Utrecht University

The Influence of Career Inaction on Task Performance: The Moderating Role of Upward Social Comparison Frequency and The Mediating Role of Self-esteem

Ziqing Wei (4504720)
Supervisor: Maarten van Bezouw
Second Supervisor: Lisanne Versteegt
Work and Organisational Psychology
Social and Behavioral Sciences
Utrecht University
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Abstract

This study investigates the possible impacts of the new concept "career inaction" on task performance and self-esteem in work psychology, examining how the upward social comparison frequency influences this process. As task performance is regarded as the key to personal career success, the main purpose of this study is to examine whether and how career inaction affects individual task performance at workplaces. Based on the self-determination and social comparison theory, a moderated mediation model was proposed. Specifically, I tested the relationship between career inaction and task performance, with self-esteem as a mediator, and examined the moderating role of upward social comparison frequency on the relationship between career inaction and self-esteem. Through an online survey, data from 191 participants across 29 countries were analysed. Although the moderating role of upward social comparison frequency and the overall moderated mediation model were not confirmed, the negative relationship between career inaction and task performance with self-esteem as the mediator was supported. In the end, the study discussed possible theoretical explanations of results, practical implications for organisations, limitations and future directions. It enriched empirical evidence on career inaction and how it impacts people's work.

Keywords: task performance, career inaction, self-esteem, upward social comparison.

Introduction

Have you ever wanted to make changes in your career life but found yourself taking no action toward it in the end? For example, you may have the desire to switch to a new company, but you never apply for the positions there and continue to work at your current organisation. It is a common phenomenon among human beings since we have the tendency to avoid changes and uncertainty, especially in this rapidly changing job market due to the development of advanced technologies (Dhar, 1997; Gati et al., 2013). In 2020, Verbruggen and De Vos first named this phenomenon career inaction, defined as "the failure to act sufficiently over a period on a desire to make a change in one's career". In this study, career inaction in the career decision-making field is explored, as well as its relationship with task performance, which is a crucial aspect of both personal and organisational progression. Moreover, the psychological mechanisms behind this relationship are also studied.

There is still limited research on career inaction in the career decision-making field. Career decisions are crucial for people's social, economic and emotional life and everyone has to make several career decisions in their life span (Hartung, 2011). For example, most teenagers experience deep consideration in which major they would like to learn based on their future career plan; people may make the decision to accept the promotion or quit the job. Due to its significance to these perspectives, psychologists have many investigations on the causes, results and the psychological process of career decision-making. Up to now, most studies on career decisions have explored how people psychologically realise their desire for career changes (Obodaru, 2012). However, our understanding of this field is still insufficient because another angle of career change has not been strengthened before, which is why and how people fail to realise their desired career changes. Career inaction is an essential term for this angle of career change (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). In recent years, as a burgeoning term in work psychology, even though some researchers have already done studies on the characteristics, causes and mechanisms of career inaction, there is still a lack of literature focusing on its impact on people, especially people's work outputs.

This study aims to address the existing gaps in this area by revealing how career inaction affects the most essential work output which is task performance. The current

research gaps raise my curiosity about people's attitudes and subsequent behaviours regarding their current career status. Will they continue to perform well as before in the stuck position or perform worse because they lose interest in it? Therefore, this study will try to address the following one: "How do people perform the tasks in their work when they perceive the failure of fulfilling the desired changes just resulting from their inaction?" As a core component of job performance, task performance is defined as "employees' behaviours and outcomes that meet the requirement of goals of daily work tasks and organisations", which is the criteria to assess organisational outcomes and success directly, such as productivity and quality of service or product, and directly related to organisational objectives (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997: Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994). Besides, task performance is regarded as a crucial prerequisite for personal career success (Zhang et al., 2022). Considering the significance of task performance, this research examines how career inaction affects it, intending to offer insights for people to avoid career inaction or help them maintain or improve task performance despite the career inaction experience, ultimately benefiting both personal career advancement and organisational development.

Moreover, understanding the role of self-esteem on task performance in the context of career inaction is crucial. Whether career inaction also affects psychological resources that may lead to certain attitudes or behaviours attracts researchers' attention. Trying to increase self-esteem and avoid low self-esteem for human beings is the consistent goal of psychology and other social subjects, given its association with various positive consequences, such as happiness, life satisfaction, professional functioning and career success (Baumeister et al., 2003; Orth & Robins, 2014). By studying it, the study may offer novel directions to increase employees' self-esteem in work settings. Self-esteem is defined as "an individual's subjective and positive evaluation of the self" (Rosenberg, 1965). Based on its definition, this study explores the mediating role of self-esteem between career inaction and task performance because self-esteem can reflect one's perception of their capability to accomplish tasks effectively. It helps academics to understand the underlying process of career inaction affecting task performance and come up with targeted interventions afterward. For example, to mitigate the negative effect of career inaction and enhance task performance, possible approaches related to

protecting personal psychological resources may be aspirational if the relationships between these variables are examined.

Additionally, the research considers whether other factors can amplify or mitigate the impact of career inaction on self-esteem so that future interventions toward people experiencing career inaction can be more detailed. I propose the possible moderator in the relation between career inaction and self-esteem is upward social comparison frequency. As a pervasive social phenomenon, social comparison is a focal human concern, evaluating oneself by taking others as a criterion for comparison (Festinger, 1954). By reducing the uncertainty about their status and abilities, there is a tendency for individuals to compare themselves with others (Suls et al., 2002). It is assumed that people with the perception of career inaction have a sense of uncertainty, especially about what will happen if they take more proactive steps. By comparing their status with the status of peers who are either acting actively or facing the same inaction, they can assess whether inaction can be justified. Through this self-evaluation setting others as criteria, self-esteem may be affected since it is a method for people to validate their failure to make desired changes or realise where they are falling behind. Upward social comparison is the other concept with direction, meaning that individuals compare themselves with people who are better than them (e.g., by having more wealth or material goods, obtaining more promotion opportunities) (Collins, 1996). It might be more difficult for individuals to justify their inaction and protect their self-esteem when comparing themselves quite frequently with more successful people at workplaces. Given its pervasiveness in social groups and possible effects on self-evaluation, the moderating role of upward social comparison is studied.

