proactive individuals are more likely to accumulate successful experiences in job search preparation, seek feedback, and actively learn from setbacks, which strengthens their job search self-efficacy over time. Recent empirical studies support this mediating mechanism. For example, proactive personality has been shown to positively predict job search self-efficacy, which in turn enhances job search intensity and job search outcomes among university students and early-career workers (Spurk et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022). These findings suggest that job search self-efficacy acts as a key explanatory mechanism linking proactive personality to actual job search behavior. Accordingly, individuals with a stronger proactive personality are expected to exhibit stronger job search self-efficacy, which subsequently promotes greater engagement in job search behavior. This cognitive pathway aligns with SCT's emphasis on self-efficacy as the central driver translating personal dispositions into observable behavior.

H₂: Proactive personality mediates the relationship between collectivism and job search self-efficacy.

H₃: Job search self-efficacy mediates the relationship between proactive personality and job search behavior.

The chain mediating effect of proactive personality and job search self-efficacy

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) posits that human behavior

emerges from the dynamic and reciprocal interaction among environmental influences, personal characteristics, and cognitive–motivational mechanisms (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Extending this framework to the career domain, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) emphasizes that contextual and background factors shape career-related behaviors primarily through their impact on individuals' personal dispositions and self-efficacy beliefs (Lent et al., 1994; Lent and Brown, 2020). Within this perspective, cultural values such as collectivism can be conceptualized as distal environmental influences that do not directly determine behavior, but rather exert their effects through sequential psychological processes.

Collectivism emphasizes interdependence, social responsibility, and the prioritization of group goals over individual interests (Triandis, 1995). At the individual level, collectivistic value orientations heighten sensitivity to family expectations and social evaluation, framing employment success as a shared responsibility rather than a purely personal achievement. Prior research has shown that collectivistic values are associated with stronger normative motivation and obligation-based goal pursuit in educational and early career contexts, encouraging individuals to engage more actively in career preparation and transition-related activities (Guan et al., 2013). Such value-driven motivation provides an important contextual foundation for the development and expression of proactive behavioral tendencies.

Proactive personality reflects a relatively stable disposition characterized by initiative-taking, future orientation, and intentional efforts to shape one's environment rather than passively adapt to situational constraints (Bateman and Crant, 1993; Crant, 2000). From an SCT perspective, contextual values that emphasize responsibility and goal fulfillment may encourage individuals to enact proactive tendencies when such behaviors are perceived as instrumental for meeting socially valued outcomes. In this sense, collectivistic values may foster proactive personality expression by reinforcing responsibility-driven action and sustained effort toward future-oriented career goals. Although proactive personality is often conceptualized as a trait-like disposition, prior research suggests that its behavioral expression is sensitive to contextual cues and value-laden environments, particularly in career-related domains (Crant, 2000).

Beyond its direct behavioral implications, proactive personality plays a critical role in shaping individuals' cognitive resources. SCT and SCCT posit that personal dispositions influence behavior partly by shaping self-efficacy beliefs through mastery experiences, persistence, and active self-regulation (Bandura, 1997). Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that individuals with higher levels of proactive personality report stronger career-related self-efficacy, including job search self-efficacy (Hirschi et al., 2018). Proactive individuals are

more likely to seek information, experiment with different strategies, and persist in the face of setbacks during the job search process, thereby accumulating mastery experiences that strengthen their confidence in managing job search tasks.

Job search self-efficacy, defined as individuals' confidence in their ability to successfully perform job search-related activities, represents a proximal determinant of job search behavior within SCT and SCCT (Bandura, 1997; Lent and Brown, 2020). A robust body of research has shown that higher job search self-efficacy is associated with greater job search intensity, persistence, and engagement across diverse populations and labor market contexts (Van Hooft et al., 2020). As such, job search self-efficacy constitutes a key cognitive mechanism through which personal dispositions are translated into concrete job search actions.

