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Career Sustainability Profiles of Self-Initiated Expatriates and Associated Person-Related Factors

Shaofang Zong  | Sandaruu Jayawardhana | Vesa Suutari

School of Management, University of Vaasa, Vaasa, Finland

Correspondence: Shaofang Zong (shaofang.zong@uwasa.fi)

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ABSTRACT

The increasingly volatile global working environment poses particular challenges for self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), who often lack formal organizational support and must manage their careers independently. However, research on SIEs has largely focused on single international experiences or specific stages of the expatriation cycle, thereby overlooking the long-term consequences of expatriation on career sustainability. This article complements existing research by adopting a longitudinal perspective building on sustainable career theorizing to examine career sustainability profiles among SIEs and the associated person-related factors. We interviewed 34 SIEs and identified three distinct career sustainability profiles: sustainable, unsustainable, and transitional. Furthermore, we found three main factors associated with profile membership within the person dimension: agency, experienced meaning of work, and global career identity. In addition, our data indicate that such person-related factors evolve through expatriation experiences over time, indicating that career sustainability among SIEs is dynamic. This study contributes to both SIE and sustainable career literature.

1 | Introduction

The topic of global mobility has recently changed considerably. While many companies reduced their use of assigned expatriates during the COVID-19 crisis (Andresen et al. 2023), self-initiated global mobility has not decreased to the same extent. Self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) are individuals who choose to pursue work abroad independently, rather than being assigned by an employer (Cerdin and Selmer 2014). The choice to relocate autonomously means SIEs lack the structured pre-departure support and adaptation resources available to assigned expatriates (Brewster et al. 2021). Consequently, SIEs must assume responsibility for their mobility decisions (e.g., location, timing, duration), job-seeking, relocation formalities, and potential return (Cerdin and Selmer 2014) or re-expatriation decisions (Mello et al. 2023a). An SIE often faces unique career challenges, such as finding a suitable job (Lee 2005), well-being challenges during transitions (Kelly and Conroy 2023), and difficulties in integrating with local societies and job markets (Al Ariss and

Ozbilgin 2010). However, expatriation may also present new job, career, and life opportunities for individuals if they succeed (Jokinen et al. 2008). The SIE situation calls for personal skills and proactive engagement in managing a career and facilitating mobility to achieve success (Jannesari and Sullivan 2019).

Previous research examines SIEs from several perspectives (see Selmer et al. 2025), including motives for relocation (Madi et al. 2023), adjustment (Atay et al. 2024), work-life balance (Cho and Chew 2021), management support (Singh et al. 2022), and repatriation decisions (Kelly and Conroy 2023). Although such studies provide important insights, they tend to focus on single international experiences, offering only a snapshot of SIEs' experiences at a particular stage of the expatriation cycle. Investigations into the careers of SIEs have focused on career capital development (Mello and Suutari 2023), employability (Makkonen 2015a), turnover intention (Lehtonen et al. 2023), career success (Mello et al. 2023b), and the factors shaping those career outcomes.

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Some work investigates the long-term impact of international work experience on career outcomes, including for SIEs (Dickmann et al. 2018; Suutari et al. 2018). However, the analysis of SIE careers from a long-term perspective remains scarce, revealing a notable gap in SIE literature regarding the understanding of the complexity and evolution of SIEs' global career trajectories over time (Mello et al. 2023a). That long-term perspective would be useful owing to the dynamic nature of SIE careers, which often involve multiple transitions across organizational and country borders (Andresen et al. 2023).

This study employs sustainable career theorizing (De Vos et al. 2020) to investigate how SIE careers evolve. A sustainable career has been defined as “sequences of career experiences, reflected through a variety of profiles of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, thus providing meaning to the individual” (Van der Heijden and De Vos 2015, 7). De Vos et al. (2020) found that a sustainable career is shaped by cumulative experiences and evolving personal and contextual conditions. Furthermore, the nature of such careers can be exposed using three indicators: health, happiness, and productivity. Although this is a novel approach (Tordera et al. 2020), career sustainability investigations relying on it now span a range of career contexts, including sports (Richardson and McKenna 2020), self-employed workers (van den Groenendaal et al. 2022), and visually impaired people (Bhaskar et al. 2023). However, the sustainable career perspective has not yet been applied in the global career context.

This study responds to calls for further research on sustainable careers (Greenhaus et al. 2024), particularly the global type (Mello et al. 2023a; Zong et al. 2026), by examining the evolution of career sustainability among SIEs. As part of that process, we address their global career transitions and the person-related factors shaping such experiences. The primary objective of this study is to employ sustainable career theorizing (De Vos et al. 2020) to explore whether distinct career sustainability profiles can be identified among SIEs. While our approach is novel within the realm of global careers, recent studies have employed similar methodologies for identifying profiles based on selected variables (e.g., coping profiles and factors associated with such profiles, Cruz and Nagy 2024; career competency profiles and predictors of profile membership, Blokker et al. 2025). The current research advances the understanding of career sustainability among SIEs by adopting a holistic approach aligned with sustainable career theorizing and simultaneously considering three indicators of sustainable careers among SIEs: health, happiness, and productivity. Additionally, we identify associated person-related factors. Both objectives are served by incorporating the temporal dimension of sustainable career theorizing into an analysis of how SIE profiles and the person-related factors associated with them evolve over time. We emphasize the person-related perspective owing to its significance among SIEs, who bear primary responsibility for managing their own career trajectories and must rely on their personal resources to do so. While context-related factors have an important role in shaping the career realities of SIEs, existing adjustment studies provide substantial insights into the context-related challenges encountered abroad (e.g., Atay et al. 2024; Singh et al. 2022).

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with 34 SIEs from diverse industries and countries. Given the scant application of career sustainability theorizing in the context of global careers (Donald et al. 2024; Mello et al. 2023b), we illuminate the career sustainability experiences of SIEs by identifying three distinct career sustainability profiles. While SIE studies often provide a snapshot of the group's experiences, we analyze their career experiences over time to unveil how career sustainability evolved throughout their careers. Additionally, we identify a set of person-related factors associated with profile membership (see Cruz and Nagy 2024), indicating how these factors also develop over time in the wake of global mobility experiences.

The paper is structured as follows: The literature review synthesizes existing research on SIEs and sustainable careers, after which we discuss the sustainable career perspective as it applies to the careers of SIEs. This is followed by a discussion of the research methodology, the findings, and finally, the discussion and conclusion.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Self-Initiated Expatriates

The cross-border movement of human capital has emerged as a significant challenge for organizations and nations alike, garnering increasing scholarly attention in international business research (Lei et al. 2025). Within that context, some researchers have focused on SIEs (Andresen et al. 2023; Kelly and Conroy 2023; Suutari et al. 2018). Building on Cerdin and Selmer (2014)'s definition, Brewster et al. (2021, 313) described an SIE as follows:

Someone who made the decision to work in another country themselves: they either go to that country and get a job once there, or they apply for employment there from their home country and some are then supported to move; or, if they were already working abroad when they made that decision, they are SIEs if they elect to work for a different organization.

SIEs relocate independently of company assignments, assuming responsibility for the full spectrum of mobility choices, including the reasons for moving, the destination, the duration of stay, and the timing of (or decision to) their return (Kelly and Conroy 2023; Mello et al. 2023a). That autonomy distinguishes SIEs from traditional corporate expatriates and entails both opportunities and risks.