This research offers valuable insights into how career inaction impacts personal characteristics and work-related behavior, offering guidance for employees and organizations on how to weaken the harm of inaction and improve task performance to facilitate their well-being. For example, whether it is effective for the organisation to develop a comparison environment for employees who experience inaction to maintain their performance. Moreover, this topic helps the academic think about what actions individuals can take to protect their self-esteem after the inaction experience. Therefore, this study focuses on the outcomes of career inaction and aims to address the following

research question: "*How are career inaction and individuals' task performance related in the workplace through affecting self-esteem, and whether the effect of career inaction on self-esteem is moderated by upward social comparison frequency?*"

Theory Framework

In this research, the negative relation between career inaction and task performance is expected, which can be explained by self-determination theory (SDT). SDT identifies three intrinsic psychological needs crucial for well-being and psychological growth: autonomy, the need to feel in control of one's own behaviour and goals; competence, the need to feel competent to accomplish tasks and master outcomes; relatedness, the need to effectively interact with and feel close with others (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Van den Broeck et al., 2016; Baumeister & Leary, 2017). Based on the core assumptions of SDT, the motivation for tasks at workplaces is highly dependent on satisfaction with these intrinsic needs (Gagné et al., 2018). Experienced failure in taking sufficient action leads to unfulfillment of mainly competence needs. Specifically, if career inaction is perceived as a failure to face challenges or grasp opportunities for career advancement, individuals feel doubt about their abilities to develop themselves and make career improvements, so competence needs are threatened. Therefore, after the career inaction experience, employees are more likely to lack motivation to accomplish tasks due to the harm to competence needs, leading to negative behavioral results like lower task performance and engagement levels.

The expected negative impacts of career inaction on task performance can also be explained through people's negative emotions resulting from failure. Empirical evidence shows that in most cases career inaction is related to individuals' biggest life regrets and job dissatisfaction which can be intensified especially when people find it difficult to justify their inaction (Hattiangadi et al., 1995; Heitmann, 2007; Lee et al., 2017). In terms of the happy-productive worker hypothesis, job satisfaction is a positive predictor of task performance (Wright & Cropanzano, 2000). Conversely, if employees are unhappy with their work, their task performance would be lowered. Consequently, this research assumes that the detrimental effect of career inaction induces regret and dissatisfaction, extending to reduced task performance. Additionally, the research on dysfunctional forms of stable careers found that some forms of "staying" in a job can also be risky to task

performance (Allen et al., 2016). Based on the definition of career inaction, remaining in one job without changes can be the manifestation of inaction. Therefore, career inaction may pose a threat to task performance, and the first hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Career inaction is negatively related to task performance.

This research expects the negative relationship between career inaction and self-esteem, which can be explained by counterfactual thoughts. In the previous studies about career inaction, researchers illustrate that career inaction possesses the recall phase where people tend to recall the whole process of career inaction and think about both factual and counterfactual outcomes of this failure (Verbruggen & de Vos, 2019). By comparing factual and counterfactual thoughts about their career inaction, self-blame is likely to be induced which can highly endanger individuals' self-esteem (Connolly & Reb, 2005; Verbruggen & de Vos, 2020). This occurs because evaluating what actually happened and what would have happened if taking sufficient action often emphasizes personal shortcomings and missed opportunities. This self-blame perspective damages their confidence and their positive view of themselves. Researchers also assume that realizing the negative consequences of one's inaction threatens self-esteem, which may worsen over time (King & Hicks, 2007; Josephs et al., 1992). People criticise themselves more intensively over time when there is no positive progress related to their careers. Therefore, this research proposes that career inaction is negatively associated with self-esteem.

The study expects a positive relationship between self-esteem and task performance which can be supported by current empirical evidence. Regarding the work psychology domain, self-esteem has been proven to be positively related to career success, such as job satisfaction and task performance (Ariani & No, 2012). When individuals have a more positive view of themselves and higher confidence, they are more motivated to achieve goals and perform well in their tasks. Besides, with the target group of both adolescents and employees, investigators found self-esteem is an important predictor of work-related outcomes, such as task performance (Kuster et al., 2013; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Hence, this research assumes that self-esteem is positively associated with task performance.

This research expects the mediating role of self-esteem between career inaction and task performance. Self-esteem encompasses two essential dimensions which are competence and worth (Donnellan et al., 2011; Gecas,1982; Rosenberg 2017). Specifically, the competence dimension refers to individuals' assessment of their ability and self-efficacy in different domains of life, while the worth dimension is people's perception of their inherent value and significance as humans (Cast & Burke, 2002; Gecas, 1982). As a failure experience to pursue positive career outcomes, career inaction may have adverse effects on individuals' confidence in both their capabilities and their inherent value. This affected self-esteem might further harm their ability to perform effectively on their tasks and ultimately hinder their prospects for achieving career success. Considering the hypothetical relations between career inaction, self-esteem and task performance, it is proposed that individuals' career inaction experience may reduce the level of self-esteem, which may result in low task performance. This leads to my second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Self-esteem mediates the relationship between career inaction and task performance.

Hypothesis 2a: Career inaction is negatively related to self-esteem.

Hypothesis 2b: Self-esteem is positively related to task performance.

