

**Protecting Your Calling: Career Goal Downward Revision Upon Receiving Negative  
Career Feedback, Mediated by Career Distress**

Katharina S. Kunath

s4707230

Department of Psychology, University of Groningen

PSB3E-BT15: Bachelor Thesis

Group number: 17

Supervisor: Teodora I. Heihal

Second evaluator: Dr. Claudia Kitz

In collaboration with: Beatriz A. Guerlixa Machado, Cléopée G. Caillet, Kamila  
Azhigulova, Louis J. Leber, and Marie H. Sahm.

July 1st, 2024

*A thesis is an aptitude test for students. The approval of the thesis is proof that the student has sufficient research and reporting skills to graduate, but does not guarantee the quality of the research and the results of the research as such, and the thesis is therefore not necessarily suitable to be used as an academic source to refer to. If you would like to know more about the research discussed in this thesis and any publications based on it, to which you could refer, please contact the supervisor mentioned*

**Abstract**

Career goals represent ways towards which we wish to develop in our professional lives. When our progress on these goals is criticized, self-regulatory processes can come into play to reduce the discrepancy between our goals and the feedback. In an attempt to maintain career identity, psychological mechanisms such as career calling may exhibit protective properties. Based on identity control theory, this study explores the relationship between negative career feedback on goal progress and career goal downward revision and investigates the mediating role of career distress and the moderating role of career calling. Our sample consisted of 182 young professionals ( $M_{\text{age}} = 23.52$ ) recruited via convenience sampling. We found that negative career feedback significantly predicted career goal downward revision, and career distress partially mediated that relationship. Career calling did not moderate the relationship between career distress and career goal downward revision. Our findings underline the importance of self-regulatory processes in the face of negative career feedback in young adults and suggest future research to explore a possible age comparison relating to the effects of career calling, as well as investigating further factors that might serve as protective mechanisms.

*Keywords:* negative career feedback, career goal downward revision, career distress, career calling

**Protecting Your Calling: Career Goal Downward Revision Upon Receiving Negative Career Feedback, Mediated by Career Distress**

Feedback plays a fundamental role in directing behaviors and initiating self-regulatory processes throughout a variety of life domains. Specifically in the career context, an employee's performance is reliant on the feedback they receive towards their career goals. These goals and aspirations keep professionals engaged and motivated in their work as they follow the necessary steps to achieve them, and obtaining feedback provides them with valuable information regarding their goal progress, supporting continuous improvement. While positive feedback signals an individual that their behaviors and efforts are proceeding in the correct direction and that little to no alteration in behavior is needed to achieve a goal (Straub et al., 2023), negative feedback prompts the individual to adjust their behaviors in order to progress accordingly. This may be helpful as it can enable employees to understand which aspects of work behavior they could improve, align their self-assessment with their actual performance, and show them where to focus their resources. However, being confronted with negative feedback towards one's goal progress can have adverse effects. Research has demonstrated that dealing with negative feedback can in fact downregulate the individual's commitment to their goals, and decrease the effort they put into achieving them (Hu et al., 2017a), eventually leading to complete goal disengagement (Hu et al., 2017b). Disengaging from a career goal and lowering strivings towards a less challenging aspiration can be an adaptive response when facing negative feedback. Previous studies have shown that while adhering to a goal that is out of reach might in fact affect an individual's health and well-being in a negative way (Miller & Wrosch, 2007; Fonteyne et al., 2017), the ability to adjust by disengaging from that goal is associated with less distress in students (Creed & Hood, 2014) and a higher sense of self-mastery (Wrosch et al., 2003). Furthermore, replacing it with an alternative goal was shown to be linked to less stress and stronger feelings of