Brewster et al. (2021) conducted a systematic literature review of the most impactful contributions to identify four recurring themes that structure SIE research and clarify the contours of the phenomenon. First, research addresses the different types of SIE, often identified in comparison with assigned expatriates (e.g., Shaffer et al. 2012). Early work distinguishes young opportunists, job seekers, officials, localized professionals, international professionals, and dual-career families (Suutari and Brewster 2001). These subgroups differ in terms

of prior international exposure, skill profiles, and career logics. Recognizing such distinctions highlights the diversity within the SIE population and directs attention to specific features of samples considering person-level (e.g., prior international experience; Suutari et al. 2018) and contextual factors (e.g., profession, see Froese and Peltokorpi 2011).

Second, a considerable volume of research addresses motives for expatriation. Motivations are diverse; however, studies consistently cite limited home-country prospects, a desire for adventure and new experiences, personal relationships, quality of life considerations, and career prospects as primary drivers (Despotovic et al. 2025; Froese and Peltokorpi 2011; Suutari and Brewster 2001; Thorn 2009). While motivation studies often adopt a relatively static view of self-initiated expatriation motives at a certain point in time, it is important to note that motivations also vary due to individual factors (e.g., age, gender, prior expatriate experience, and seniority) and context (e.g., nationality and family situation) (Selmer and Lauring 2011). Collectively, these findings emphasize that self-initiated expatriation decisions are goal-driven yet context-sensitive, blending instrumental career aims with personal and family priorities. Nevertheless, little is known about how these motives evolve over time during international careers.

Third, the adaptation of SIEs when abroad (or upon repatriation) has garnered significant attention. Given that SIEs typically lack employer-provided support, securing suitable employment and the associated visas and work permits can be challenging, and they will likely receive limited assistance with career management and repatriation (Al Ariss and Ozbilgin 2010; Cerdin and Selmer 2014). Nevertheless, many SIEs become embedded in their host country by developing local social ties (Mäkelä and Suutari 2013), acquiring the local language (Froese and Peltokorpi 2013), and, in the absence of fixed assignment end dates, staying abroad for extended periods, with some ultimately settling more permanently (Przytuła 2015; Suutari and Brewster 2001). This dynamic suggests a dual reality characterized by greater initial vulnerability due to limited organizational support, juxtaposed with a high level of adaptive interest and capacity, as SIEs invest in cultivating local social capital.

Fourth, research outlines the specifics of SIEs' careers and related career outcomes. The group typically exhibits high levels of organizational mobility, a trend that can be expected to persist throughout their careers (Biemann and Andresen 2010). Their career orientations also tend to remain relatively stable across age groups. However, when SIEs experience limited autonomy, poor job fit, a lack of job variety, or a weak psychological contract, they often perceive themselves as underemployed, in that their skills and experience are underutilized, which is associated with weak job and career satisfaction and work alienation (Lee 2005). Expatriate careers can also disrupt work–life balance (Suutari and Makela 2007), and some SIEs accept localized contracts that restrict family-friendly flexibility (Lee 2005; Richardson 2006). Conversely, expatriation provides extensive learning opportunities for career capital development (Dickmann et al. 2018). While the evidence is somewhat mixed (Mello et al. 2023a), expatriation and the corresponding development of career capital may facilitate career advancement and promotions (Biemann and Andresen 2010; Mello et al. 2023b). The limited external

support available to them forces SIEs to exercise individual agency in managing their careers (Makkonen 2015a) and to build networks within the host country (Kubovcikova and van Bakel 2022).

In summary, while prior research has significantly advanced our understanding of SIEs, it has traditionally focused on single assignment experiences. As outlined in the introduction, a longitudinal perspective on SIE careers and their evolution over time remains insufficiently developed in the current literature (Andresen et al. 2023; Chen et al. 2024). Consequently, we propose that sustainable career theorizing (De Vos et al. 2020) provides a useful framework for understanding the careers of SIEs from a long-term perspective. We next outline sustainable career theorizing and review the existing research on sustainable careers.

2.2 | The Process Model of Sustainable Careers

The process model of sustainable careers (De Vos et al. 2020) offers a long-term, dynamic perspective on the evolution of a sustainable career, characterized by three indicators: *health*, *happiness*, and *productivity*. *Health* pertains to the evolving alignment of a person's career with their physical and psychological capacities. Research has examined general health (Van der Heijden et al. 2024), physical health (van den Groenendaal et al. 2022), mental health (Gerritsen et al. 2024), and burnout (Barthauer et al. 2020), among other aspects. *Happiness* reflects individuals' subjective appraisal of their careers in relation to their overarching goals and values, both professional and personal. It is frequently assessed through measures of career satisfaction (van den Groenendaal et al. 2022), job satisfaction (Tordera et al. 2020), or life satisfaction (Gerritsen et al. 2024). *Productivity* encompasses performance, career success, and career potential. Common metrics of productivity include job performance (Kong et al. 2023), employability (Talluri et al. 2022), and career advancement (Bhaskar et al. 2023). It is crucial to consider all three indicators in the analysis when seeking to understand the sustainability of an employee's career (De Vos et al. 2020; Gerritsen et al. 2024).

The sustainable career model also underscores that a sustainable career is shaped by the interplay of three dimensions: *person*, *context*, and *time* (De Vos et al. 2020). The *person* dimension highlights two elements: agency and meaning. Agency indicates that individuals play a prominent role in shaping their career sustainability by exerting control over their career activities and coping with situations that are beyond their control (De Vos et al. 2020). Research has indicated that proactive career behaviors, such as career planning and network building (Lent et al. 2024), and reactive career activities, such as leveraging technology to regain functional capacity following the onset of disability (Bhaskar et al. 2023) or reshaping a response to exclusion (Baldrige and Kulkarni 2017), are associated with career sustainability. The meaning aspect emphasizes the importance of individuals' interpretations of the significance, purpose, and personal relevance of their career in contributing to career sustainability relative to their values and aspirations (De Vos et al. 2020). Ruiz Castro et al. (2020) found that a lack of meaning in work was a significant driver of career transitions, while

experiences of greater meaning enhanced participants' career sustainability.

The *context* dimension considers external factors related to career actors across different contextual layers, including national and industrial, organizational and work, and private life contexts (De Vos et al. 2020). Recently, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as an additional actor in the career ecosystem due to its disruptive potential regarding the labor market, thereby influencing individuals' career sustainability (Donald et al. 2024). Existing research indicates that contextual factors impacting individuals' career sustainability include social culture (e.g., gender norms; Michaelides et al. 2023), the human resource practices of employers (Tordera et al. 2020), industry or profession characteristics (Richardson and McKenna 2020), and family support (Michaelides et al. 2023).

The *time* dimension views a sustainable career as an evolving process shaped by individuals' past and present experiences as well as their future expectations. It is influenced by the constant changes and interactions between personal and contextual conditions (De Vos et al. 2020). Careers are increasingly boundaryless as individuals navigate opportunities that span organizational and national boundaries (DeFillippi and Arthur 1994; Guan et al. 2019), and career environments increasingly involve career disruptions (Akkermans et al. 2020). However, researchers of career sustainability devote relatively little attention to the time dimension. Some research adopts a career stage perspective and reports that the challenges an individual faces vary according to their career stage, leading to distinct career sustainability experiences (Blokker et al. 2025). Furthermore, in today's career landscape, most individuals experience multiple job and career transitions, such as moving across organizations and industries (Wiernik and Kostal 2019), changing careers and professions (Akkermans et al. 2024), or adapting to career disruptions and shocks arising from issues like dramatic changes to the job market or to personal health circumstances (Akkermans et al. 2020).