Besides, incorporating social comparison theory offers insights into how internal psychological needs interact with external social influences in shaping career-related behaviors. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory suggests that in situations where standards are unclear, people tend to compare themselves with others to evaluate their worth, and the direction of social comparison is upward and downward (Festinger, 1970). In situations where people experience failure or other negative experiences, empirical evidence shows that upward social comparison is negatively related to self-esteem and confidence and may further hinder employees' tendency to perform efficiently (Li, 2019; Schmuck et al., 2019; Swallow & Kuiper, 1988). Comparing with people who are better off in work settings makes people just experiencing failure (i.e. career inaction) have stronger thoughts that they are inferior to others, causing reduced self-esteem. Therefore, this research assumes that the upward social comparison frequency would strengthen the negative relationship between career inaction and self-esteem and would not change the

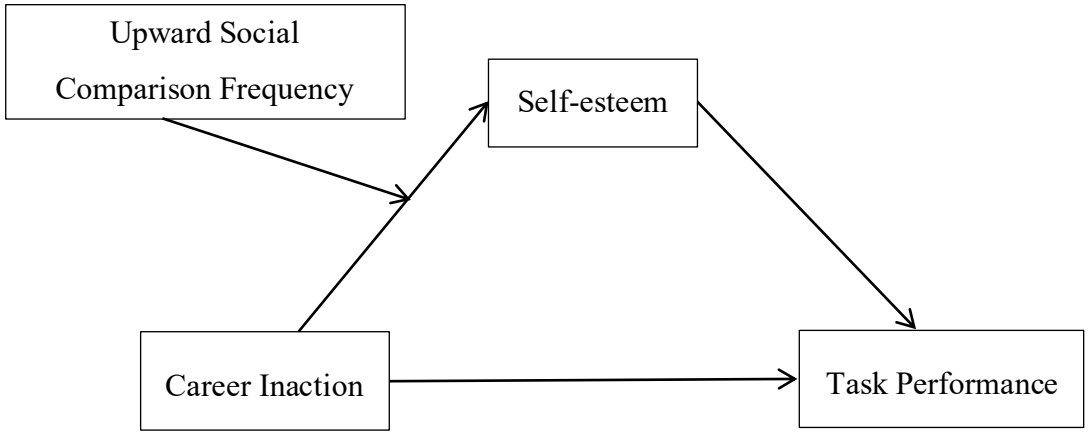
direction of how career inaction is related to self-esteem and task performance. Specifically, if an individual frequently engages in upward social comparison, seeing others progressing in their career could intensify feelings of regret and lower self-esteem when they experience career inaction. Conversely, if a person seldom compares themselves with people better than them in the work domain, the negative impact of career inaction on self-esteem might be less severe, compared to those who engage in frequent upward social comparison. This leads to the third and fourth hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: Upward social comparison moderates the relationship between career inaction and self-esteem and plays a strengthening role in this relationship.

Hypothesis 4 (Moderated Mediation Model; see Figure 1): The relationship between career inaction and task performance mediated by self-esteem will vary depending on the frequency of upward social comparison people make with others. Specifically, the relationship will be strengthened as the upward social comparison frequency is higher.

Figure 1

Proposed moderated mediation model



Methods

Design and Procedure

To answer the research question and test four hypotheses, cross-sectional research was conducted. 5 master students majoring in work and organisational psychology at Utrecht University collected data as a group. To collect data, an online survey (see Appendix A and Appendix B) was created through Qualtrics platform. Before the distribution, the research project was registered in Student Ethics Review & Registration

site and the survey was approved by The Faculty Ethics Review Committee (Approval number: 24-1681). In the survey, apart from answers to questions regarding research variables, demographic and work-related information was gathered. The collection process lasted for 18 days. Considering the broader generalisability and the ease of access to diverse participants due to the international backgrounds of researchers, there are no limitations on participants' nationalities. The participants were recruited mainly within the network of researchers. The link to survey was also published on different social media and shared in social group chats like university alumni. All participants joined the survey voluntarily and anonymously. They were allowed to stop participating at any time or withdraw afterward.

Participants

The recruitment criteria for this research are employees who are currently working at least 25 hours per week and are at least 18 years old. G*Power was utilized to determine the appropriate sample size. The default parameters were employed with medium effect size (0.15), α level (0.05), and high power (0.80). Based on the hypothesis, the number of predictors were set to 6, including three control variables, one independent variable, one mediator and one moderator. The result of power analysis suggested a total sample size of 193 was adequate to test the hypothesized model. In similar research examining the mediating effect of psychological capital and moderating role of ethical leadership in the relationship between islamic work ethic and task performance, 218 respondents were collected (Qasim et al., 2022).

In total, 307 people were recruited for this group research. After data cleaning, 191 participants' information was included for further data analysis. The participants were from 29 countries. Among the sample, 58.1% identified as female, 40.8% as male, 1% as other. The average age of participants was 35.46, ranging from 19 to 65 years. Additionally, the average tenure in current employment was 5.04 years, ranging from less than 1 year to 32 years.

Instruments

Four questionnaires written in English were combined into a single online survey to examine the levels of variables. Reliability analyses were conducted to all the questionnaires.

Task performance. This study used task-based job performance questionnaire to measure participants' task performance (Goodman & Svyantek, 1999). It required participants to respond to how they performed their tasks at workplace in the past 6 months. There are 9 items in this questionnaire (e.g. I planned and organised to achieve objectives of the job and meet deadlines) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree". Higher scores indicated better task performance participants had in the past 6 months. The reliability in this research was good with α= .89.

Career inaction. Career inaction was measured by a 9-item scale designed by D'Huyvetter and Verbruggen (2023). The questionnaire was of good reliability with α = .88. Participants were asked to respond to several statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree". For instance, the statement could be "I fail to take concrete actions to fulfill my career desires". There were no reverse-scored items in this scale. Therefore, higher total scores indicated a higher level of career inaction experienced by the individual.

Self-esteem. The level of self-esteem can be evaluated by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). It was created by Morris Rosenberg in 1965 and consists of 10 statements, including, for example, "I feel that I have a number of good qualities". Each statement was on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." These statements were divided into positive and negative categories, with five items respectively. To assess the overall level of an individual's self-esteem, all the negatively worded items were reverse scored, which were items 2, 5, 6, 8 and 9. The reliability was good in this research (α= .88).