Integrating these arguments, collectivism may influence job search behavior through a sequential psychological process. Specifically, collectivistic values may promote the expression of proactive personality by emphasizing responsibility-driven and future-oriented action; proactive personality, in turn, enhances job search self-efficacy by fostering active engagement and mastery experiences; and heightened job search self-efficacy subsequently facilitates more intensive and sustained job search behavior. This chain mediation pathway reflects SCT's triadic reciprocal determinism by linking distal cultural values (environmental factors), personal dispositions (proactive personality), and cognitive mechanisms (job search self-efficacy) into a coherent explanatory framework. Accordingly, the present study proposes the following hypothesis:

H₄: Proactive personality and job search self-efficacy sequentially mediate the relationship between collectivism and job search behavior.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

With the informed consent of all participants, this study administered an online questionnaire survey via the professional survey platform Wenjuanxing between January 2 and January 15, 2026. Prior to participation, respondents were required to carefully read and agree to an electronic informed consent form that clearly explained the research objectives, survey procedures, data confidentiality measures, and potential implications. This procedure ensured that participation was fully voluntary and based on informed understanding. The target population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in vocational universities in Heilongjiang Province, China, aged between 18 and 21 years. To ensure data quality,

participant eligibility was carefully screened during the survey distribution process. The final questionnaire comprised 27 measurement items.

The adequacy of the sample size was evaluated in accordance with established guidelines for covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM). Prior methodological research suggests that CB-SEM requires a sufficiently large sample to ensure model identification, parameter stability, and adequate statistical power, particularly when the proposed model involves multiple latent constructs and structural paths (Kline, 2016). In line with these recommendations, the sample size in the present study exceeded commonly cited thresholds for CB-SEM applications, including the minimum ratio of observations to estimated parameters and the general guideline of a sample size greater than 200 for complex structural models (Hair et al., 2019). Therefore, the sample size was deemed sufficient to support reliable estimation and hypothesis testing using AMOS.

A total of 601 questionnaires were distributed using a convenience sampling approach across four vocational

universities in Heilongjiang Province. After data collection, systematic data screening and quality control procedures were implemented. Questionnaires were excluded if they contained more than 10% missing values, duplicate submissions, or response patterns indicative of insufficient response quality, such as straight-lining or inconsistent answers to reverse-coded items. After these procedures, the remaining responses were retained for subsequent analyses.

After applying these exclusion criteria, a total of 380 valid questionnaires were retained for subsequent analyses, yielding an effective response rate of 63.22%. This sample size exceeded commonly recommended minimum thresholds for multivariate statistical analyses, suggesting that it was adequate for the estimation of the proposed model (Hair et al., 2019).

Regarding sample characteristics, 42.90% of the respondents were female ($n = 163$), while 57.10% were male ($n = 217$). Detailed descriptive information, including participants' gender, age, academic year, and educational background, is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information.

Variables	Groups	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	163 (42.9%)
	Female	217 (57.1%)
Grade	18-19 years old	143 (37.6%)
	20-21 years old	226 (59.5%)
	22 years old and above	11 (2.9%)
Educational background	Junior College	334 (87.9%)
	4-year university	46 (12.1%)
Hometown location	Cities	108 (28.4%)
	Townships	143 (37.6%)
	Rural Areas	129 (33.9%)

To improve the reliability and validity of the data, multiple procedural measures were adopted. First, the use of an online survey platform ensured respondents' anonymity and data confidentiality, which helped minimize social desirability bias and promote truthful reporting. Second, rigorous data screening and cleaning processes were conducted to enhance the representativeness of the final sample and ensure the overall quality of the data.

Measures

To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, established and widely used measurement scales were

adopted based on a thorough review of the relevant literature. Considering the research context and characteristics of the student sample, four authoritative scales were selected to measure collectivism, proactive personality, job search self-efficacy, and job search behavior.

