

Article

Redefining ‘Careers’ and ‘Sustainable Careers’: A Qualitative Study with University Students

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Abstract: Contemporary society challenges traditional linear career progressions with the emergence of the ‘sustainable career’ concept. This dynamic career path spans different societal domains over time and involves individuals actively shaping their paths through actions and the interpretation of their experiences. The evolving socioeconomic contexts demand a reevaluation of career development processes, necessitating an examination of individual perspectives on what makes a career authentically sustainable. Despite this, in the Italian and Spanish contexts, a definition of the concept of career and sustainable careers rooted in individuals’ interpretations is still absent. This qualitative study is designed to fill the existing gap by exploring the definition of the concepts of ‘career’ and ‘sustainable career’ in an initial sample of Italian (N = 197) and Spanish (N = 193) students (323 females, 67 males) aged 18–30 years (M = 20.13; SD = 2.13). Participants answered open-ended questions about ‘career’ and ‘sustainable career’. Qualitative data analysis software identified key themes, and correspondence analysis explored differences between the Italian and Spanish samples. The findings reveal that the concept of a career encompasses an evolving sequence of work experiences, incorporating training pathways, a continuous commitment to personal growth goals, and professional satisfaction. A sustainable career extends this, emphasizing a healthy work–life balance and the often-overlooked dimension of social empowerment. This study offers a perspective for designing research and interventions aimed at promoting careers and work environments perceived as authentically sustainable.

Keywords: career; sustainable career; qualitative study; cross-cultural comparison

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1. Introduction

In the field of career studies, we encounter a landscape characterized by complexity and dynamism, aimed at understanding the nature of careers with purposes important to individuals, organizations, and contemporary society at large. Within our society, higher-education institutions aim to develop employable graduates, university students aspire to obtain sustainable careers by securing gainful employment at the graduate level, and organizations actively seek to recruit graduates to promote their long-term sustainability [1].

In this rapidly changing labor market context, characterized by an increasingly unpredictable and complex employment landscape [2], the traditional concept of ‘career’ has undergone a profound metamorphosis, revealing the need for an ideographic, systemic, and dynamic approach [3].

Following this need, our study is grounded in the theoretical framework proposed by De Vos and colleagues [3], wherein the individual is positioned as the central actor in shaping their career (person-centered approach), manifesting it through actions and interpretations of experiences across diverse educational, professional, social, and cultural

contexts (systemic approach), throughout the entire lifespan (dynamic approach), while altering the person–career fit.

The person-centered approach by De Vos et al. [3] is rooted in two fundamental concepts: agency and meaning. Concerning ‘agency’, we align with the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [4], which posits that individuals are proactive and growth-oriented, exhibiting a propensity to take actions aimed at mastering both internal and external forces to achieve integrated functioning. Regarding ‘meaning’, our study is also influenced by Savickas’ Life Design paradigm [5], which emphasizes how individuals construct their identities and shape their careers through brief narratives, facilitating a sense-making process that imparts meaning to experiences and career trajectories. This paradigm recognizes the importance that individuals attribute to the concept of a career, enabling them to shape their identities and careers more intentionally and purposefully.

1.1. The Concepts of ‘Career’

A career can be defined as the evolving sequence of work experiences over an individual’s lifetime [6]. ‘Career’ is a highly subjective and intricate construct, and is unique to each individual and dynamic over time [7]. In other words, a career is a complex and context-dependent process that permeates the entirety of an individual’s life, influencing all of a person’s roles and necessitating negotiation with institutions and society; it affects the past, present, and future, constituting both an individual and a social trajectory [8].

Traditionally, careers have been perceived as a linear progression up the corporate hierarchy, characterized by a sequential journey through various stages from entry into the workforce until retirement [9]. Among the trailblazers in the field of career studies is Donald Super [10], who underscored the pivotal role of self-concept development in the context of career advancement, asserting that the self-concept evolves. Hence, career development is an ongoing and lifelong process [9], divided into stages that encompass exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement.