2.3 | The Sustainable Career Angle on Self-Initiated Expatriates

While there is little research on SIE careers from the career sustainability perspective that incorporates its three indicators, there are studies on certain aspects of career sustainability, such as well-being (Biswas et al. 2022), career satisfaction (Chen et al. 2024), or career progress (Mello et al. 2023a). The sustainable career angle emphasizes the importance of incorporating how career sustainability evolves over time, while SIE studies typically focus on specific stages of the expatriation cycle, such as pre-departure (Richardson 2006) or repatriation (Mello et al. 2023a). While existing studies do not provide a comprehensive view of the overall career sustainability of SIEs or how such sustainability evolves over time, some research unveils the experiences of SIEs in terms of health, happiness, and productivity separately.

In terms of *health*, expatriates must often learn to cope with their new situations, while lacking recourse to the home-country resources previously available (Dickmann and Baruch 2011). One

result is that expatriates often feel they must work extended hours, which can strain their well-being (Biswas et al. 2022) and lead to burnout (Berger and Bruch 2021), exhaustion (Mäkelä et al. 2022), fatigue, and sleep disturbance (Grant-Vallone and Ensher 2001). While these challenges can affect all expatriates, SIEs often feel them more acutely due to this lack of structured organizational support, requiring them to self-manage their relocation and career planning (Cerdin and Selmer 2014). A family situation can feature among the reasons SIEs expatriate (Richardson and Mallon 2005); however, the outcomes are mixed: some report better work-life balance, while others experience intensified tensions between personal and professional roles abroad (Tahir 2023). These pressures can undermine SIEs' overall health, thereby threatening the sustainability of their careers.

In terms of *happiness*, expatriates often report relatively high levels of career satisfaction despite the challenges of international work. Mello et al. (2023b) conclude that international assignments often have positive effects on subjective career success, particularly in terms of career and life satisfaction, although outcomes vary for individuals and contexts. Repatriated SIEs also tend to report strong career satisfaction, with some studies finding them as satisfied as assigned expatriates (AEs) (Sutari et al. 2018; Mello et al. 2024). However, findings on job satisfaction were more mixed. While some SIEs report lower job satisfaction than AEs (Froese and Peltokorpi 2011), others—such as SIE academics—report high levels of satisfaction (Stoermer et al. 2021), reflecting the diversity within the SIE population. Tahir (2023) finds that SIEs may experience persistent tensions in juggling work and private roles, which strains their sense of balance and satisfaction. Chen et al. (2024) report that stronger organizational and community embeddedness enhances career satisfaction for SIEs, while Selmer and Luring (2012) show that good relations at work and successful adjustment are positively linked to job satisfaction. Nevertheless, these findings do vary significantly. Some SIEs struggle with unmet expectations, constrained opportunities, or work-life tensions abroad, which may undermine their happiness and, in turn, threaten the long-term sustainability of their careers. Overall, there is a need for more targeted research on happiness as an indicator of sustainable careers among SIEs.

Regarding *productivity*, expatriation can be beneficial for SIEs' longer-term productivity by enhancing their career capital (Dickmann et al. 2018). Career capital developed abroad has been found to relate positively to subsequent career success in terms of promotions and perceived marketability, even after expatriation (Mello et al. 2023b). The performance of SIEs may decline temporarily when they take up a new assignment. For instance, maladjustment due to high uncertainty and stress has been shown to undermine work contributions (Maharjan et al. 2022). Older SIEs seem to restore performance levels more efficiently than their younger counterparts, perhaps because they translate their dedication more effectively into faster adjustment (Selmer and Luring 2015). However, the employability effects are not uniformly positive for SIEs. Studies of western SIEs in China suggest that they can experience a reduction in perceived employability as employers might view employing them as a risky proposition (Makkonen 2015a). Furthermore, SIEs can struggle to secure roles that reflect their competencies

after expatriation if their skills are perceived as highly context-specific (Makkonen 2015b). Overall, while the broader expatriation literature has begun to document links between international experience, performance, and career success, systematic evidence on SIE-specific productivity measures such as employability and sustained career capital utilization remains limited compared to that available for AEs (Brewster et al. 2021).

The sustainable career framework emphasizes time is a central dimension (De Vos et al. 2020), recognizing that individuals' careers and career sustainability evolve. This is particularly relevant for SIEs, whose careers feature a variety of transitions requiring them to navigate cultures, organizations, and labor market realities. Although time is central to understanding the longer-term career sustainability of SIEs, only a few empirical studies have examined these dynamics over time. Suutari et al. (2018) conducted an eight-year follow-up of expatriates, including SIEs, demonstrating how international work experience influences long-term subjective and objective career success. In line with a temporal perspective of sustainable careers, Andresen and Biemann (2013) show that, unlike other types of global managers, SIEs typically follow boundaryless career trajectories marked by mobility across national and organizational boundaries over time. Although they achieve lower objective career success than AEs, they report comparable levels of subjective career success, suggesting that career sustainability unfolds differently across career patterns as objective and subjective success diverge. Begley et al. (2008) interviewed SIEs at different intervals post-repatriation and found that SIEs tend to experience short-term difficulties around reintegrating into home-country job markets, but that over time, their situation improved. Lee (2005) investigated the experiences of SIEs abroad and found that they initially accepted jobs for which they were overqualified, but in time, most obtained more appropriate positions and after a few years, they began to realize that they would remain abroad longer than initially planned. Dickmann et al. (2018) traced the development of expatriates' career capital (knowing-how, knowing-whom, and knowing-why) over time, demonstrating its increasing value. Fu et al. (2017) followed SIEs across three waves to illustrate how their organizational socialization, adjustment, and performance evolved during different stages spent abroad. Other studies indirectly highlight this temporal dynamic: Despotovic et al. (2025) show that SIEs' motivation may shift as their circumstances change, while Makkonen (2015a) demonstrates that perceived employability can strengthen or weaken over the course of expatriation. Collectively, these studies indicate that SIE careers clearly evolve over time; yet systematic, longitudinal research remains scarce. The result is a significant gap in understanding how SIEs reach, build, and sustain their career sustainability across changing contexts and phases of life.

Although a variety of theoretical perspectives have informed SIE research, sustainable career theorizing has yet to be applied to it. Our study, therefore, adopts the sustainable career model proposed by De Vos et al. (2020) as its conceptual foundation to examine the sustainable career indicators of happiness, health, and productivity. In contrast to prior research that focuses on a single point in the expatriation journey, our study considers multiple phases of SIEs' international careers. By acknowledging that these indicators evolve over time and across contexts,

it addresses a significant gap and advances a more dynamic and comprehensive understanding of career sustainability among SIEs.

3 | Method

3.1 | Research Design

The current research addresses the underexplored topic of the lived experiences of SIEs during their careers. The topic is a complex and evolving one that is shaped by continuous cross-border transitions and demands on personal resources. Investigating such dynamic and subjective experiences requires access to the meanings individuals assign to their career trajectories. Saunders et al. (2009) argue that individuals interpret and engage with what may appear to be the same objective reality in distinct ways, influenced by their own values, backgrounds, and situational contexts. Our subject SIEs experienced and interpreted career realities differently at various stages of their careers, constructing meaning through ongoing interactions with a constantly changing environment, which in turn shaped their actions and career trajectories. Therefore, we adopted an interpretive qualitative approach, which is based on a social constructivism ontology and assumes that multiple realities are constructed by individuals because of their interactions with their socially constructed realities (Cohen et al. 2004). This interpretive approach facilitates a profound exploration of the subjective experiences and views of social actors in an understudied phenomenon (Morgan and Smircich 1980). In this research, social constructivism enables an enquiry into career sustainability within SIEs' social, economic, cultural, historical, and temporal contexts (Creswell and Poth 2018), thereby facilitating an analysis of how SIEs take ownership (agency) and make sense (meaning) of their global careers.