Specifically, collectivism was measured using a validated collectivism scale that assesses individuals' emphasis on group goals, social harmony, and interdependence. Proactive personality was assessed with a widely recognized proactive personality scale, which captures individuals' tendency to take initiative and effect environmental change. Job search self-efficacy was measured using an established scale evaluating

individuals' confidence in their ability to successfully perform job search-related tasks. Job search behavior was assessed with a validated job search behavior scale reflecting the frequency and intensity of job search activities.

All measurement items were adapted to ensure suitability for the student population and the research context. The final questionnaire was refined through a review of prior studies and contextual adjustments, resulting in a measurement instrument with satisfactory content validity and applicability.

Collectivism scale

This study used the collectivism scale developed by Farrukh (2019). The scale consists of 7 items, measured using a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "strongly disagree," 2 represents "disagree," 3 represents "slightly disagree," 4 represents "neutral," 5 represents "slightly agree," 6 represents "agree," and 7 represents "strongly agree." Previous studies have used this scale, with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.810, indicating good reliability.

Proactive personality scale

This study referred to and adopted the Proactive Personality Scale (PPS) from Trifiletti et al. The PPS is a 10-item measure designed to assess the potential for proactive behaviors, enhancing our ability to understand and predict a wide range of behaviors. The scale uses a 7-point Likert system, where 1 represents "completely false," 2 represents "false," 3 represents "slightly false," 4 represents "neutral," 5 represents "slightly true," 6 represents "true," and 7 represents "completely true." The Cronbach's alpha for the 10-item scale is 0.939, indicating good reliability.

Job search self-efficacy scale

This study adopted the six-item job search self-Efficacy behavior subscale (JSSE) from the job search self-efficacy scale developed by Van Ryn and Vinokur. The scale adopted a five-point Likert response format. The response options were as follows: 1 = Not at all confident, 2 = Slightly confident, 3 = Somewhat confident, 4 = Quite a bit confident, and 5 = A great deal confident. Higher scores indicated greater confidence in one's job search abilities. The internal consistency of the scale was high, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.945, indicating strong reliability.

Job search behavior scale

This study referenced and adopted the "Job Search Behavior Survey" by Teye-Kwadjo et al, which measures 7 items. The items are scored using a 5-point Likert scale.

The scoring system is as follows: 1 (never [0 times]), 2 (rarely [1-2 times]), 3 (occasionally [3-5 times]), 4 (Frequently [6-9 times]), 5 (Very frequently [10 or more times]). The Rasch person and item reliabilities for the JSB-7 were 0.941, indicating good reliability.

Ethical considerations

This study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, on December 20, 2025 (Approval No. R. 745/2025). To protect participants' privacy, the study was conducted anonymously. Participants were clearly informed on the first page of the questionnaire that the study was anonymous, that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time without any negative consequences, with any withdrawn data excluded from the analysis. All raw data were stored in encrypted form on a university server for a period of one year and will be permanently deleted thereafter.

Statistical analysis

This study used IBM SPSS 26.0 to carry out the data entry and conduct descriptive statistics and other related analyses. Additionally, AMOS 26.0 was used to test the mediating effect of proactive personality and job search self-efficacy on the collectivism and job search behavior difficulties relationship.

RESULTS

Common method deviation test

In the present study, family support, job search behavior, proactive personality, and job search self-efficacy were assessed using standardized measurement scales. To examine the potential influence of common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was conducted (Harman, 1967; Podsakoff et al., 2003). The results indicated that four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted. The unrotated factor solution showed that the first factor accounted for 36.945% of the total variance, which is below the commonly accepted threshold of 40% or 50%, suggesting that common method bias is unlikely to pose a serious threat in this study.