The transformation of the socioeconomic environment challenges the once-entrenched paradigms surrounding careers, shifting our perception from a linear progression of job positions with hierarchical advancements and the sole assessment based on tangible metrics such as wages, promotions, and professional standing [11]. The traditional model of a career path, in which individuals climb a predefined ladder to attain success, is rapidly yielding ground to a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of what constitutes a fulfilling and sustainable career. Individuals are increasingly navigating their career paths through a labyrinth of possibilities, adapting to frequent changes, and seeking personal fulfillment beyond the boundaries of traditional success markers.

Moreover, the career trajectory is significantly shaped by the meanings individuals ascribe to their career experiences during their narrative discourse, whether explicitly articulated or implicitly held. It is important to recognize that individuals may hold diverse conceptions of careers [12], and these representations significantly influence their career choices [13,14] while providing invaluable insights into how individuals intend to shape their futures [15].

1.2. The Concepts of ‘Sustainable Career’

Recently, the topic of career sustainability has become central to the academic literature. The concept of ‘sustainability’, as outlined by the United Nations, encompasses a global perspective that encourages individuals to strive to fulfil their needs in a way that ensures that the ability to fulfil future ones is not compromised [16]. A sustainable career can be conceptualized as a continuum of professional experiences [17] reflected through patterns of continuity over time, crossing various facets of society, and it is characterized by indicators of health, happiness, and productivity [3]. Therefore, while general sustainability concerns the balance between current and future needs on a broader scale, career sustainability focuses on maintaining a fulfilling, healthy, and productive career for the individual over time and across contexts. De Vos and colleagues [3] emphasized that the analysis of career

sustainability needs a multidimensional approach. First, it involves a person-centered perspective, focusing on the individual as the central actor who shapes the sustainability of their career through actions and interpretations of experiences. Second, it encompasses a systemic viewpoint, considering not only the work context but also the individual's private life, the sector to which they belong, the broader labor market context, society, and culture. Lastly, it acknowledges the dynamic nature of careers, recognizing that they evolve. Hence, it is crucial to contemplate what renders a career sustainable throughout the lifespan, accounting for both intra-individual and contextual changes that influence career management.

To cultivate a sustainable career, it is imperative to take into account the people and factors that hold significance for the individual in their career [18], including their values and internal career anchors [19]. While needs, values, and career anchors may evolve, they represent critical milestones against which individuals make career decisions, enhancing their adaptability [3]. The perception of professional experiences as meaningful is correlated with increased motivation and commitment [20]. In other words, when individuals find purpose and significance in their professional pursuits, it acts as a powerful motivator, propelling them to invest more effort and energy into their work. Meaningful professional experiences impart a distinct sense of purpose and mission on one's professional endeavors [21]. Moreover, attributing meaning to professional experiences plays a pivotal role in facilitating a state of life satisfaction [20] and flourishing [22], because the satisfaction derived from finding purpose in one's professional experiences can spill over into other facets of life, creating a holistic sense of well-being.

1.3. The Context of the Study

The dynamics of our contemporary socioeconomic landscape have ushered in a new era where traditional career paths are no longer the standard. In the 21st century, the emerging career patterns are characterized by the experience of being protean—driven by the individual's values and being self-directed [23] and boundaryless—transcending the confines of single employment settings [24] and comprising many positions with multiple organizations. These career patterns exhibit a reduced dependence on traditional career management and are intricately and dynamically linked to career adaptability [25] and to the perception of career success [26].

In recent years, many European countries have experienced several significant changes in the labor market, which inevitably had a significant impact on young people's ability to enter the labor market and develop sustainable and decent careers. In 2022, Spain had one of the highest youth unemployment rates in Europe, second only to Greece: 22.4 percent of 15–29-year olds were unemployed [27]. Also in 2022, Italy had the third-highest percentage of unemployed youth in Europe, at 18 percent [27] (Eurostat, 2023). On the one hand, job insecurity characterizes the transition of Spanish youth into the world of work [28]. On the other hand, young Italian university students have a more negative perception than their peers in other European nations, such as Switzerland, of being able to access a decent job [29]. These data can influence youth perceptions of career development.