self-mastery (Wrosch et al., 2003). These findings suggest that when encountering negative career feedback, individuals can benefit from engaging in adaptive career behaviors such as goal accommodation. Yet, which self-regulatory processes come into effect that allow a professional to reassess their current career goals upon receiving negative feedback? The literature shows that negative feedback has been linked to the experience of negative affect, such as career distress (Creed et al., 2015; Praskova & McPeake, 2022). When confronted with negative performance feedback, employees experienced a decrease in positive and an increase in negative affect (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2009). Furthermore, in a sample of students and working adults, Belschak and Den Hartog (2009) found the relationships between negative feedback and work commitment as well as organizational citizenship behavior and intentions for turnover to be mediated by affect. Moreover, Ilies and Judge (2005) reported that through affect, individuals showed a tendency to engage in downward goal adjustment when confronted with negative feedback. Similarly, Praskova and McPeake (2022) identified a positive relationship between career goal discrepancy, career distress, and goal adjustment. The greater the goal discrepancy was in young adults, the higher the level of career distress they experienced, which was in turn associated with more goal-accommodating tendencies. It seems that by displaying a discrepancy between an individual's current progress and their desired goal, negative feedback is a powerful source that triggers certain emotional processes through which subsequent goal-related behaviors are provoked, potentially in an attempt to reduce that discrepancy and the emotional discomfort associated with it. In the workplace, various factors may influence these interactions; notably, existing research proposed career calling to be one of them. Individuals with a sense of career calling tend to be more engaged in their careers and have more detailed goals (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Huang et al., 2022). Yet, young adults with a strong sense of career calling have been found to be more distressed by negative career feedback and more likely to engage in the processes of

goal accommodation in response to high levels of negative feedback (Praskova & McPeake, 2022). These observations suggest that higher levels of career calling stimulate an increase in the relationship between goal discrepancy and career distress, resulting in more goal-revising tendencies.

Considering existing research, the objective of this study is to understand whether young adults will lower their career strivings to reduce the distress linked to discrepancies driven by negative career feedback. More specifically, we expect that negative career feedback on goal progress drives career distress, and via this mechanism influences career goal downward revision. We also explore whether there is a conditional effect of career calling on the indirect pathway between career distress and career goal downward revision. This research contributes to the literature by shedding light on the consequences of negative feedback and the mechanisms of how they manifest. It seeks to explore the steps individuals take when facing work-related distress, in order to protect parts of their identity and well-being, and it might help us understand who stands to lose more upon receiving negative career feedback. The study set out to gain insights into the significance of career calling, as there is yet little literature assessing the role of career calling when facing negative feedback and career distress. Our research may provide useful insights considering a possible protection mechanism induced by high levels of career calling regarding the maintenance of one's career identity, which can help bring clarity to self-regulatory processes occurring at the workplace. This investigation may also provide useful information about the importance of how feedback is communicated, concerning its consequences for employees and the workplace.

### **Negative Career Feedback on Goal Progress**

With a career goal reflecting an intention that initiates behaviors and actions aiming at achieving a desired result (Hu et al., 2017b), this study will focus on negative career feedback (NCF) regarding the progress an employee is making towards that goal. NCF illustrates the

discrepancy between the current state of the recipient and where they were hoping to be in terms of attaining their goals, which can be emotionally demanding to process. It plays a fundamental role in most aspects of human behaviors and usually triggers self-regulatory processes to obtain certain achievements, including goal-directed behaviors regarding one's career (London, 2003; Jawahar & Shabeer, 2019). According to research, individuals engage in cognitive or behavioral processes to deal with the discrepancy between their progress and their strivings. They may intensify their efforts and improve their strategies, or they may adjust their expectations to more achievable ones (Nicklin & Williams, 2011). These self-regulatory behaviors aim to reduce the discrepancy and to realign identity and goal pursuit. Identity control theory (ICT) by Burke (2007) proposes that a person's different identities and behaviors depend on the social context these are embedded in. People are tied to their career context through their career identity, and ICT aims to illustrate how this career identity is maintained and regulated in the face of feedback from the professional's career environment. It proposes that through disturbances, here elicited by NCF, professionals engage in reflected appraisals, which include the interpretations and consequences of the feedback for the individual. The model suggests that these reflected appraisals are then compared to the individual's identity standard, and when a discrepancy is detected, it in turn elicits emotional distress. Self-regulatory behaviors are then motivated to reduce the observed discrepancy. Research has established that young adults who receive negative feedback about their career goals tend to disengage from and reduce their efforts to achieve them (Anderson & Mounts, 2012; Hu et al., 2017a; Hu et al., 2017b). Thus, experiencing NCF can trigger mechanisms that influence subsequent career goal outcomes in various ways.