Upward social comparison frequency. The frequency that participants engage in upward social comparison can be estimated by an 8-item scale which is adapted from prior social comparison research at work (Buunk et al., 2003; Goodman, 1977). Participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which they compared themselves to others who were better along eight dimensions: performance, working conditions, quality of supervision, quality of coworkers, career progression, benefits, prestige, and salary (Brown et al., 2007). The data would be recorded by a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Higher total scores indicated that subjects made upward

comparisons more frequently. The reliability analysis showed a high overall reliability coefficient for the scale (α = .93), indicating excellent internal consistency.

Control variables. Gender, age and tenure were controlled in the data analysis. The effect of gender is significant on work-related outcomes like performance, and tenure also has positive effects on it (Shirom et al., 2008). Besides, both gender and age have been proven a significant relationship with self-esteem (Bleidorn et al., 2016; Ferris et al., 2010). After data cleaning, the gender variable has been divided into three categories, which are males, females and other. I selected female as the reference category and created two dummy variables: one for "male" and one for "other". Age was recorded from 18 to 65 years, with an additional option for “less than 18”. Tenure was measured from 1 to 50 years, with an additional option for “less than 1 year”.

Analyses to be conducted

This research used SPSS29 to analyse data and all the hypotheses. Firstly, means and standard deviations of all variables were computed as descriptive findings. Pearson's correlation analysis method was used to check whether the relationship between each variable was significantly correlated and find the direction of these relationships.

Secondly, for hypothesis 1, simple linear regression was performed. To test hypotheses 2 and 3, I analysed the effect of hypothesised mediator and moderator variables by using model 4 and model 1 of PROCESS macro by Andrew F. Hayes respectively (Hayes, 2013). To test the moderated mediation model proposed in hypothesis 4, I ran and interpreted model 7 of Hayes' PROCESS-macro (Hayes, 2013).

Results

Before conducting correlation and regression analysis, all the assumptions, missing values and outliers of all continuous variables have been assessed. The normality of each variable was assessed using skewness and kurtosis (Blanca et al., 2013). This analysis indicates that the distributions of career inaction and upward social comparison are normal, while task performance and self-esteem are mildly negative skewed, suggesting the existence of the ceiling effects in these two questionnaires. However, in the analysis of normality of residuals, the normality assumptions for linear regression were met. The results also showed that there was no multicollinearity in any of the variables, and both the linearity and homoscedasticity assumptions were met. Possible

outliers were examined by evaluating Mahalanobis Distance with the significance set less than .01 (Ghorbani, 2019). Eventually, no multivariate outliers were detected.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of all major variables. Career inaction was negatively correlated with task performance (r = - .25, p < .01) and self-esteem (r = - .37, p < .01), also positively correlated with upward social comparison frequency (r = .30, p < .01). The higher score on career inaction is, the lower levels of task performance and self-esteem are among subjects. However, the higher score on career inaction is, the more frequently people compare themselves with people who are better off at workplace. Self-esteem was positively correlated with task performance (r = .48, p < .01), and negatively correlated with upward social comparison frequency (r = -. 31, p < .01). The higher level of self-esteem people possess, the better task they perform at workplaces, and the less frequent upward comparison they make. Additionally, upward social comparison frequency was found not significantly correlated with task performance.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Major Variables (N=191)

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Male	1.60	.51							
2. Other	.01	.10	- .09						
3. Age	35.53	11.99	.01	- .06					
4. Tenure	4.81	6.63	.02	.03	.53**				
5. Career Inaction	2.57	.93	- .01	.06	- .01	.06			
6. Upward Social Comparison Frequency	2.94	.95	- .01	- .04	-.28**	-.28**	.30**		
7. Self-esteem	3.82	.78	.00	.07	.25**	.07	-.36**	-.30**	
8. Task Performance	4.02	.70	- .04	.03	.09	-.05	-.24**	-.07	.46**

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01

Male (Male=1, Female/Other=0); Other (Other=1,Female/Male=0).

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1 assumed that career inaction is negatively related to task performance. The higher level of career inaction is experienced, the worse task performance subjects will have. A hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to test hypothesis 1. Adding three control variables in the first block and career inaction in the second block with task performance as dependent variable, the results (See Table 2) showed that career inaction was significantly associated with task performance in a negative direction (b = - .18, p < .001). Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 2

Results of Regression Analysis (N=191)

Steps and Variables	***Task Performance***				***Self-esteem***		
	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*
1. Male	- .05	- .05	- .05	- .05	-.01	- .01	.00
Other	.28	.35	.03	.03	.82	.72	.71
Age	.01	.01	.00	.00	.02***	.02**	.02**
Tenure	- .01	- .01	- .01	- .01	- .01	- .01	- .01
2. Career Inaction		- .18***	- .06	- .06	-.30***	- .21	- .26***
3. Self-esteem			.39***	.39***			
4. Upward Social Comparison Frequency						- .09	- .13*
5. Career Inaction × Upward Social Comparison Frequency						- .02	- .02
R^2	.02	.08	.23	.23	.20	.22	.23

F (df1, df2)	1.12 (4,186)	10.94 (1,185)***	8.91 (6, 184)***	8.91 (6, 184)***	9.41 (5, 185)***	7.63 (7, 184)***	7.62 (7, 183)***