This is particularly relevant for young university students who experience the transition from school to work as a major turning point in their lives [30]. Due to global economic instability and the complexity of career decision making, many university students will increasingly face challenges and obstacles related to career sustainability and making effective career decisions [31–34]. The pressure experienced by young individuals regarding their prospects primarily arises from their perception of career development [35].

This changing landscape calls for a deeper exploration of how young individuals perceive and construct their career narratives. To the authors' knowledge, no study has ever explored career and sustainable career definitions by comparing Italian and Spanish university students.

1.4. Aims of the Study

Aligned with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [4] and Savickas' Life Design paradigm [5], our study aims to understand how Italian and Spanish university students conceptualize careers and sustainable careers. Grounded in both the person-centered and contextual approaches of De Vos et al.'s model [3], we focus on the individual as the protagonist of his or her career journey, which is defined through the meanings he or she ascribes to the career and professional experiences he or she navigates [36], highlighting the specificity of the socio-cultural contexts.

Notwithstanding the growing interest in career sustainability, a definition firmly rooted in individual experiences within the Italian and Spanish contexts is still lacking. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to help fill this gap in the literature by exploring definitions of sustainable careers and careers among Italian and Spanish university students, addressing the broader discourse on career sustainability. To achieve our research objective, we have formulated the following research questions:

1. How do Italian and Spanish university students conceptualize the notion of a 'career', and what commonalities and distinctions emerge in their perceptions?
2. What are the definitions of 'career sustainability' among Italian and Spanish university students, and what shared perspectives or potential variations can be identified?

By addressing these research questions, we aim to deepen our contextual understanding of sustainable careers and careers, thereby making a crucial contribution to yield a more comprehensive understanding of the roles and significance of careers within the existential storylines of individuals and in the specific socio-cultural contexts that shape them. Moreover, the findings stemming from this investigation are poised to furnish valuable insights that can potentially inform the formulation of policies and the implementation of practices geared toward the cultivation of careers that are perceived as authentically sustainable for individuals within the Italian and Spanish contexts.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

The initial sample of the present study consisted of 197 Italian university students (28 males and 169 females) and 193 Spanish university students (154 males and 193 females). However, to pair the sample and allow subsequent comparisons, we randomly eliminated some participants. The final sample consisted of 112 university students: half of them were Italian (28 males and 28 females) and the other half Spanish (again 28 males and 28 females). The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 31 years ($M = 20.38$; $SD = 2.44$).

The research protocol was administered to the university students during lecture hours, in agreement with the lecturer. A researcher from the research group explained the objectives of the study. The students were free to decide whether to participate. Those who participated scanned a QR code and filled in the research protocol on a form created via Google. In each case, they were asked to view the informed consent and agree to participate in the research. The research protocol safeguarded the confidentiality and protection of participants' data, and the survey responses were anonymous, with no personally identifiable information recorded. The responses collected were inaccessible to unauthorized parties, and only the researchers directly involved in the study had access to the data. The study was conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki, following the guidelines of the Italian Orientation Society (SIO) and the Italian Psychology Association (AIP).

2.2. Methodology for Analyzing Career and Sustainable Career Definitions

To investigate participants' perceptions of the career and sustainable career concepts, we employed a brief research protocol consisting of three key sections:

- Biographical information, with the gender and age of the participants.
- Definition of the career concept: 'What is a career in your opinion?'

- Definition of the sustainable career concept: ‘What is a sustainable career in your opinion?’

This qualitative research approach aligns with methodologies previously utilized to explore concepts such as work and decent work [14,37]. It is a methodology that makes it possible to investigate the participants’ perceptions of the concept under investigation. Unlike extensive research protocols, our approach prioritizes brevity, which has been highlighted as more satisfying for respondents by Allen and colleagues [38]. Moreover, this approach ensures that participants’ responses are not unduly influenced by the cultural or theoretical perspectives of the researchers during the data collection process.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using two software programs: SPSS 25.0 and NVivo 12.0. The first of these two is a software program mainly used for quantitative analyses; NVivo 12 is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) that supports the researcher in organizing and analyzing data [39,40]. We divided the analysis into different steps.

First step: first, we checked whether there were significant differences regarding age between the two groups of students, Italian and Spanish, using the paired-sample *t*-test [41] in SPSS 25.0. We expected that there should be no difference in this variable between the two groups.