3.2 | Samples

When selecting interviewees, we applied the conceptual criteria of SIEs proposed by Cerdin and Selmer (2014) to distinguish SIEs from other types of international movers. Accordingly, our selection criteria encompassed only individuals who had: (1) self-initiated their international relocation, (2) held or intended to hold regular employment in the host country, (3) planned a temporary stay abroad, and (4) possessed professional skills or qualifications. Each participant in the sample had one or more self-initiated work experiences abroad during their career, thus fulfilling the first two criteria. They also held at least a bachelor's degree in addition to years of professional experience, which aligns with the fourth criterion. Regarding the third criterion of a planned temporary stay abroad, the situation was more complex. In a long-term career follow-up study such as this, it became evident that the intention to stay temporarily or to immigrate more permanently is not always very clear among SIEs. Over time, SIEs accumulate experiences and make new mobility decisions. Concerning the third criterion, we thus adopted the perspective of McNulty and Brewster (2017), positing that individuals can be regarded as SIEs if they either expressly stated a temporary stay intention or lacked a definite time frame at the beginning of their expatriation.

We employed purposive sampling to recruit SIEs working outside their home countries, utilizing both professional and social networks within their home countries and internationally, and we complemented this approach with snowball sampling (Haak-Saheem et al. 2022). The objective was to select SIEs with diverse backgrounds and expatriation locations, thereby capturing variation in career sustainability experiences across different cultural and institutional contexts (Brewster et al. 2021). Consequently, we recruited SIEs from five global regions: Europe ($n = 15$), Asia ($n = 8$), the Middle East ($n = 3$), Africa ($n = 5$), and the Americas ($n = 3$). At the time of the study, participants were distributed across various continents: Americas ($n = 7$), Europe ($n = 23$), Asia ($n = 3$), and Australia ($n = 1$) (Table 1).

3.3 | Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews to capture the career experiences and follow the evolution of career sustainability (CS) among SIEs (Kelly and Conroy 2023). Such a relatively open interview framework facilitates focused, conversational, two-way communication (Saunders et al. 2009). The questions were designed to elicit detailed insights into SIEs' career experiences across all three indicator areas. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min, were recorded with informed consent and automatically transcribed via Microsoft Teams to ensure transcription consistency and efficiency. Participants were invited to discuss their career experiences both prior to expatriation and during each expatriation period. The interview questions also encompassed their future career plans. The discussion of different career stages included person-related factors associated with career sustainability.

3.4 | Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using MAXQDA 24, which supports the development of a structured codebook by assigning codes to relevant text segments, creating memos to capture reflections and connections between codes, tracking code frequencies, and examining excerpts associated with specific codes. Analytical tools such as MAXQDA have been utilized in expatriation research previously (e.g., Andresen 2021).

Data analysis was conducted in two stages (see e.g., Cruz and Nagy 2024, for a similar approach). We identified different career profiles in terms of career sustainability (stage 1), by inductively grouping participants into three emerging career sustainability sets: sustainable, unsustainable, and transitional. The grouping process was based on how their experiences evolved across the three indicators of the sustainable career framework: happiness, health, and productivity (De Vos et al. 2020). The sustainable career profile includes SIEs who experienced consistently positive outcomes across all three indicators over time throughout their careers. The unsustainable career pattern comprises SIEs who have not achieved sustainability over time. For this group, one or more indicators remained persistently weak, resulting in an overall lack of sustainability. The final pattern was labeled transitional to encompass SIEs whose career sustainability fluctuated in the different stages of their careers. These individuals experienced periods of compromised health, happiness, or productivity yet eventually

reached a more sustainable career state. Their profiles illustrate that career sustainability can develop gradually and may be achieved after navigating significant challenges or turning points in their careers.

The second stage identified person-related factors associated with the career sustainability of SIEs but also differentiated the identified SIE profiles. Our approach was abductive; we were concurrently observing emerging data and considering theory-driven classifications of person-related factors indicated by sustainable career theorizing. The approach made it possible to report findings in a form that connects with sustainable career theorizing, while our reporting was not limited to the factors named in the model.

3.5 | Trustworthiness

We adopted several strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of this research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). First, we guaranteed anonymity to all participants to uphold ethical research standards in line with established qualitative research guidelines (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Creswell and Poth 2018). Second, we used follow-up contacts to verify that the interview transcripts captured their experiences as career expatriates and to clarify any ambiguities or missing information to enhance interpretive accuracy (Andresen 2021). Third, to mitigate potential research bias (Haak-Saheem et al. 2022), we employed a multi-step, iterative coding process. In the first round, the first and second authors independently coded the data. Discrepancies were addressed through joint discussion and deeper analytical reflection, which led to convergent interpretations. In the second round, the first author conducted coding using MAXQDA and compared the results with those from the first round. This was followed by collaborative discussions with the second and third authors to further refine the coding framework and ensure analytical rigor. Throughout the process, we moved iteratively between the data and relevant theoretical concepts, continuing this cycle until we reached theoretical saturation—that is, the point at which no new codes or insights emerged.

4 | Results

We present our research findings in two sections to achieve our objectives of identifying different career sustainability profiles among SIEs and examining the person-related factors associated with profile membership. Additionally, we incorporate the temporal dimension, which is one of the core aspects of sustainable career theory. The analysis of profiles directly engages with this temporal dimension by investigating the long-term evolution of career sustainability throughout the international career trajectories of SIEs. Regarding the identified person-related factors, we also discuss how these factors have developed through global work experiences.

4.1 | Career Sustainability Profiles Among Self-Initiated Expatriates

The literature on sustainable careers conceptualizes a career as a dynamic, long-term process rather than a mere snapshot

TABLE 1 | Sample description.

Code	Age	Gender	Civil status	Chil	Home country	Current profession	Countries (n)	Career track abroad (country and years of stay)
John	34	Male	Single	0	Sri Lanka	Hotel Manager	3	Dubai (2)—Seychelles (6)—Canada (2)
Mia	30	Female	Married	0	Sri Lanka	Accountant	2	Canada (2)—Australia (1)
Ann	38	Female	Single	0	Nigeria	Researcher	2	United Kingdom (4)—Finland (3)
Jack	33	Male	Married	1	Syria	Researcher	3	Saudi Arabia (7)—United Arab Emirates (2)—Finland (1)
Tim	32	Male	Single	0	Lebanon	Researcher	3	Kuwait (2)—Italy (5)—Finland (2)
Joe	42	Male	Married	6	Singapore	Marketing Manager	1	Finland (7)
David	52	Male	Married	5	Finland	Entrepreneur	1	Netherlands (4)
Ray	40	Female	Married	1	China	Asst. Professor	2	Finland (5)—United Kingdom (3)
Ben	38	Male	Married	1	France	Accountant	2	China (10)—Canada (2)
Max	48	Male	Married	1	Germany	Entrepreneur	1	China (2) ^a —China (14)
Sam	44	Male	Married	2	China	Sales Manager	2	Finland (6)—Finland (8)
Dave	45	Male	Married	2	Belgium	Entrepreneur	3	Finland (7)—United States (2)—Finland (10)
Mary	36	Female	Engaged	0	Albania	Economist	2	France (2)—Luxembourg (8)
Amy	37	Female	Married	1	Albania	Director	2	Malta (3)—Luxembourg (7)
Dan	45	Male	Married	3	Poland	Banking Officer	2	Ireland (8)—Luxembourg (9)
Lily	50	Female	Single	1	Italy	Finance Manager	5	Luxembourg (4)—UK (3) ^a —Turkey (2)—Romania (5)—Brussels (1)
Simon	30	Male	Single	0	Kenya	Engineer	2	United Kingdom (2)—Finland (2)
Tom	48	Male	Married	2	France	HSC Manager	1	China (7) ^a —China (11)
Mike	44	Male	Married	2	Iran	Post Doc Researcher	1	Finland (3)
Meg	26	Female	Married	0	Canada	Architect	1	South Korea (2)
Ivy	27	Female	Married	0	Austria	Communication specialist	2	Germany (6)—Finland (1.5)
Heidi	25	Female	Married	0	US	Researcher	1	Canada (2)
Liz	50	Female	Married	1	South Africa	Teacher	2	Abu Dhabi (5)—Finland (18)
Henry	44	Male	Married	2	Nigeria	Director	3	Brazil (1)—Finland (8)—Canada (14)