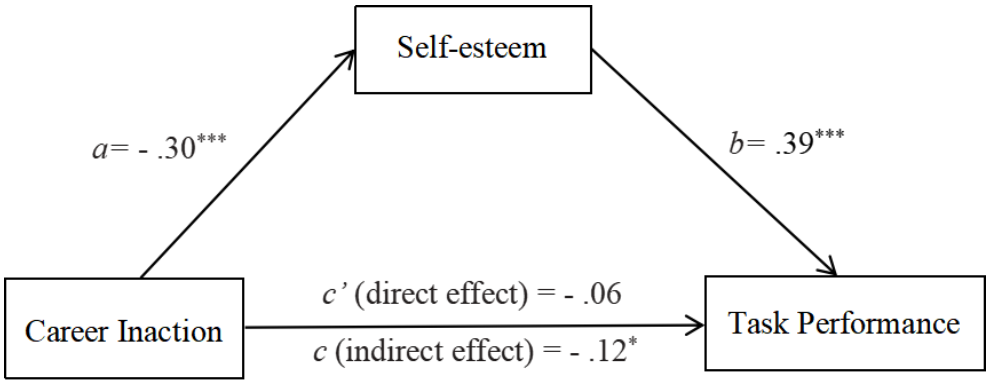
Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Unstandardised regression coefficients are reported for the respective regression steps. Male (Male=1, Female/Other=0); Other (Other=1, Female/Male=0).

Hypothesis 2 focuses on the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between career inaction and task performance. Hypotheses 2a and 2b suggest career inaction is negatively related to self-esteem, and self-esteem is positively related to task performance respectively. To test hypothesis 2, model 4 of Hayes' PROCESS-macro was run (Hayes, 2013). As shown in Table 2, career inaction was negatively related to self-esteem (b = - .30, p < .001), indicating that hypothesis 2a was confirmed. Self-esteem was also proven a positive relation with task performance (b = .39, p < .001) so hypothesis 2b was also supported. The total effect (b = -.18, with 95% CI: -.28 to -.07) and indirect effect (b = -.12, with 95% CI: -.20 to -.06) of career inaction on task performance were significant. However, as shown in Figure 2 when self-esteem was added in the model, the results turned out that the direct effect of career inaction on task performance was not significant. In conclusion, hypothesis 2 was supported. Self-esteem played a full mediating role in the effect of career inaction on task performance.

Figure 2

Path diagram of the indirect effects of career inaction on task performance through self-esteem.



Note: c'= direct effect of X on Y; c= indirect effect of X on Y through M or a*b

Hypothesis 3 suggests that upward social comparison frequency plays a moderating role in the relationship between career inaction and task performance and can strengthen this relation. To test hypothesis 3, model 1 of Hayes' PROCESS-macro was conducted with career inaction as the independent variable, self-esteem as the dependent variable and upward social comparison as the moderator (Hayes, 2013). As shown in Table 2, in addition to age, none of the predicting variables are significantly related to self-esteem. Moreover, the interaction effect between career inaction and upward social comparison frequency was not significant (b = -. 02, p > .10). Consequently, hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Hypothesis 4 emphasizes the moderated mediation model, suggesting that the relationship between career inaction and task performance mediated by self-esteem will vary depending on the frequency of upward social comparison. In the previous step, the moderating role of upward social comparison frequency has been found non-significant in the effect of career inaction on self-esteem. I still ran model 7 of Hayes' PROCESS-macro to check the moderated mediation index. As shown in Table 3, the mediation of self-esteem on the relationship between career inaction and task performance was consistently significant across different levels of comparison frequency, and the effect appeared to slightly increase as the comparison frequency increased. Nevertheless, the moderated mediation index implied that the moderation of comparison frequency on this mediation effect was not significant (b = -.01, with 95% CI: -.05 to .04). Specifically, the effect of the mediation does not change significantly with changes in the frequency of upward social comparison. Therefore, hypothesis 4 was not confirmed.

Table 3

Indirect effects of career inaction on task performance through self-esteem at varying levels of upward social comparison frequency (N = 191)

	Task Performance	
Upward Social Comparison Frequency	Effect	95% CI
Low (-1 SD)	- .09	- .19 to - .04
Mean	- .10	- .18 to - .05
High (+1 SD)	- .11	- .20 to - .04

Discussion

In summary, this research achieved the objectives of adding to the empirical evidence on career inaction and investigating its potential effects. Whether career inaction experience influences task performance and the psychological mechanism behind this relation were examined. Even though the overall moderated mediation model was not confirmed, the findings supported the main hypothesis that career inaction is negatively related to task performance. Besides, self-esteem as the mediator between career inaction and task performance was proven, but the interaction effect of career inaction and upward social comparison was not found to be significant on self-esteem. The findings above highlight the complex influences of career inaction and psychological factors affecting employees' task performance.

Theoretical Implications

The present study confirmed the significant negative effect of career inaction on task performance, implying that failure to take action toward one's career desire would damage how one performs their tasks at the workplace. On the contrary, if people find it easy to manage to realise their career desires, they tend to accomplish their tasks better in work settings. This finding aligns with the previous studies that performance would be hampered when people feel stuck in their career but fail to make changes (Allen et al., 2016). In the process of career inaction influencing individuals, the factual outcomes of career inaction are normally worse than counterfactual thoughts, like missing promotion opportunities due to inaction (Verbruggen & de Vos, 2019). In such situations, people tend to generate negative emotions like self-blame and a damaged sense of fulfillment, which would further harm their intrinsic motivations to perform well in the unchanged career statement (Løvoll et al., 2017; Reb & Connolly, 2010). This result contributes to the research on how career inaction may impact people, which is the first time providing empirical evidence on the relationship between career inaction and task performance, confirming the assumptions of previous literature. This finding on task performance also gives insights to future researchers about how career inaction may affect other work-related factors, such as work motivation and satisfaction.