Second step: next, we analyzed the qualitative answers of the participants. Before proceeding with the analysis of the answers, the datasets received a cleaning process, i.e., grammatical errors or words written in dialect were corrected. Two researchers were involved in this phase, one native Italian speaker and one native Spanish speaker. No translation of the participants’ answers was carried out.

Once the files were cleaned, the participants’ answers were analyzed in their original language by a bilingual researcher and a Spanish researcher (for the Spanish participants’ answers) and the same bilingual researcher and an Italian researcher (for the Italian participants’ answers). Analyses were conducted separately by the two pairs of researchers, and a fourth researcher intervened to resolve the few discrepancies that had emerged in the data coding. In this way, a version of the analyses was arrived at that satisfied all researchers and enabled the research results to be compiled.

Specifically, using the NVivo 12 software, we identified the most frequently used words for both the career concept and the sustainable career concept. Researchers can use NVivo12’s word frequency tool to identify the most common thematic nodes among participants’ answers. In this vein, we asked NVivo to identify the 50 most frequently used words in the responses with at least four letters. Additionally, words expressed in masculine and feminine or singular and plural were merged, and all adverbs or articles were eliminated. At this point, we created tables with the most frequently used words for each group that were repeated at least three times. These tables allowed us to identify the most relevant thematic nodes emerging from the definitions of the students involved in the research.

To investigate how Spanish and Italian university students defined careers and sustainable careers, analyses were conducted separately for these two groups. Next, we conducted a content analysis of the most relevant themes [42]. This analysis facilitated an inductive (i.e., data-driven) approach. This procedure is consistent with grounded theory methods (GTM) producing conclusions that did not have to begin with hypotheses [42]. Several authors [43–45] have emphasised that these methodologies provide intellectual rigour to scientific research.

To ascertain whether there were significant differences in the nodes identified between the groups of Italian and Spanish students, we applied a correspondence analysis using the SPSS 25.0 software. Correspondence analysis allows the researcher to visualise relationships between nominal and categorical variables [46–48]. This analysis is based on contingency tables, allowing one to detect relationships or differences between two groups.

3. Results

The students involved in the study had no statistically significant differences in age ($M_{IT} = 20.80$; $M_{ES} = 19.96$; $t = 1.86$; $p = 0.07$).

3.1. Definition of the Concept of 'Career'

In the description of the career concept, Italian students used a total of 422 words. The Spanish students used 497 words.

The results of the word frequency analysis for the concept of 'career' showed that in both cases (Italian and Spanish students) the words used to describe careers involved the work–study sphere (work/work, professional, sphere, training, pathway/trjectory) or personal aspects (person/personal, experiences, achievement, goal, life). In all these cases, the word 'time' emerged. The other words used most frequently by Italian students were 'satisfaction' and 'growth'. Spanish students also referred to 'future' and 'effort'.

Table 1 summarizes the results of this word frequency analysis.

Table 1. Word frequency analysis for the concept of career.

Italian Students		Spanish Students	
Word	Count	Word	Count
Work	22	Work	48
Path	22	Career	24
Life	8	Studies	21
Career	7	Life	21
Personal	7	Future	18
Professional	6	Education	16
Own	5	Personal	15
Reach	5	Professional	15
Field	4	Arrive	9
Experience(s)	4	Field	8
Satisfaction	4	Effort	7
Growth	3	Level	7
Training	3	Time	7
Goal(s)	3	Trajectory	6
Time	3	Academic	5
		Expertise	4
		Dedicates	4
		Goal(s)	4
		Allows	4
		Experience(s)	3

The frequency analysis illustrated in Table 1 allowed us to identify the nodes that Italian and Spanish students used to describe the concept of career. The first node was 'career as work'. This node included all the definitions that included words such as work, career, profession, and professional. For example, participant No. 44, an Italian student, defined a career as 'a career path', whereas participant No. 12, a Spanish student, defined a career as 'a job throughout life'.