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of the main variables

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients for the main study

variables. As shown in the table, the mean scores of collectivism ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.79$), proactive personality ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.77$), job search self-efficacy ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 0.77$), and job search behavior ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.76$) were all above the scale midpoint, indicating relatively high levels of these constructs among the participants. Correlation analysis revealed that collectivism was positively and significantly associated with proactive personality ($r = .98$, $p < .01$), job search self-efficacy ($r = .94$, $p < .01$), and job search behavior ($r = .88$, $p < .01$).

Proactive personality was also strongly and positively correlated with job search self-efficacy ($r = .97$, $p < .01$) and job search behavior ($r = .92$, $p < .01$). In addition, job search self-efficacy showed a significant positive relationship with job search behavior ($r = .97$, $p < .01$).

Overall, the correlation results indicate significant and positive relationships among all key variables, providing preliminary support for the hypothesized associations and laying a foundation for subsequent regression and mediation analyses.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and correlation matrices of variables.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1	4.69	0.79	-			
2	4.68	0.77	.98***	-		
3	4.73	0.77	.94***	.97***	-	
4	4.77	0.76	.88***	.92***	.97***	-

Notes: $N = 380$. 1. collectivism; 2. proactive personality; 3. job search self-efficacy; 4. job search behavior
* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Test of mediation and chain mediation model

This study used structural equation modeling to analyze the chain mediating effect of proactive personality and job search self-efficacy on collectivism and job search behavior. All indices met the conventional acceptable

criteria for model fit in social science research (Hair et al., 2019; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). ($CMIN/df = 3.288$, $RMSEA = 0.078$, $CFI = 0.9$, $TLI = 0.9$, $NFI = 0.9$).

The Bootstrap method (5,000 resamples) was employed to test the mediation and serial mediation effects. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Bootstrapping test result for mediating effects and chain mediating effects.

Total, direct, and indirect effect	Effect	SE	Boot 95% CI	
			LLCI	ULCI
CO→PR→SBS	0.33	0.41	.253	.416
PR→SBS→SB	0.28	0.51	.194	.395
FS→PR→SBS→SB	0.16	0.04	0.125	0.267
Direct effects: CO→SB	-0.37			
Total indirect effect	0.47			
Total effect	0.13			

Notes: CO, Collectivism; PR, Proactive Personality; SBS, Job Search Self-Efficacy; SB, Job Search Behavior

Mediation effects

The results indicate that collectivism (CO) exerts a significant indirect effect on job search behavior (SB) through proactive personality (PR). Specifically, the indirect effect of CO→PR→SBS was 0.33, with a Bootstrap 95% confidence interval of [0.253, 0.416], which does not include zero, indicating that proactive personality plays a significant mediating role between collectivism and

job search self-efficacy (SBS). In addition, the indirect effect of PR→SBS→SB was 0.28, with a Bootstrap 95% confidence interval of [0.194, 0.395], which also excludes zero. This result suggests that job search self-efficacy significantly mediates the relationship between proactive personality and job search behavior. Overall, these findings demonstrate that proactive personality and job search self-efficacy independently function as important mediators in the relationships among the study variables.

Serial mediation effects

Further analysis of the serial mediation effects revealed that collectivism (CO) has a significant serial indirect effect on job search behavior (SB) through the sequential pathway of proactive personality (PR) → job search self-efficacy (SBS). Specifically, the indirect effect of CO→PR→SBS→SB was 0.16, with a Bootstrap 95% confidence interval of [0.125, 0.267]. Since the confidence interval does not include zero, the serial mediation effect is statistically significant. This finding indicates that individuals with higher levels of collectivism are more likely to develop stronger proactive personality traits, which in turn enhance their job search self-efficacy, ultimately leading to more active job search behaviors.

Total effect, direct effect, and type of mediation

After incorporating the mediating variables, the direct effect of collectivism on job search behavior became significantly negative ($\beta = -0.37$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$). Although collectivism exhibited a strong positive zero-

order correlation with job search behavior ($r = .88$, $p < .01$), this association reversed in the structural model after controlling for proactive personality and job search self-efficacy.