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Code	Age	Gender	Civil status	Chil	Home country	Current profession	Countries (n)	Career track abroad (country and years of stay)
Peter	33	Male	Single	0	Nigeria	HR specialist	4	Liberia (2) ^a —Kenya (1)—Canada (2)—Sweden (4)
Tyler	45	Male	Married	1	France	Unemployed	1	Finland (10)
Kim	41	Female	Married	2	Finland	Manager	1	Canada (11)
Kate	41	Female	Single	0	Finland	Project Manager	1	Pakistan (1.5)
Rose	41	Female	Married	4	Poland	Project Manager	2	Nigeria (4)—Canada (6)
Jasmine	39	Female	Married	0	Malaysia	Content Marketer	2	Finland (4.5)—Iceland (3.5)
Maria	42	Female	Single	2	Finland	HR business partner	2	Czech (1.5)—Sweden (2)
Smith	45	Male	Married	0	Brazil	Post Doc Researcher	3	Germany (6.5)—United Kingdom (1)—Finland (7)
Alice	44	Female	Single	2	Indonesia	Financial specialist	3	Singapore (2)—Hong Kong (6)—Canada (2)
Sophia	37	Female	Married	1	Kazakhstan	Project manager	1	Canada (14)

^aLocations/periods as assigned to an expatriate.

of a point in time (De Vos et al. 2020). Accordingly, we consider the careers of SIEs both in their home countries prior to expatriation and during their international career experiences as we assess the evolution of career sustainability. This study identifies three distinct career sustainability profiles that reflect varying experiences in relation to the three indicators of career sustainability: health, happiness, and productivity. These profiles are categorized as sustainable, unsustainable, and transitional.

4.1.1 | The Sustainable Career Profile (n = 7)

Those SIEs with this profile predominantly reported very positive experiences abroad. Although they had often achieved career sustainability in their home countries, they chose to relocate internationally for various reasons, including career aspirations, a desire for new experiences, or family considerations. They expressed contentment, noting that they had secured engaging and fulfilling employment. Rather than viewing stress as a burden, they reported it as a catalyst for enhanced productivity. Furthermore, they emphasized continuous growth in their global careers, highlighting opportunities for development and career advancement. Participants indicated that they continued to pursue expatriation, motivated by personal aspirations, professional growth opportunities, and familial factors. Many expressed satisfaction with their work–life balance while also taking on greater responsibilities within their organizations and receiving recognition for their accomplishments. They conveyed a sense of enjoyment in their new roles and expressed pride in their achievements.

I really enjoyed it [expatriation] at the professional level and also at the personal level. (Amy)

4.1.2 | Unsustainable Career Profile (n = 9)

In contrast to the sustainable career profile, participants in this category exhibited unsustainable career trajectories throughout their global mobility experiences. The concept of a sustainable career emphasizes the equal importance of happiness, health, and productivity, and that success across all areas is necessary to establish career sustainability. However, SIEs with this career profile struggled to achieve overall career sustainability. At times, they experienced productivity in terms of high performance and career progression but were dissatisfied with their job or their health suffered due to elevated stress levels and work overload. Conversely, there were occasions when they found satisfaction in their work but were unable to maintain their health and productivity.

My work feels very fulfilling. I really feel like what I'm doing is meaningful... and appreciated... However, due to the work overload I experience, my health fluctuates significantly... I do not get enough sleep. (Meg)

For many SIEs, the decision to expatriate followed earlier experiences of limited career sustainability in their home countries. Despite being relatively successful and earning competitive salaries, some participants reported a heavy workload or lack of personal fulfillment. Consequently, they chose to pursue opportunities abroad in search of more sustainable careers that would offer a better fit. However, after their expatriation, they faced various new challenges that impeded their ability to achieve career sustainability. Some participants reported satisfaction with the host country's culture, climate, or their jobs abroad; others were able to attain higher-level positions and perform effectively,

but struggled with onerous work demands, leading to elevated stress levels and poor work–life balance. Upon re-expatriating, they often encountered new challenges, further hindering their ability to establish overall career sustainability. Overall, their experiences indicate an unsustainable career profile throughout their global careers.

Jasmine, a Malaysian professional who worked in Iceland before moving to Finland said: my well-being was down the drain. That's when I realized that I enjoy the working culture in Iceland, where people are very ambitious and driven, but it is not good for my mental health.

4.1.3 | Transitional Career Profile ($n = 18$)

A third career profile emerged that was distinct from the previous sustainable and unsustainable career profiles. Here the career sustainability of SIEs typically evolved over time to incorporate greater sustainability. We identified SIEs who had unsustainable career trajectories in their home countries but managed to achieve career sustainability following expatriation. While working in their home country, they were often dissatisfied with low incomes and limited career advancement. Additionally, some reported health concerns related to heavy workloads and safety issues in their home country. Consequently, they chose to relocate abroad in search of better career opportunities. After expatriation, some of these SIEs quickly secured fulfilling and enjoyable jobs that offered higher salaries and sometimes led to promotions to more senior positions. Meanwhile, they successfully maintained their health by effectively managing work-related stress.

I was not satisfied with the job conditions, including everything from salary to productivity to the work culture... personal safety was another problem... that is why I basically chose to leave my home country... Of course, I was satisfied after moving to Saudi Arabia... So, I can say I was much more productive. Overall, I am happy and satisfied in my second host country. (Jack)

Some SIEs initially found it difficult to secure work abroad in which they were simultaneously happy, healthy, and productive. For instance, while they appreciated the nature of their roles in the host country, they often felt they had to sacrifice their well-being to sustain high levels of productivity. In other cases, their health remained stable, but they felt dissatisfied with their performance. Nevertheless, while it sometimes required multiple relocations, these SIEs succeeded in constructing sustainable careers abroad. They were satisfied with their life and career, maintained a work–life balance, and achieved high levels of productivity, accompanied by good income and career progress.

In Sri Lanka, I had to begin with a low salary... It was quite a challenge to move up the ladder... In Dubai, it involved hard physical work, but I definitely had more

opportunities and growth. In the Seychelles, it was not very hard physical work, but I had to work long hours. It has been challenging for career growth... In Canada, the situation is totally different... Now, after 10 years, I'm a housekeeping manager. (John)

While some SIEs initially struggled to create sustainable careers, some reported experiencing career sustainability in the early stages of their careers. More specifically, regardless of whether they began their careers in their home country or directly abroad, participants initially entered jobs that were closely aligned with their personal interests. They also managed to sustain their well-being and expressed pride in their achievements. Nevertheless, their career sustainability later diminished following expatriation. They perhaps lost interest in their work, struggled to cope with high levels of stress, and accordingly their performance declined. Some found it hard to secure a suitable job abroad. However, they were typically eventually able to address the challenges and restore career sustainability due to new career moves. When interviewed, they were content with their careers, accomplishments, and quality of life.