The second node was called 'training pathway' and included answers describing 'career' as a personal and professional training process. Words categorized under this node were level, training, studies, academic, and experience(s). For example, an Italian student (participant No. 19) defined a career as 'a training path during which you accumulate knowledge and experience', but a Spanish student (participant No. 52) described a career as 'a level of study that allows you to build your professional future'.

The third node we identified was called 'commitment' and included words such as 'effort' and 'time'. In this case, describing a career involved considering an individual's effort in building it. For example, participant No. 41, an Italian student, described a career

as ‘the time devoted to one’s career’, and participant No. 11, a Spanish student, described a career as ‘the time and effort a person devotes to study, to obtain a degree and a job’.

The fourth node was called ‘growth and satisfaction goals’ and included all statements containing words such as growth, satisfaction, personal, life, knowledge, and goal(s). In this context, a ‘career’ was a source of personal satisfaction and growth. For example, an Italian student (participant no. 30) described a career as ‘the path that each person takes to reach his or her job satisfaction’. Additionally, participant no. 33, a Spanish student, described a career as ‘the trajectory that allows you to evolve as a person to reach your professional goals’.

However, some participants’ definitions could not be classified into the aforementioned nodes. For example, participant No. 44, an Italian student, described a career as ‘mainly a prison that leads us to exhaustion without any real promise’. Beyond this, participant No. 85, a Spanish student, defined a career as ‘content and wisdom’. These answers were classified under a node called ‘unclassifiable’.

Finally, some participants did not provide any answers. For this reason, a final node called ‘no response’ was created.

Table 2 summarizes the results described so far.

Table 2. Nodes and references for the concept of career.

Node	Italian	References	
		Spanish	Total
Career as work	25	24	49
Training pathway	9	22	31
Commitment	5	3	8
Growth and satisfaction goals	12	15	27
Unclassifiable	1	3	4
No response	17	9	26

A correspondence analysis showed no difference for the following nodes: career as work (inertia = 0.00; chi-square = 0.04; df = 1, $p = 0.85$), commitment (inertia = 0.01; chi-square = 0.54; df = 1, $p = 0.46$), growth and satisfaction goals (inertia = 0.00; chi-square = 0.44; df = 1, $p = 0.51$), unclassifiable (inertia = 0.01; chi-square = 1.04; df = 1, $p = 0.31$), and no response (inertia = 0.03; chi-square = 3.21; df = 1, $p = 0.07$). Significant differences emerged concerning the training pathway node (inertia = 0.07; chi-square = 7.54; df = 1, $p = 0.01$). The Spanish students provided more classifiable answers in this node.

3.2. Definition of the Concept ‘Sustainable Career’

In describing a sustainable career, Italian students used 477 words, and the Spaniards used 395 words.

The results of word frequency analysis for the term ‘sustainable career’ showed that Italian and Spanish students used words concerning the work–study sphere (work/work, professional, sphere, training, pathway/trajectory) or personal aspects (person/personal, experiences, achievement, goal, life). In both analyses, the word ‘time’ was especially prominent. The other words used most frequently by Italian students were satisfaction and growth. Additionally, Spanish students used the words ‘future’ and ‘effort’.

Table 3 summarizes the results of this word frequency.

The following nodes were identified in the frequency analysis of the sustainable career concept. The first node was called ‘sustainable career as a job’ and included words such as work, career, and professional. Two examples of answers categorized under this node came from participant No. 8, an Italian student, who defined a sustainable career as ‘a person’s career path’ and participant No. 11, a Spanish student, who defined a sustainable career as ‘a job that lasts a lifetime’.

Table 3. Word frequency analysis for the concept of sustainable career.

Italian Students		Spanish Students	
Word	Count	Word	Count
Career	63	Work	44
Work	47	Career	36
Path	32	Study	19
Life	18	Life	18
Own	14	Future	15
Person	12	Person	9
Sustainability	12	Allow	8
Allow	10	Time	8
Professional	10	Professional	7
Individual	9	All	7
Development	7	Adequate	6
Conditions	6	Stable	6
Others	5	Climb	6
Time	5	Effort	5
Ability	4	Academic	4
Accessible	4	Scope	4
Community	4	Pleasure	4
Costs	4		
Create	4		
Rights	4		
Experience	4		
Environment	4		
World	4		
Respect	4		
Satisfaction	4		

The second node was called ‘sustainable career as an educational pathway’. This node includes answers concerning whether a sustainable career is both a personal and professional training pathway. Words such as ‘academic’ or ‘study’ were included in this node. For example, participant No. 36, an Italian student, defined a career as ‘an academic pathway’, and participant No. 12, a Spanish student, described a sustainable career as ‘what you choose to study and that will bring you closer to your goals’.