This discrepancy reflects a suppression effect arising from the extremely high intercorrelations between collectivism and the two mediators, indicating that the direct path represents the residual effect of collectivism beyond shared variance with these proximal psychological resources.

Meanwhile, the total indirect effect of collectivism on job search behavior was positive and substantial ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < .001$), whereas the total effect was relatively small ($\beta = 0.13$), suggesting that collectivism influences job search behavior primarily through indirect pathways rather than through a direct behavioral effect.

Based on the combined results of the direct and indirect effects, it can be concluded that proactive personality and job search self-efficacy jointly exert a significant serial mediating effect between collectivism and job search behavior, which constitutes a case of competitive mediation (Figure 2).

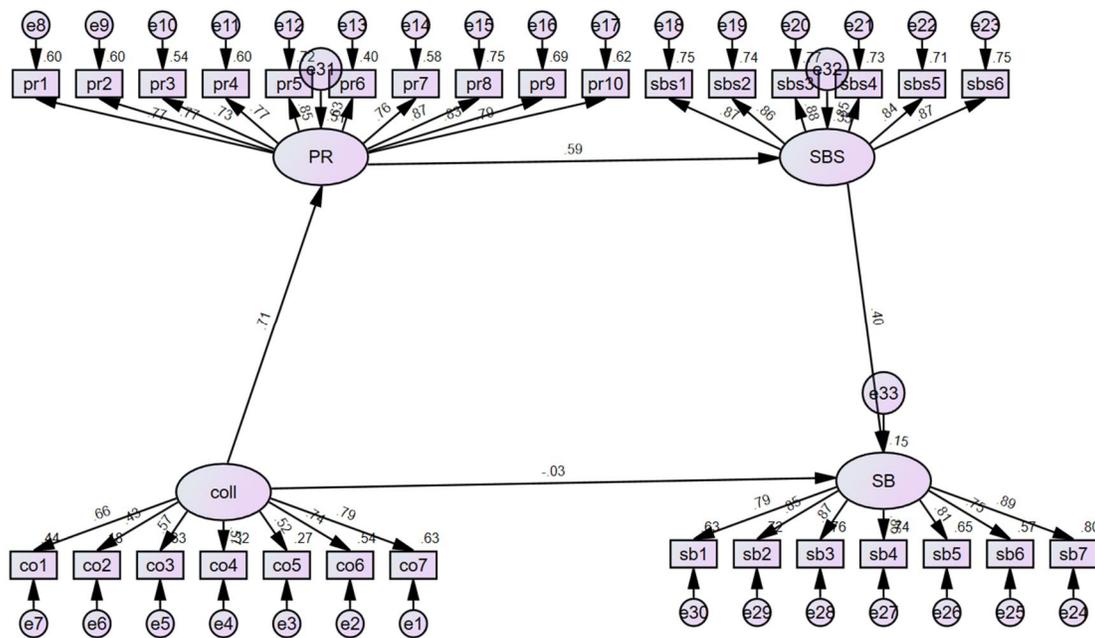


Figure 2. The chain mediating effect model of proactive personality and job search self-efficacy on collectivism and job search behavior.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the mediating and serial mediating mechanisms underlying the relationship between collectivism and job search behavior by

incorporating proactive personality and job search self-efficacy into an integrated analytical framework.

Several noteworthy findings emerged. First, the results revealed that collectivism does not exert a simple linear effect on job search behavior; instead, its influence is

primarily transmitted through indirect pathways. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that cultural values tend to shape career-related outcomes through individual psychological and motivational processes rather than through direct behavioral effects (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). Specifically, collectivism was found to positively predict proactive personality, which in turn enhanced job search self-efficacy and ultimately promoted job search behavior. This result aligns with the proactive motivation perspective, which emphasizes that proactive personality reflects individuals' tendency to take initiative and effect change in their environments (Bateman and Crant, 1993), and that such dispositions are conducive to higher confidence in career-related tasks, including job search activities (Saks and Ashforth, 1999; Wanberg et al., 2005).