This study found self-esteem can mediate the relationship between career inaction and task performance. It implies that career inaction experience is detrimental to one's

self-esteem and further leads to worse task performance. The negative association between career inaction and self-esteem verified previous researchers' assumptions. Recognition that unachieved future hope is the result of one's inaction can threaten individual self-esteem, and they hypothesised that the threat would intensify over time (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; King & Hicks, 2007). The negative relationship between self-esteem and task performance can be explained by the most popular theory about the core self-evaluation traits (CSE) and job performance which argues that employees with high CSE are motivated to perform better at workplaces (Kacmar et al., 2009). However, self-esteem, a component of CSE, is threatened by the failure to take positive action, thereby damaging individuals' motivation to perform. The mediation results fill the gap in the literature by offering empirical evidence on psychological mechanisms through which career inaction impairs task performance. Before this research, there was little research exploring the broader effects of career inaction on psychological factors and whether these factors further affect their work. This finding offers a deeper understanding that career inaction may harm their future career progression like promotion by threatening their task performance through diminished self-esteem. This effect may intensify especially when no psychological interventions are provided, offering direction for researchers and organisations to make intervention strategies.

Opposed to the hypotheses, the moderating role of upward social comparison frequency and the overall moderated mediation model was not supported. Even if upward social comparison frequency was negatively related to self-esteem, the interaction of career inaction and upward social comparison was not significant on self-esteem. The results indicate that the more frequently people engage in upward social comparison in work settings, the lower self-esteem levels they have. This finding is consistent with previous literature suggesting that upward social comparison lowers self-esteem by highlighting perceived inferiority (Buunk et al., 2013). However, among those experiencing career inaction, an increased frequency of such comparison does not significantly exacerbate the decline in self-esteem. This phenomenon might be explained by the helplessness theory. In some situations, people may suffer from long-term regret due to career inaction, and this long-term regret is associated with a sense of helplessness (Gilovich et al., 1998). If individuals attribute the unfavorable outcomes of career

inaction to uncontrollable factors, this could lead to learned helplessness, potentially reducing their motivation and self-esteem (Rosenbaum & Ben-Ari, 1985). Thus, the moderating role of upward social comparison would become less significant, overshadowed by a generalised sense of helplessness to realise desired change. From the statistical perspective, the data of this study was inclined to higher scores of self-esteem. The potential effect of upward social comparison might be muted because there were not sufficient participants reporting low self-esteem.

Practical Implications

To effectively address career inaction and its impact on task performance, it is critical for organisations to learn career inaction's causes, manifestations, and consequences. It is advisable for the management to raise awareness and implement targeted initiatives. One strategy involves the HR department identifying tenure data and paying more attention to those employees who have relatively stable careers, such as remaining in the same position for a prolonged period. Afterward, interviews or surveys can be taken to understand whether they have the desire to make career changes but fail to truly act for changes. Once employees experience career inaction, the well-being team or managers are supposed to provide targeted psychological and career advancement support, such as more encouragement in daily work or professional psychological counseling, in case this career inaction experience will further harm their self-esteem and task performance.

On the other hand, when managers notice a decreasing level of employees' task performance, like failing to achieve the objectives of tasks in time or an increasing number of errors in accomplishing tasks compared to previous performance, managers may have regular catch-up meetings with employees to find the potential causes behind it and check whether it results from career inaction. Then, managers should offer career advancement support and organisations offer psychological support. This approach helps prevent further detrimental effects of career inaction on their self-esteem and overall organisational performance. Besides, to help employees achieve their career desires and perform optimally in tasks, managers can also schedule regular career meetings to discuss their recent performance and recommend potential development opportunities and

resources. This initiative may help prevent career inaction, thus protecting and increasing their self-esteem and task performance by making them feel competent and valued.

Additionally, even though upward social comparison frequency was not proved as a significant moderator on the effect of career inaction on self-esteem, it was negatively related to self-esteem when testing the moderated mediation model. Regarding this finding, organisations can work on establishing a collaborative work culture rather than a negative comparison atmosphere that makes employees jealous or feel inferior. For instance, the company can facilitate teamwork and shared objectives rather than individual comparison and competition. This approach may effectively protect one's self-esteem by reducing upward social comparison possibilities at workplaces.

Limitations and Future Directions

Firstly, the sample size for data analysis (N=191) is a bit lower than the recommended sample size by G*Power (N=193). Besides, the distributions of task performance and self-esteem in this study were skewed left, indicating a higher frequency of high scores on these two questionnaires compared to low scores. It is known as the ceiling effect, where many respondents score near the highest value in a questionnaire, normally making it difficult to get accurate central tendencies in data analysis (Menzies et al., 2008). Based on the public's understanding of task performance and self-esteem, they tend to assume both high task performance and self-esteem are desired and praised by society. Therefore, the ceiling effect of this study can be explained by social desirability bias, which suggests a tendency to underreport undesirable attitudes or behaviours, and the lack of a sufficient sample (Badejo et al., 2022). To mitigate the negative influence of the ceiling effect on data analysis, it is recommended for future researchers to recruit a larger sample when investigating these two variables so that the distribution would be more likely to be normal.

The second limitation of this study was its cross-sectional design. The inability to conclude causality is one of the shortcomings of cross-sectional design because all the data was collected at the same time point (Wang & Chen, 2020). The main purpose of this study was to examine the possible impact of career inaction on individuals. Given the constraints on research time and financial budgets, it was not feasible for this study to adopt the longitudinal design to assess task performance before and after experiencing

career inaction. Therefore, future studies on this topic should consider a longitudinal design as this design could reveal the long-term effects of career inaction on task performance or other variables and allow researchers to establish causality of variables.

Thirdly, the direction of social comparison was not fully explored in this study. It solely incorporated the upward comparison into the hypothesised model. Although a significant relationship with self-esteem was identified, its moderating role was not confirmed. This suggests that there may be other factors influencing the process that future studies should investigate. Besides, based on the theory about outcome-related counterfactual thoughts, sometimes career inaction may be related to positive consequences like contentment or relief when factual career outcomes are perceived better than counterfactual outcomes (Begeer et al., 2014; Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). In this regard, comparing with others who are worse off may help people rationalise their inaction and contribute to positive consequences. Therefore, future studies on career inaction should explore when and why career inaction generates positive consequences, considering downward social comparison as a potential moderator variable.