The third node identified was called ‘sustainable career as work–life balance’. This node included information emphasising that a sustainable career allows workers to have a certain degree of work–life balance. Therefore, this node includes words such as ‘life’ and ‘time’. For example, participant no. 25 (an Italian student) described a sustainable career as follows: ‘a sustainable career is a career that allows you to have a good quality of life and enough free time’. Similarly, participant no. 71 (a Spanish student) described a sustainable career as ‘compatible with all aspects of life’.

The fourth node was called ‘sustainable career as personal satisfaction’ and included all statements containing words such as satisfaction, experience, pleasure, or future. In this case, the definition of a sustainable career involves the personal satisfaction a person could derive from a sustainable career. Participant no. 45 was an Italian student who described a sustainable career as ‘a career that allows one to lead a satisfying life and cultivate one’s passions without giving them up to prioritize work’. In this vein, participant no. 59, a Spanish student, described a sustainable career as ‘a career that positively influences one’s life’.

The fifth node was called ‘social empowerment’ and described a sustainable career as something useful for improving the conditions of society. Words such as environment, world, respect, others, development, or sustainability appeared under this node. Participant no. 25 (an Italian student) described a sustainable career as follows: ‘[a] sustainable career is a career defined with respect for the self, the other and the surrounding world, capable

of decreasing costs and increasing profits'. Similarly, participant no. 84 (a Spanish student) described a sustainable career as 'a career that takes sustainability into account'.

Even in sustainable career descriptions, some definitions could not be classified because they did not fit any of the previous nodes. For example, participant no. 44, an Italian student, described a career as 'an ideal that as people we spend our lives chasing [...] which often drains us of our energy and happiness'. On the other hand, participant no. 85, a Spanish student, wrote that a sustainable career is one 'that looks everywhere'. These answers were classified under the node called 'unclassifiable'.

Finally, participants who did not provide any answers were classified in another node called 'no response'.

Table 4 summarizes the results described so far.

Table 4. Nodes and references for the concept of sustainable career.

Node	References		
	Italian	Spanish	Total
Career as work	26	22	48
Training pathway	1	6	7
Work–life balance	8	3	11
Personal satisfaction	18	17	35
Social empowerment	12	3	15
Unclassifiable	7	5	12
No response	16	18	34

A correspondence analysis showed no difference for the following nodes: career as work (inertia = 0.01; chi-square = 0.58; df = 1, $p = 0.45$), training pathway (inertia = 0.03; chi-square = 3.81; df = 1, $p = 0.05$), work–life balance (inertia = 0.02; chi-square = 2.52; df = 1, $p = 0.11$), personal satisfaction (inertia = 0.00; chi-square = 0.04; df = 1, $p = 0.83$), unclassifiable (inertia = 0.00; chi-square = 0.37; df = 1, $p = 0.54$), and no response (inertia = 0.00; chi-square = 0.17; df = 1, $p = 0.68$). Significant differences emerged in relation to the node called social empowerment (inertia = 0.06; chi-square = 6.24; df = 1, $p = 0.01$). The Italian students provided more classifiable answers in this node.

4. Discussion

The transition to work represents a significant milestone in the careers and trajectories of young university students [30]. However, we know that the context in which young individuals envision and make decisions about this process has significantly changed [9–11]. The difficulties and challenges they face in accessing qualified jobs and building sustainable careers [13,14] represent a significant source of pressure, especially for countries like Spain and Italy, which are characterized by high unemployment rates and job instability [27–29]. The perceptions and meanings that young people attribute to their careers are crucial inputs in planning their future, as noted by various researchers [35,36].