When I started the (first) job, it was actually one of the best career experiences that I ever had... Everything I learned about teaching came from that job [in the first host country]... I was hired [in the third host country] for my expertise, for what I had, my education and stuff, and what I had, experience... Every one and a half years, I was promoted, or I could find another job at a higher level... Unlike in Finland [second host country], where for nine years, I could not move up at all. (Henry)

4.2 | Person-Level Factors Associated With Career Sustainability Profiles

Three main factors were associated with profile membership within the person dimension of sustainable career theory: agency, experienced meaning of work, and global career identity. The data indicate that such person-related factors are dynamic and evolve alongside expatriation experiences.

4.2.1 | Agency

Our data show that the degree of agency individuals have in planning and managing their careers varies and that such activity is connected with the career sustainability of SIEs and which profile they fit. Agency emerged through three different angles: career adaptability, entrepreneurial mindset, and career resilience. While these angles may overlap, they emphasize different aspects of agency and thus complement each other. We also address how agency evolves spurred by global experiences in the context of each of the above angles.

4.2.1.1 | Career Adaptability. Many career planning and management activities of SIEs can be clearly linked to the concept of career adaptability, a central element of career

construction theory (Savickas 2005). The concept describes a person's ability to handle current and future challenges, career changes, and personal difficulties (Savickas 2005). This adaptability manifests via *concern*, *control*, *curiosity*, and *confidence*. For example, some SIEs demonstrated proactive *concern* by carefully planning their move abroad (which might involve budgeting and career strategies), preparing in advance (as in researching the host country), or continuously learning new skills and acquiring professional qualifications. Some respondents also demonstrated an intention to *control* over their careers by making careful choices in relation to changing jobs, industries, or countries. Those SIEs with strong career adaptability traits also tended to be open-minded about exploring new cultures or career paths and about learning new knowledge or skills, which exemplifies *curiosity*. *Confidence* manifests in terms of a certainty that obstacles can be surmounted and a preparedness to face future challenges. Those SIEs with robust career adaptability traits appear to make steady career progress and remain employable. The ability to adapt also helps manage stress, balance work and their personal life, and stay mentally and physically healthy. Moreover, it helps people find jobs that match their values and support personal growth, which enhances happiness and satisfaction at work.

Career adaptability was clearly observable in both the sustainable and transitional career profiles. In contrast, SIEs whose careers exhibited lower sustainability seemed to be less involved in adapting their careers to benefit them. When reporting on difficulties in adapting to the host country and maintaining their careers, especially in terms of job performance and career growth, this last group tended to focus on external challenges instead of their own efforts to prepare for or manage their careers and movement.

I did a lot of research on the company (preparing for moving, concern)... I also changed industries because when I was working in audit, not in accounting, I had to adapt to the needs of the market. Auditing was more popular in Albania (making career decisions about changing industries, control) ... So I was levelling up my position... I would say I was happy on a personal and professional level... I was learning new things every day... In all countries, I continue to study and invest in my career... So, whenever I saw an opportunity to learn more, I invested in those (learning new things, curiosity)... You can deal with different situations, and the confidence is also growing (confidence)... I was really enjoying it on both a professional and personal level. (Amy; sustainable career profile)

Adopting a temporal perspective showed that the career adaptability concept is dynamic. Respondents developed career adaptability through high-density global work and navigating unexpected cross-cultural events. They gained experience that bolstered their proactive approach to preparing for career sustainability in later expatriations. They learnt career adaptability is crucial in global careers, where they enter new settings, get

limited support, and face unforeseen challenges. They learnt to prepare for and cope with such challenges individually and as family members (Mäkelä and Suutari 2013). All the SIEs in the transitional group but one achieved career sustainability abroad, enhanced by career adaptability skills gained during expatriation.

So, each time you move, when you go to another place you prove yourself and your skills. So, you get more confidence in your personality. I'm (now) satisfied with my career success and what I did before in these multiple countries, and I always try to apply what I learned from these different positions, different companies, and different environments to develop myself... So, my career is like a chain; each job helped in the next, and I was successful. (Jack; transitional career profile)

4.2.1.2 | Entrepreneurial Mindset. An entrepreneurial mindset (McGrath and MacMillan 2000) is as a significant factor within the agency theme. It is characterized by entrepreneurial activities and thinking, and a preference for environments that foster autonomy and innovation. This concept refers to a growth-oriented perspective through which individuals promote flexibility, creativity, continuous innovation, and renewal (Ireland et al. 2003, 968). While career adaptability emphasizes the self-directed agency of SIEs in planning and managing career transitions, the entrepreneurial mindset emphasizes the independent creation of work opportunities. This is evident in a person's willingness to adopt flexible employment modes (e.g., freelance consulting) or as entrepreneurs, where they retain full responsibility for their employability and development.

This mindset also manifests as the motivation to initiate new projects and enterprises, frequently within contexts lacking established procedures. This entrepreneurial approach facilitates career sustainability by enabling SIEs to recognize and link opportunities, especially in contexts where expatriation could otherwise constrain career advancement. By perceiving challenges as opportunities and prioritizing innovative work over routine tasks, SIEs consistently assist the development of novel activities and enterprises. These activities contribute to an individual's productivity, happiness, and overall well-being. The entrepreneurial mindset is especially prominent among SIEs fitting the sustainable career profile and is evidenced in several instances within the transitional career profile; however, it is completely absent among those with an unsustainable career profile.

I always took the jobs with an entrepreneurial spirit—that's just who I am... I had to set up the first non-Mercedes client... I was the first guy in China in that department, so I always look where I can do something, create something that is new... Same thing I always looked for jobs that nobody had before (preference to be creative)... I always did everything in an environment where you have entrepreneurship... I go always fields where you don't have processes where you're not stuck in this big tanagers where you really

need decision-making (preference of innovation and decision-making)... (after the prior employer shut down the subsidiary in China) they offered me to go back to Austria to back to Germany and do the business from there with them. And I said no... I am staying here, so I have my own consulting business. I set up the patent... And also in the consulting assignment, I can see things and connect the dots very fast (cognitive agility). (Max; sustainable career profile)

Such an entrepreneurial mindset is often evident from the outset of an SIE's career and becomes increasingly amplified as their career transitions across borders. This mindset is driven by a combination of a persistent desire for learning and a preference for innovation. Over time, the accumulated experience through successive expatriation assignments further enhances their innate capacity to recognize emerging opportunities. They are inspired by the prospect of building something new and by the dynamic nature of international environments demanding adaptability and creative problem-solving. Repeated exposure to diverse cultural, institutional, and organizational contexts sharpens this group's entrepreneurial orientation, reinforcing self-directed career agency. As their careers evolve, so too does their ability to proactively shape opportunities across different markets and sectors, often resulting in highly portable and sustainable global career paths.

I have always been able to find jobs by sticking to my triangle model (logistics, IT, and commercial)... And because I liked new things, my position and salary and things were progressing well... I am a global logistics network expert on how to transport medicines rapidly by air, and how to build such networks inside a country. I created an innovative method and system, based on the knowledge I have gained in the airline industry... I now have my own business, a global healthcare system, which is the first global healthcare system today in the world. (David; transitional career profile)

4.2.1.3 | Career Resilience. Differences also existed among SIEs regarding the degree to which they emphasized the necessity of thriving under pressure and the ways in which they bolstered resilience through challenging experiences. Several SIEs emphasized the importance of perseverance and were convinced that challenges are transient, an attitude that strengthened their capacity to withstand adversity. This corresponds with the contemporary conceptualization of career resilience in the literature (Peeters et al. 2022; Seibert et al. 2016). Career resilience is a developmental process through which individuals persist, adapt, and succeed on their professional trajectories despite encountering challenges, transitions, and disruptions (Mishra and McDonald 2017). While career adaptability encompasses proactive behaviors intended to anticipate and manage changes (Bimrose and Hearne 2012), career resilience relates more specifically to the capacity to endure and withstand even highly challenging changes. High resilience was found to

contribute to career sustainability for SIEs by enhancing their performance through challenging experiences and by facilitating career advancement and satisfaction. Although recognizing the potential for adversity and maladaptive aspects in certain resilience-related behaviors, the data demonstrated the enjoyment derived from managing challenges. The significance of resilience was highlighted by SIEs within sustainable career profiles and among individuals exhibiting transitional patterns who, notwithstanding facing challenges during international transitions, succeeded in reconstructing their career sustainability.