Conclusion

Task performance is crucial for both personal career success and the achievement of organisational objectives. Therefore, it is important for academics and organisations to study the impact of career inaction, which is often seen as a negative experience in an individual's career, on personal task performance, and whether there are other factors like self-esteem and upward social comparison frequency affecting this relationship. Despite the overall moderated mediation model and the moderating role of upward social comparison frequency on self-esteem not being significantly supported, the findings confirmed the significant negative relations between career inaction and task performance, as well as between upward social comparison frequency and self-esteem. Additionally, self-esteem was found as the mediator in the relationship between career inaction and task performance. The results demonstrate how insufficient career development behaviour harms psychological resources and performance at workplaces. The findings emphasise the need for approaches to employee development integrating career support with psychological well-being initiatives, with the aim of sustaining and enhancing employees' task performance. By proactively addressing career inaction and

fostering an organizational culture that values personal career progression, organisations can create a more motivated and high-performing workforce.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

Dear participant,

Welcome to the study "Career Related Decision-Making", the master thesis project of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Utrecht University. It is important that you learn about the procedure of this study before it starts, so please read the following text carefully. If anything is unclear to you, contact the researchers through email: m.j.vanbezouw@uu.nl. The researchers will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Goal of the study

The aim of this study is to better understand how failing to take action when desiring career changes affects people's lives, identify the potential causes, and explore possible prevention strategies.

Procedure of the study

For this study, we ask you to answer a series of demographic and career related questions. Participating in this study does not involve any notable risks or inconveniences. Answering the questions in this study will take approximately 15-20 minutes.

Voluntary participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary: you are not obligated to participate. You may decide to stop your participation during the study, and you can also decide to withdraw after the study. You do not have to provide a reason for stopping. If you decide to stop, your (personal) data will be deleted, except for (personal) data that have already been processed. There are no consequences to stopping. You can indicate directly to the researcher that you wish to withdraw from participation, or you can contact the following email address: m.j.vanbezouw@uu.nl.

Risks and benefits

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life. Your participation may make you more aware of how psychological research functions, and your responses will help the investigator understand how people make decisions.

Privacy

We treat your personal data confidentially, as required by law (the General Data Protection Regulation or GDPR). Personal data are data that can be traced back to you individually, either directly or indirectly. When working with (personal) data, researchers may use external parties, for instance when administering online surveys. In that case the appropriate contracts with these parties have been arranged in order to warrant your privacy.

Data sharing

The data from this survey will be utilized for the master's thesis research project, without any (directly identifying) personal data. The results may be used in other future research, which may investigate a different topic than the study you are currently participating in.

Further information

If you have a shared with other researchers and/or will be shared through a public database (open any questions about the study, either before you participate or afterwards, please feel free to contact the responsible researcher: Maarten van Bezouw, m.j.vanbezouw@uu.nl. You can contact the UU's privacy department (privacy@uu.nl) or the Data Protection Officer of the UU (fg@uu.nl) for questions and complaints about the study, and you have the right to file a complaint with the Data Protection Authority (https://autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl/en). You can direct any formal complaints about this study to the member of the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Utrecht University: klachtenfunctionaris-fetcsocwet@uu.nl

Consent statement:

By clicking on the 'Yes' button you acknowledge:
You have read the information given above.
Your participation in this study is voluntary.
You are at least 18 years old.
Your data is anonymous for research purposes.

Do you consent to participate in this study?
-Yes -No

Appendix B

Questionnaires

Part 1 Demographic and work-related information

1. What is your age?

< 18 (1) ... >65 (50)

2. Which gender do you identify most with?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary/third gender (3)
- Prefer not to say (4)
- I identify as... (5) _____

3. In which countries did you grow up?

☐Prefer not to say (1)

☐Afghanistan (2)

☐Albania (3)

☐Algeria (4)

☐Andorra (5)

☐Angola (6)

☐Antigua and Barbuda (7)

☐Argentina (8)

☐Armenia (9)

☐Australia (10)

☐Austria (11)

☐Azerbaijan (12)

☐Bahamas (13)

☐Bahrain (14)

☐Bangladesh (15)

☐Barbados (16)

☐Belarus (17)

❑Belgium (18)

❑Belize (19)

❑Benin (20)

❑Bhutan (21)

❑Bolivia (22)

❑

Bosnia and Herzegovina (23)

❑Botswana (24)

❑Brazil (25)

❑Brunei Darussalam (26)

❑Bulgaria (27)

❑Burkina Faso (28)

❑Burundi (29)

❑Cambodia (30)

❑Cameroon (31)

❑Canada (32)

❑Cape Verde (33)

❑Central African Republic (34)

❑Chad (35)

❑Chile (36)

❑China (37)

❑Colombia (38)

❑Comoros (39)

❑Congo, Republic of the... (40)

❑Costa Rica (41)

❑Côte d'Ivoire (42)

❑Croatia (43)

❑Cuba (44)

❑Cyprus (45)

❑Czech Republic (46)

❑Democratic Republic of the Congo (47)

❑Denmark (48)

❑Djibouti (49)

❑Dominica (50)

❑Dominican Republic (51)

❑Ecuador (52)

❑Egypt (53)

❑El Salvador (54)

❑Equatorial Guinea (55)

❑Eritrea (56)

❑Estonia (57)

❑Ethiopia (58)

❑Fiji (59)

❑Finland (60)

❑France (61)

❑Gabon (62)

❑Gambia (63)

❑Georgia (64)

❑Germany (65)

❑Ghana (66)

❑Greece (67)

❑Grenada (68)

❑Guatemala (69)

❑Guinea (70)

❑Guinea-Bissau (71)

❑Guyana (72)

❑Haiti (73)

❑Honduras (74)