Furthermore, job search self-efficacy played a critical role in translating proactive tendencies into actual job search behavior, supporting social cognitive theory, which posits self-efficacy as a key motivational mechanism linking personal characteristics to behavioral outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Betz and Taylor, 2006). Both the individual mediation effects and the serial mediation effect were statistically significant, providing robust support for the view that personality traits and cognitive motivational factors jointly shape individuals' job search processes (Kanfer et al., 2001).

Overall, this study extends prior research that has mainly focused on the direct effects of cultural values on career-related outcomes by uncovering the psychological mechanisms through which collectivism influences job search behavior. Previous studies have suggested that cultural values often exert their influence through individual psychological processes rather than direct behavioral pathways (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). Second, the significant mediating role of proactive personality suggests that collectivism may serve as an important contextual factor in fostering proactive dispositions. In collectivist cultural contexts, individuals are more likely to internalize social norms emphasizing responsibility, group expectations, and long-term goal commitment (Triandis, 1995; Farrukh et al., 2019). These cultural values may encourage individuals to take initiative, anticipate future demands, and actively shape their environments, which are core characteristics of proactive personality (Bateman and Crant, 1993). This finding provides empirical support for the argument that proactive personality is not solely an individual-level trait but can also be nurtured by broader cultural and social contexts (Thomas et al., 2010). Third, job search self-efficacy was found to play a crucial mediating role between proactive personality and job search behavior. Individuals with higher levels of proactive personality tend to possess stronger confidence in their ability to search for and obtain employment, which in turn motivates them to engage more actively in job search behaviors (Saks and Ashforth, 1999; Wanberg et al.,

2005). This result is consistent with Social Cognitive Theory, which posits that self-efficacy is a key cognitive mechanism translating personal characteristics into behavioral outcomes (Bandura, 1997). The present findings further highlight the importance of self-efficacy as a proximal predictor of job search behavior within a culturally embedded career development process (Kanfer et al., 2001).

An additional and particularly interesting finding of this study is the presence of competitive mediation. Although the total indirect effect of collectivism on job search behavior was positive, the direct effect was negative when the mediating variables were included. This suggests that collectivism may simultaneously exert both facilitating and inhibiting influences on job search behavior. On the one hand, collectivism can indirectly promote job search behavior by enhancing proactive personality and job search self-efficacy. On the other hand, collectivist values may directly discourage certain job search behaviors, possibly due to concerns about group harmony, fear of deviating from collective expectations, or reliance on family and social networks rather than individual initiative (Hofstede, 2001; Oyserman et al., 2002). This dual effect helps explain previously inconsistent findings regarding the role of collectivism in career-related behaviors and underscores the importance of examining indirect mechanisms rather than relying solely on direct-effect models. These findings support the social cognitive view that cultural values operate as distal contextual factors whose effects on behavior are largely transmitted through motivational and self-efficacy mechanisms rather than exerting independent direct influences.

Taken together, the findings of this study contribute to the literature in several important ways. Theoretically, this study integrates cultural values, personality traits, and cognitive motivational factors into a serial mediation model, thereby enriching the application of Social Cognitive Theory in the field of job search and career development (Bandura, 1997; Lent et al., 1994). Practically, the results suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing job search behavior among students or job seekers in collectivist contexts should focus on cultivating proactive personality traits and strengthening job search self-efficacy, rather than attempting to modify cultural values directly. Educational institutions and career guidance programs may therefore benefit from designing targeted training and experiential learning opportunities that foster initiative-taking and confidence in job search activities (Brown and Lent, 2019).