With these premises in mind, this research has sought to explore in depth how young individuals perceive and construct their professional narratives. Adopting a systemic and idiographic perspective, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of these processes by comparing the definition of the career and sustainable career concepts among Italian and Spanish university students. The results enable us to approach the primary meanings that students attribute to the concept of a career. The different perspectives confirm that professional careers constitute a complex mosaic of objective experiences and subjective evaluations [3].

A significant portion of the university student responses, both Italian and Spanish (40%), placed great emphasis on the relationship between career and concepts such as work or profession, but framed it in terms of a path or itinerary towards employment. This aligns with one of the most widely shared social understandings of the career concept, understood as an individual's professional trajectory and its temporal dimension throughout their life.

Twenty-five percent of the contributions made by students also relate to the career as a person's path, but, in this case, they are restricted to one of its components: education. For these students, the career refers to the space and time of education or the degrees and qualifications accumulated, often with connotations related to initial education. The observed differences regarding the country of origin suggest semantic influences on the meaning of 'career', as in Spanish, university studies are also referred to as careers. One-fourth of the definitions used by the students participating in the study also referred to the career as a source of personal satisfaction and growth. This aspect, beyond the importance of the subjective dimension of the career, points to traditional standards of professional progress or success, indicating a significant shift in how young people view their future. For a minority of students, the career is also described with consideration of the effort that an individual must dedicate to building it; the dimensions of commitment and proactivity are fundamental components of the current concept of the career.

The concept of professional sustainability has gained significant relevance in an ever-evolving labor market. It involves the implementation of strategies and practices throughout a person's professional journey to ensure an appropriate balance between work and personal life, thus fostering ongoing well-being and satisfaction in the workplace [3,17]. Following the model of De Vos et al. [3], the results show the role of the personal dimension, where agency and meaning suggest that professional competencies and adaptability are important for the analysis of sustainable careers. From the point of view of the contextual dimension, where a systemic view is taken, it influences different contexts and highlights the importance of aligning work demands with support systems. In terms of the temporal dimension, given the changes and events throughout a career, it is necessary to develop a reflective process that considers the interaction between the individual, his or her context, and changes over time.

Focusing on the concept of a 'sustainable career', it is evident that both Italian and Spanish students placed importance on longevity and continuity within a sustainable career. Furthermore, both groups emphasized the importance of achieving an appropriate work-life balance as an essential component of a sustainable career. These notable observations indicate that students from both Italy and Spain highly value the idea that a sustainable professional career should not entirely drain an individual but, instead, allow personal time to extend beyond workplace boundaries. Additionally, assigning significance to one's professional encounters assumes a vital function in promoting a state of life satisfaction [20] and overall success [22]. This is due to the fact that the gratification derived from discovering a sense of purpose in one's professional experiences has the potential to permeate into various other aspects of life, thereby generating a notion of holistic and comprehensive well-being. However, the productivity indicator does not emerge in this study in the definitions obtained for sustainable careers.

Lastly, particularly noteworthy is the fact that for both Spanish and Italian students, the concept of 'social empowerment' is integral to the definition of a sustainable career, a dimension that is conspicuously absent in the traditional concept of a career. Thus, a sustainable career can be defined as one that promotes well-being and quality of life for oneself, others, society, and the planet as a whole. Within the scope of this study, it becomes evident that a career can be considered sustainable when it has a social impact, or it serves the purpose of enhancing the overall societal conditions. This definition of sustainable careers is in line with the findings of Romero-Rodriguez et al. [8], who found that good practices in vocational education and training are based on methodologies that promote the development of sustainable careers based on ethics and social justice.

In summary, this study makes a significant and valuable contribution to our understanding of how Italian and Spanish university students perceive and comprehend the concepts of a 'professional career' and a 'sustainable career'. Despite sharing a broad understanding of these concepts, it is evident that cultural and educational factors may influence certain divergences. These differences could have far-reaching implications for career guidance and decision-making processes in these specific contexts.

The analysis of the meanings of ‘career’ and ‘sustainable career’ confirms that individuals use different indicators to evaluate both concepts, including personal and contextual aspects. The results align with those authors who emphasized that the career is a subjective and unique construct for each person [7], meaning that individuals may have different orientations in terms of how they view their career and what elements are positive for it [49]. However, some constants emerge: the profession is their central axis, but their valuation goes beyond traditional criteria.