### **Career Goal Downward Revision**

Besides disengaging from their career goals upon receiving negative feedback, will young adults also downregulate these goals to less complex and more achievable ones? Career

goal downward revision (CGDR) is a process in which professionals lower their career goals after experiencing certain setbacks. These setbacks may include a perceived career goal discrepancy and a greater distance from the desired goal. In their studies with varsity track and field athletes, Williams et al. (2000) and Donovan and Williams (2003) have found their participants to be particularly prone to lower their strivings when their performance did not match their goals substantially, indicating that the higher the discrepancy, the stronger the tendency to downward revise one's goal. Negative feedback is a widely used tool by which such discrepancies are communicated. Based on identity control theory, revising a career goal towards a less challenging one upon receiving NCF can be seen as a response in order to ward off the negative affect induced by the discrepancy. In light of this theory, we expect that when confronted with NCF, individuals are informed about a discrepancy between their ought career identity (identity standard) and their momentary position, ensuing certain behaviors in order to regain equilibrium. We propose that the stronger the NCF, the stronger the inclination for individuals to engage in CGDR in an attempt to reduce the discrepancy. Therefore, we hypothesize that receiving negative feedback on the progress of one's career goals elicits a tendency to downward revise these goals.

### **The Mediating Role of Career Distress**

What makes individuals lower their aspirations in the face of a setback? Cognitive and emotional self-regulatory processes come into play when an individual is confronted with NCF, which can later influence the choice of strategy in dealing with progress discrepancies. Previous research has established that NCF is negatively related to well-being (Creed et al., 2015), and can affect an individual's emotional state, with young adults reporting distressful feelings (Hu et al., 2018). As negative feedback accumulates, this distress can reach overwhelming levels, increasing the pressure on individuals to lower their aspirations, in order to decrease the distress. According to identity control theory, the distress can function as



a mechanism, encouraging the individual to reduce the discrepancy between their current state and their identity standard. Previous research supported the assumption that individuals approach NCF through an identity control theory model (Burke, 2007). They found that NCF was associated with stronger career goal discrepancies, which were linked to more career distress (CD) (Creed et al., 2015; Hu et al., 2018; Sheppard et al., 2020).

In turn, CD has been shown to take on a mediating role for NCF in predicting CGDR in the literature, as it can impact an individual's decision-making process on whether to re-engage or disengage from the goal (Jawahar & Shabeer, 2019). Ilies et al., (2010) have demonstrated that negative affect can lead to decreasing exam goals in a student sample, illustrating a connection between negative affect and subsequent goal downward revision. Considering that NCF is likely to evoke affective states with a negative emotional valence, we propose that CD works as an underlying process on the mediation path that connects NCF and CGDR. We therefore hypothesize that CD takes on a mediating role in the relationship between NCF and CGDR.

### **Conditional Effects of Career Calling**

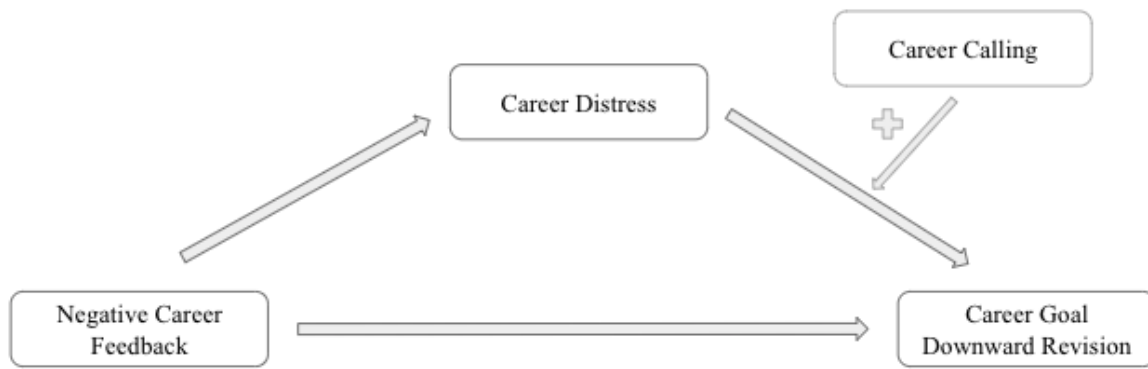
The interest in the concept of career calling (CC) has grown increasingly in research during recent decades (Pitacho & Cordeiro, 2023), being especially relevant for young adults who find themselves at the beginning of their careers, setting goals and making career-related choices (Parola et al., 2023). CC refers to a deep sense of purpose in the career one is pursuing, and finding meaning and fulfillment in what one is striving for. It has been described as the deepest way of experiencing work (Pitacho & Cordeiro, 2023). Having a sense of CC has been shown to have various positive outcomes, such as satisfaction, commitment, and engagement in careers (Wrzesniewski, 2003; Duffy & Dik, 2013; Pitacho & Cordeiro, 2023), and has also been linked to higher levels of psychological and social well-being (Mesurado et al., 2022; Pitacho & Cordeiro, 2023). As CC is personally so