❑Hong Kong (S.A.R.) (75)

❑Hungary (76)

❑Iceland (77)

❑India (78)

❑Indonesia (79)
❑Iran (80)
❑Iraq (81)
❑Ireland (82)
❑Israel (83)
❑Italy (84)
❑Jamaica (85)
❑Japan (86)
❑Jordan (87)
❑Kazakhstan (88)
❑Kenya (89)
❑Kiribati (90)
❑Kuwait (91)
❑Kyrgyzstan (92)
❑Lao People's Democratic Republic (93)
❑Latvia (94)
❑Lebanon (95)
❑Lesotho (96)
❑Liberia (97)
❑Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (98)
❑Liechtenstein (99)
❑Lithuania (100)
❑Luxembourg (101)
❑Madagascar (102)
❑Malawi (103)
❑Malaysia (104)
❑Maldives (105)
❑Mali (106)
❑Malta (107)
❑Marshall Islands (108)
❑Mauritania (109)
❑Mauritius (110)
❑Mexico (111)
❑Micronesia, Federated States of... (112)
❑Monaco (113)
❑Mongolia (114)
❑Montenegro (115)
❑Morocco (116)
❑Mozambique (117)
❑Myanmar (118)
❑Namibia (119)
❑Nauru (120)
❑Nepal (121)
❑Netherlands (122)
❑New Zealand (123)
❑Nicaragua (124)
❑Niger (125)
❑Nigeria (126)
❑North Korea (127)
❑Norway (128)
❑Oman (129)
❑Pakistan (130)
❑Palau (131)
❑Panama (132)
❑Papua New Guinea (133)
❑Paraguay (134)
❑Peru (135)
❑Philippines (136)
❑Poland (137)
❑Portugal (138)
❑Qatar (139)
❑Republic of Moldova (140)
❑Romania (141)
❑Russian Federation (142)
❑Rwanda (143)
❑Saint Kitts and Nevis (144)
❑Saint Lucia (145)
❑Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (146)
❑Samoa (147)
❑San Marino (148)
❑Sao Tome and Principe (149)

❑Saudi Arabia (150)
❑Senegal (151)
❑Serbia (152)
❑Seychelles (153)
❑Sierra Leone (154)
❑Singapore (155)
❑Slovakia (156)
❑Slovenia (157)
❑Solomon Islands (158)
❑Somalia (159)
❑South Africa (160)
❑South Korea (161)
❑Spain (162)
❑Sri Lanka (163)
❑Sudan (164)
❑Suriname (165)
❑Swaziland (166)
❑Sweden (167)
❑Switzerland (168)
❑Syrian Arab Republic (169)
❑Tajikistan (170)
❑Thailand (171)
❑The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (172)
❑Timor-Leste (173)
❑Togo (174)
❑Tonga (175)
❑Trinidad and Tobago (176)
❑Tunisia (177)
❑Turkey (178)
❑Turkmenistan (179)
❑Tuvalu (180)
❑Uganda (181)
❑Ukraine (182)
❑United Arab Emirates (183)
❑United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (184)
❑United Republic of Tanzania (185)
❑United States of America (186)
❑Uruguay (187)
❑Uzbekistan (188)
❑Vanuatu (189)
❑Venezuela, Bolivarian Republic of... (190)
❑VietNam (191)
❑Yemen (192)
❑Zambia (193)
❑Zimbabwe (194)

4. What is your current employment status?

- ❑ Employed Full-time (1)
- ❑ Employed Part-time (2)
- ❑ Unemployed (3)
- ❑ Retired (4)
- ❑ Student (5)
- ❑ Other, please specify _____

5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Less than High School (1)
- High school (2)
- College/University (3)
- Associate degree (4)
- Bachelor's degree (5)
- Master's degree (6)
- Professional degree (7)
- Doctorate degree (8)
- I prefer not to answer (9)
- Other, please specify (10)_____

6. How many years have you been employed in your current position? Please round up to the nearest year.

<1 (1) ... 50 (51)

Part 2 Questionnaires about four research variables

Career Inaction

Below are some statements about your career/work. Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements (1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree)

1. I don’t manage to realize my career desires
2. I find it difficult to take action to change something in my career
3. I fail to effectively change the elements in my career that I want to change
4. I feel stuck in my career
5. I would like to change something in my career, but I don’t actively pursue it
6. I would like to change something in my career, but I don’t know how to start
7. I feel paralyzed when thinking about realizing my career desires
8. I fail to take concrete actions to fulfil my career desires
9. I want to change something in my career, but I don’t dare to give up what I currently have

Task Performance

Below are statements about how you performed your tasks at work. Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements (1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree)

1. I achieve the objectives of the job.
2. I meet criteria for performance.
3. I demonstrate expertise in all job-related tasks.
4. I fulfil all the requirements of the job.
5. I could manage more responsibility than typically assigned.
6. I appear suitable for a higher level role.
7. I feel competent in all areas of the job, and handle tasks with proficiency.
8. I perform well in the overall job by carrying out tasks as expected.
9. I plan and organise to achieve objectives of the job and meet deadlines.

Self-esteem

Below are some statements about how you feel about yourself. Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements (1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree).

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
2. At times I think I am no good at all.
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel1do not have much to be proud of.
6. I certainly feel useless at times.
7. I feel that I'm a person of worth.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure.
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Upward Social Comparison Frequency

Please indicate the frequency of your comparison with others at workplace (1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always).

1. I compare myself to others who are better off than me in terms of work performance.
2. I compare myself to individuals with superior working conditions.

3. I compare myself to individuals who receive better supervision at the workplace.
4. I compare myself to those who have higher quality coworkers.
5. I compare myself to individuals who have more advanced career progression.
6. I compare myself to individuals who receive better benefits.
7. I compare myself to those with higher prestige at the workplace.
8. I compare myself to individuals who earn more salary than me.