We see how the meaning of ‘career’ has become more linked to the idea of a trajectory, focusing on the process dimension, while the meaning of ‘sustainable career’ has been more centered on the product or outcome. Work or education are important aspects of a sustainable career, but complementary meanings have emerged that are compatible with a concept of sustainability that is both idiographic and multidimensional. Thus, satisfaction, the career as personal fulfilment, and the balance between personal and professional life are aspects present in the sustainable career model of authors like Van der Heijden [18] and De Vos et al. [3].

5. Conclusions

This research delved into the definitions of the concepts of a ‘professional career’ and a ‘sustainable career’ among Italian and Spanish university students, within the context of contemporary society, challenging traditional linear career progressions. These conceptions can influence career choices and affect how individuals develop strategies and manage their professional paths. By investigating individual perspectives among Italian and Spanish university students, the study contributes to understanding the multifaceted nature of career development in the face of changing socioeconomic contexts.

The findings reveal a diverse range of viewpoints, emphasizing the intricate interplay of personal choices and meanings attributed to the concept of a career. For instance, the study reveals that, on the one hand, a career can be defined as an evolving sequence of work experiences, influenced by contextual and cultural factors, that include training pathways, a continuous commitment to personal growth goals, and professional satisfaction; on the other hand, a sustainable career can be defined as a professional trajectory that incorporates the concept of work as an ongoing commitment, training pathways, a healthy work–life balance, personal satisfaction, and social empowerment. Similarities and differences were identified in the understanding of these fundamental concepts related to the world of work among these groups of students. Commonalities included the recognition of the importance of work and the profession in a professional career, as well as the value placed on social empowerment, longevity, and work–life balance in a sustainable career. Differences included a greater emphasis on the ‘professional career as an educational path’ among Spanish students and a stronger focus on the ‘sustainable career as an educational path’ among Italian students. Therefore, the results indicate that Spanish students tend to emphasize education and training in the careers they choose, while Italian students may be more aware of the importance of continuous education in establishing sustainable professional trajectories.

Moreover, this study makes a distinctive theoretical contribution by emphasizing the often-overlooked dimension of ‘social empowerment’ in sustainable career concepts. The inclusion of social impact as integral to defining a sustainable career adds noteworthy value to established perspectives. Recognizing that a sustainable career extends beyond the personal dimension introduces a novel understanding aligned with ethical and social justice principles. This insight enriches discussions on sustainable careers, highlighting their potential to positively impact both individuals and the broader societal and environmental context.

This intriguing perspective on cultural disparities and commonalities in the understanding of professional and sustainable careers can be beneficial for career professionals and those involved in higher education in these particular contexts.

6. Limitations and Implications for Future Research and Practice

Notwithstanding, the study has several limitations. First, the limited sample size may not be representative of the broader population. Second, the study specifically explores students' perspectives on the definitions of 'career' and 'sustainable career', and it does not investigate the views of other key stakeholders, such as professionals from different industries, academics, or practitioners. Third, the study does not examine how these definitions may have evolved over time or in response to changing societal contexts.

Future longitudinal research could focus on conducting comparative cross-cultural studies using groups from different cultural backgrounds and providing valuable insights into the dynamics of these concepts. Moreover, comparative intergenerational studies would help scholars to see changing patterns in workers of different generations; for example, future studies with larger samples could evaluate differences in the definitions of 'career' and 'sustainable career' in the following generational groups [50]: baby boomers, generation X, generation Y—millennials, and generation Z. In addition, qualitative studies on employees could contribute to the understanding of how leaders and managers might need to shift their thinking and acting to create organisations that foster a greater person–organization fit for younger generational employees.

The study also holds potentially significant implications for career counselling practice. Because there is a considerable variation in how university students define their careers and career sustainability, counsellors would find it beneficial to delve into their clients' perspectives on these topics at the outset of the career counselling process. These viewpoints can not only have a profound impact on how they interpret the results of a career-assessment test [14], but can also have a far-reaching influence on the entire trajectory of the students' career development.

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