I'm extremely hardworking. Some would say a workaholic, but I think more hardworking. I'm extremely resilient. The more stressed I feel, the more productive I am... Now moving is much more... let's say the idea of moving again is far more difficult... in general, what has become stronger in my mind is that there the difficulties because before I was invincible. (Lily; sustainable career profile)

Similar to career adaptability, career resilience appears to be forged through a dynamic process in which SIEs continuously develop and strengthen their capacity to adapt as they cope with diverse and challenging experiences. Many highlighted that changing living situations, jobs, or societies exposes them to stress and challenges, but also fosters resilience. In some cases, resilience is cultivated through confronting injustice, such as wage disparities attributable to race, or constraints on career advancement. Many SIEs overcome challenges, enhance their resilience, and interpret those challenges as opportunities for personal development. That might entail accepting unskilled work, acquiring new languages, or operating in difficult environments to obtain the experience that can contribute to success. Ultimately, the acquired resilience enables SIEs, particularly those with a transition career profile, to attain career sustainability.

We are more exposed if we are changing living place, job, and society. You're exposed to stress... but you can manage, I mean every change helped me to be more open and be more resilient to stressful life situations. (Dan; transitional career profile)

4.2.2 | Meaning

In line with career sustainability theory, our findings indicated that the meaning SIEs attach to their work and careers plays an important role in shaping their career sustainability. The respondent SIEs discussed the meaningfulness of their work or spoke of their sense of purpose (or lack thereof) in some of their roles. They often described their work as meaningful when it created a broader societal impact, contributing to the greater good rather than self-interest. An example would be creating innovative outcomes that address critical societal needs, help others grow, advancing research, or educating future generations. Conversely, work lacking a deeper purpose or causing conflicts with personal values will not be perceived as meaningful, even

if it pays well. Overall, the pursuit of meaning is more visible among those fitting the sustainable and transitional career profiles and appears to be among the key drivers for the career sustainability of some SIEs.

I was working for a purpose. So, I was working with an organization that I believe so much in what they work, what they do. And for me, the happiness comes from every single day of going to work doing that it wasn't even connected to remuneration in any form. It wasn't connected to the quality of work environment. It's the purpose. So, I was very much motivated by that and I was very happy. (Peter; sustainable career profile)

Unlike other person-related factors that constantly evolved through international experiences, our observations showed that views on the meaning of work appeared somewhat more stable. Specifically, SIEs with sustainable and transitional career profiles tended to anchor their career pursuits in deeply held personal values, which often manifested in an aspiration to search for purpose and meaningfulness in their work. Although the preferences were relatively stable, international moves tend to intensify the search for meaning in work in when SIEs had diverse work experiences owing to global careers. Then, the variety of their experiences leads them to seek opportunities that align with their values and interests. The journey towards finding meaning in work can be complex and iterative, with SIEs sometimes experiencing a sense of loss or disorientation following significant career disappointments. Some have also chosen to resign from positions that conflict with their moral perspective to pursue roles contributing to a greater societal purpose.

4.2.3 | Global Career Identity

The interview material illustrates the role of a global career identity (Suutari and Makela 2007) in factors impacting SIEs' career sustainability. The respondents highlighted their global career identity through a strong global career orientation (e.g., a desire to live and work abroad), a global job market perspective (e.g., scanning career options across borders), and a sense of global belonging (e.g., identifying as global citizens or being reluctant to repatriate). When SIEs repatriate, they often struggle to adjust to work and life at home and show a strong inclination towards international work. A global career identity is crucial, enabling individuals to navigate work options across countries to achieve career sustainability. Many SIEs prefer continuous movement and new challenges over stability, finding comfort zones stifling. This pursuit of new opportunities involves calculated risks and a willingness to start from a low baseline, contributing to personal fulfillment and job satisfaction when successful. The global career identity is especially pronounced among SIEs with sustainable and transitional career profiles, although some SIEs with an unsustainable career profile emphasize their global identity, driven by dissatisfaction or a desire to escape stagnation; despite the challenges inherent in working abroad.

I wanted to get international experience to be competitive in the international market... it gave me more happiness... the quality of the opportunity was the main driver that made me move to the next country... In Canada, there was a better job fit. I was hired for my expertise... I could also grow. Every six months, I was promoted or I could find another job that was at a higher level ... There was a time I went back to Nigeria between Finland and Canada. I did get a job, but I didn't even last one month there... I see myself as a global citizen... Canada offers the best value and return on investment for me in terms of career sustainability (Henry; transitional career profile).

From a temporal perspective, SIEs universally described how a global career identity evolved as they accumulated international experience. Although they frequently encountered challenges, they exhibited a progressively increasing self-confidence and competence in navigating the global career environment. After experiencing diverse career and location settings, they came to understand their preferred career paths, roles, and living environments. Ongoing personal development, increased self-confidence, and the acquisition of professional competencies significantly advanced their career progression and employability. While acknowledging the challenges inherent in global careers, they also developed an appreciation for mobility, cross-cultural differences, and diverse experiences. This phenomenon was especially pronounced among SIEs exhibiting a transitional career profile. For them, each international relocation functioned as a catalyst to construct a global identity, driven by continuous adaptation, self-reflection, and identity development (Akkan et al. 2022).

5 | Discussion

Drawing on 34 semi-structured interviews with SIEs, this paper utilizes sustainable career theorizing (De Vos et al. 2020) to examine career sustainability profiles among SIEs and the individual-related factors associated with these profiles. Next, we elaborate on the reported findings from the perspectives of the study's contributions and practical implications.

5.1 | Theoretical Contributions

5.1.1 | Profiles of Career Sustainability Among SIEs

The results reveal three distinct career sustainability profiles reflecting different configurations of health, happiness, and productivity among SIEs. Our results show that SIEs with sustainable career profiles exhibit robust career sustainability across three indicators during expatriation, while those with unsustainable profiles fail to align those indicators, which hinders overall career sustainability. Unlike the two profiles above, the transitional career profile shows evolving career sustainability, with some SIEs building sustainable careers abroad after an unsustainable start at home, and others starting with a sustainable

career profile, losing it, and later regaining it as their international experience grew.

This study is the first to apply sustainable career theory to SIE careers. The current research diverges from most mainstream SIE literature, which examines specific expatriation stages, such as pre-departure motivation (e.g., Richardson 2006), adjustment and cross-cultural experiences (e.g., Haslberger et al. 2013), or return outcomes (e.g., Tharenou and Caulfield 2010), by adopting a long-term sustainable career perspective encompassing home-country career experiences before expatriation and subsequent expatriate work. The long-term lens is essential as early career experiences shape later mobility decisions; each global career move enhances competency development (Dickmann et al. 2018), and impacts SIEs' career sustainability subsequently. This approach aligns with sustainable career theory that views careers as path-dependent, dynamic processes developing over time (Talluri et al. 2025). Our study contributes to sustainable career literature in several ways. Few studies examine all three career sustainability indicators (Barthauer et al. 2020), and even less is known about how health, happiness, and productivity evolve during a working life, leaving long-term career sustainability underexplored. This study is the first to apply a profile approach to sustainable career literature, and empirically examine how career sustainability evolves over an individual's career. To do so, we revealed how the three core indicators shift across trajectories rather than within isolated stages. The study advances SIE research by exploring the long-term career impacts of self-initiated expatriation on career sustainability, a theoretical angle not previously applied to SIEs. Our findings on the three career profiles are noteworthy as they depict the diverse, evolving ways in which SIE career sustainability unfolds encompassing home-country experiences and international moves.