Implications

This study provides important theoretical and practical implications for research on job search behavior within collectivist cultural contexts. From a theoretical

perspective, by incorporating proactive personality and job search self-efficacy into a serial mediation model, this study extends Social Cognitive Theory by clarifying the psychological mechanisms through which collectivism influences job search behavior. Rather than exerting a direct and uniform effect, collectivism operates through individual dispositions and cognitive beliefs, highlighting the importance of process-oriented explanations in culturally grounded career research.

Furthermore, the identification of proactive personality as a key mediator contributes to the literature by demonstrating that personality traits related to initiative and agency are not solely innate characteristics but can be shaped by cultural values. This finding advances existing research by emphasizing the contextual embeddedness of proactive personality and underscores the need to consider cultural antecedents when examining personality-behavior relationships in career development studies.

In addition, the significant mediating role of job search self-efficacy reinforces its central position as a proximal predictor of job search behavior. The results illustrate how a proactive personality enhances individuals' confidence in their job search capabilities, which subsequently translates into more active job search behavior. The presence of competitive mediation further enriches mediation theory by revealing that collectivism may simultaneously facilitate and constrain job search behavior through different pathways, offering a plausible explanation for inconsistent findings in prior research.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that interventions aimed at promoting job search behavior should prioritize the development of proactive personality traits and job search self-efficacy, particularly among students in collectivist societies. Educational institutions and career service providers may adopt experiential and project-based learning approaches to encourage initiative-taking and future-oriented planning. Moreover, career guidance programs should incorporate targeted training, mentoring, and feedback mechanisms to strengthen job search self-efficacy.

Finally, the negative direct effect of collectivism on job search behavior highlights the importance of culturally sensitive intervention designs. Career support programs should align job search activities with collective goals and social expectations, thereby leveraging the positive indirect effects of collectivism while reducing its potential inhibitory influence.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference among collectivism, proactive personality, job search self-efficacy,

and job search behavior; longitudinal or experimental designs would better capture the dynamic and causal nature of these relationships. Second, the exclusive reliance on self-reported measures may introduce common method variance and social desirability bias, indicating the need for multi-source or objective assessments of job search behavior in future studies. Third, the sample was drawn from a specific educational and cultural context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings; future research should replicate the proposed model across different age groups, occupational backgrounds, and cultural settings to enhance external validity. Finally, future studies should explore potential contextual moderators, including institutional support and economic uncertainty, to clarify the boundary conditions under which collectivism facilitates or constrains job search behavior.

Conclusion

This study investigated the underlying mechanisms through which collectivism influences job search behavior by proposing and testing a serial mediation model that incorporates proactive personality and job search self-efficacy. Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory, the findings demonstrate that collectivism affects job search behavior primarily through indirect pathways rather than through a simple direct relationship.

The results reveal that collectivism positively predicts proactive personality, which in turn enhances job search self-efficacy and ultimately promotes job search behavior. Both the individual mediation effects and the serial mediation effect were found to be statistically significant, highlighting the joint roles of personality traits and cognitive motivational factors in shaping job search behavior. These findings contribute to the career development literature by clarifying how cultural values are translated into concrete behavioral outcomes through psychological mechanisms.

Importantly, the study also identified a competitive mediation pattern. While the total indirect effect of collectivism on job search behavior was positive, the direct effect was negative when mediating variables were included. This dual effect suggests that collectivism may simultaneously facilitate and constrain job search behavior through different mechanisms. On the one hand, collectivist values can foster proactive dispositions and self-efficacy beliefs that encourage active job search. On the other hand, concerns related to group harmony, social expectations, or reliance on collective support may directly inhibit certain job search behaviors. This finding helps reconcile inconsistent conclusions in previous research regarding the role of collectivism in career-related outcomes.

Overall, this study advances understanding of the

complex and dynamic relationship between cultural values and job search behavior by integrating cultural, personality, and cognitive perspectives within a unified framework. The findings underscore the importance of considering both indirect mechanisms and contextual influences when examining career behaviors, and they provide valuable insights for theory development and practice in culturally diverse educational and employment contexts.

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