5.1.2 | The Role of Person-Related Factors on Profile Membership

This study addresses the personal dimension of career sustainability by exploring individual factors influencing the phenomenon among SIEs and also differentiates emergent career profiles. Three key factors linked to profile membership, evolving through expatriation, are agency, experienced work meaning, and global career identity.

First, the findings of this study demonstrate that agency plays a pivotal role in influencing the career sustainability of SIEs. Additionally, this research contributes to the literature by demonstrating that agency manifests in career adaptability (Savickas 2005), as evidenced by proactive behaviors such as meticulous planning and preparation for mobility, deliberate career decision-making, and active engagement in further learning. In addition, career resilience (Mishra and McDonald 2017) plays a part, as reflected in the capacity to cope with relocation challenges and to withstand disruptions beyond an individual's control. Furthermore, agency can manifest in an entrepreneurial mindset (Ireland et al. 2003), characterized by role adaptability and a willingness to initiate new projects or business opportunities, even in the absence of established frameworks. The pursuit of meaning is significant for many SIEs, frequently articulated through discussions concerning the meaningfulness

of their work (Hu and Hirsh 2017) and the sense of purpose experienced in (or absent from) certain roles. The aspect of work meaning has not been thoroughly examined in the context of self-initiated expatriation to date. Moreover, global career identity (Suutari and Makela 2007), defined by a strong global career orientation, a global job market perspective, the pursuit of new work challenges within the global job market, and a sense of global belonging, appears as a critical factor influencing the career sustainability of SIEs.

The findings demonstrate that elevated levels of agency, a strong sense of meaning associated with work, and a well-developed global career identity contribute to career advancement, well-being, and career satisfaction, thereby promoting overall career sustainability. In contrast, diminished agency, an absence of meaningful work, and a weakly developed global career identity are correlated with career unsustainability, as reflected in job insecurity, work disengagement, and dissatisfaction. These individual-related factors are more prominent among SIEs with sustainable and transitional career profiles, whereas those with unsustainable career profiles tend to highlight environmental factors constraining their career sustainability. This observation is consistent with sustainable career theory, which conceptualizes individuals as the owners of their careers and underscores their responsibility for maintaining their careers through proactive development and reactive adaptation to external factors (De Vos et al. 2020).

Moreover, our findings indicate that these person-related factors are dynamic and develop throughout expatriation experiences. This was most evident in the transitional career profile, where person-related attributes developed progressively over time, thereby enhancing career sustainability in subsequent stages. In contrast, SIEs fitting an unsustainable career profile typically demonstrated limited development in terms of these person-related factors, which restricted their capacity to establish sustainable careers internationally. Among SIEs with a sustainable career profile, we observed that these factors were strong from the outset and continued to develop through expatriation experiences.

Our findings on person-related factors in SIEs' career sustainability advance the understanding of how individual attributes differentiate sustainable, unsustainable, and transitional career paths, echoing Talluri et al.'s (2025) view that individual factors chiefly determine subjective person-career fit, which is defined as the alignment of a career with the health, happiness, and productivity aspects central to sustainable career theory. Although there is research examining career sustainability from a person-centered perspective that addresses proactive career behaviors (Talluri et al. 2022), nonwork orientation (Hirschi et al. 2020), and work motivation (Hallpike et al. 2024), the evolution of those attributes over time remains underexplored. While evidence among SIEs is limited, our findings align with the view that career adaptability is connected with the subjective career success of expatriates (Mello et al. 2024), even though the temporal evolution of these factors has not been examined previously. While evidence among SIEs is limited, our findings are consistent with the perspective that career adaptability is associated with the subjective career success of expatriates (Mello et al. 2024), despite the temporal evolution of these factors not

having been analyzed previously. Our study is among the first to apply a temporal lens to examine how these attributes develop across the global career moves of SIEs.

5.2 | Practical Implications

Our findings contribute to sustainable career theory by demonstrating that individual-related factors influence both immediate outcomes and long-term career sustainability among SIEs. These evidence-based insights provide several significant practical implications for individuals (SIEs), managers in organizations employing SIEs, and policymakers in national institutions. For SIEs, a crucial insight is that maintaining a substantive global career necessitates not only proactively fostering career adaptability through strategic career planning, informed decision-making, and ongoing skill development, but also enhancing resilience by employing coping strategies, reinforcing perseverance, and effectively managing challenges. Moreover, career sustainability is augmented through the cultivation of a global career identity, which encompasses the promotion of a global career orientation, the adoption of a global labor market perspective, and the cultivation of a sense of global belonging. It is also imperative to pursue fulfilling employment that aligns with an individual's personal values. Furthermore, cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset that embraces flexibility in employment modalities (e.g., freelance consulting) and being receptive to alternative career trajectories (e.g., entrepreneurship) is advantageous when navigating uncertain or rapidly evolving international labor markets.

Organizations engaging SIEs can enhance the career sustainability of those employees through targeted interventions that deliver structured international career support. That support could encompass pre-departure and on-board training, the creation of a psychologically safe environment that fosters inclusivity, and training for supervisors on integrating SIEs. Additionally, structured initiatives, such as mentorship programs, could enhance SIEs' social networks and promote work-life balance to manage stress. Furthermore, offering flexible career pathways, including non-linear or cross-border rotational opportunities, could align with the aspirations of SIEs.

For national institutions, it is particularly relevant to design migration policies and practices that support long-term career sustainability of expatriates like transparent visa regulations and stable residency pathways, enhance social systems that protect mobile workers such as portable health care and equal employment rights, foster a sustainable career ecosystem that values global talent, for instance, collaborate with employers to address SIEs' real-life challenges and facilitate partnerships between educational institutions and employers on upskilling (Donald et al. 2024).

5.3 | Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The current study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, while data saturation was achieved regarding the reported findings, the sample size of

34 participants is relatively limited. Although purposive sampling was utilized to gather evidence from diverse cultural and institutional settings, the number of participants meant representation of various cultural backgrounds was constrained. Future studies might address that shortcoming by interviewing larger samples of SIEs from diverse cultural backgrounds to deepen the understanding of potential cross-cultural variations in career sustainability. Future research could build on our insights by utilizing larger samples of SIEs to yield more generalizable findings.

Second, in our samples, there are several cases ($n=6$) that had both AEs and SIEs experience during their international career. This phenomenon corresponds with prior research demonstrating that expatriate career trajectories are not confined to a single category but can evolve dynamically along an AE-SIE continuum (McNulty and Vance 2017; Suutari and Brewster 2000). This observation underscores the importance of analyzing AEs and SIEs not as fixed categories, but as interchangeable roles within a comprehensive global career trajectory incorporating diverse mobility arrangements. Furthermore, future research could explore the impact of transitions between AE and SIE roles on individuals' job demands and resources (Bakker and Demerouti 2007) as well as their long-term career sustainability.

Finally, this study offers valuable insights into the influence of individual-related factors on the career sustainability of SIEs. Future research could investigate the dynamic interplay between personal attributes and contextual factors throughout the expatriation experience over time. That approach would align with Talluri et al.'s (2025) emphasis on subjective person-career fit as a mechanism connecting individual characteristics with evolving career environments. Furthermore, examining the effects of career sustainability for individuals (e.g., future career and mobility plans) and organizations (e.g., retention) would be valuable.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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