meaningful and significant, individuals with a high sense of CC may be more likely to be deeply inclined and profoundly dedicated to their career goals, as research has shown that CC involves active engagement in behaviors that aim at achieving an individual's aspirations (Praskova et al., 2015; Praskova & McPeake, 2022). Based on these findings, we assume that elevated levels of CC reflect a stronger sense of career identity. We therefore extend Burke's identity control theory model by including the concept of CC, in order to explore its potential as a protective mechanism. When an important career goal that is central to one's calling gets challenged by negative feedback, it could potentially threaten a professional's overall career identity. The discrepancy between where they are and where they would like to be in achieving a career goal might be perceived as larger, and the distress as more severe, making the desire to reduce the discrepancy stronger in an attempt to protect and maintain their career identity. It can then be easier to consider a less challenging goal instead of persevering in their strivings, leading to a higher tendency to engage in downward goal revision. Consequently, reducing discrepancies will function as a defense mechanism in order to protect one's career identity and one's calling, suggesting that individuals with a higher sense of CC are more likely to engage in that behavior. We therefore hypothesize that high levels of CC will strengthen the positive effect of CD on CGDR, such that those with a stronger sense of CC may experience increased CD and are more likely to downwardly revise their goals when confronted with NCF.

The present study explores the mediated moderation between NCF as the independent variable, CGDR as the dependent variable, CD as the mediator, and CC as the moderator (Figure 1).

### **Figure 1**

*Model*



## Methods

### Sample

An online survey was conducted using an initial sample of participants ( $N = 329$ ) recruited via social networks and online platforms, given the necessity for convenience sampling. The target population was aimed to consist of participants who either had the status of a university student or an employee ranging from the age of 18 to 35 years. This criterion was set to ensure that the participants included in the sample were in the process of finding their career paths at the time of completing the survey, as opposed to having already committed to a specific career. We excluded three participants from our final sample because they did not meet the age criterion to be eligible for this study. Six participants were excluded for not providing informed consent. Data was missing from 137 participants, who were therefore removed. One participant was removed as they were unemployed and not a student. Our final sample size consisted of 182 participants.

The final sample was relatively young with an average age of  $M = 23.52$  years ( $SD = 3.02$ ). A total of 62.1% of the sample were female ( $N = 113$ ), 36.8% were male ( $N = 67$ ), and 1.1% indicated 'Non-binary' ( $N = 2$ ). A total of 63.7% of participants were enrolled in a university program ( $N = 116$ ) at the time of study completion, while 29.1% indicated being employed ( $N = 53$ ) in different work sectors. Only a small minority of 7.1% studied while also being employed ( $N = 13$ ). The majority of the sample, 53.3%, indicated the Netherlands

as their country of residence ( $N = 97$ ), while 14.8% lived in Germany at the time of data collection ( $N = 27$ ), and 31.9% specified other countries of residence ( $N = 58$ ).

### **Measures**

The measures analyzed in the present study are different online self-report questionnaires administered using the online survey platform Qualtrics.

#### ***Feedback on Career Goals (FCG) Inventory***

In order to assess negative feedback towards career goals, our independent variable, we used the Feedback on Career Goals inventory by Hu et al. (2017c). The original material is made of three subscales, containing 24 items. For the current study, we made use of one of the three subscales, feedback on current career progress (e.g., “People tell me that I am not working hard enough to get into/improve/maintain my chosen career”), containing eight items. Response options follow a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”. The higher the scores on the scale, the stronger the intensity of negative feedback experienced by the participants. The inventory shows good internal reliability with a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of .77 for feedback on career progress. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for our sample was .88.

#### ***9-item Career Distress Scale***

To assess career distress, our mediator, we used the 9-item Career Distress Scale by Creed et al. (2016). We excluded the following three items: “I often feel that my life lacks much purpose.”, “I don’t have the special talents to follow my first career choice.”, “An influential person doesn’t approve of my career choice, which is hindering me from seeking that career.”. We did so since we believed that they would influence other items in our questionnaire. Moreover, we expanded the measurement to include career continuation in addition to assessing distress related to career selection in the items. The six items (e.g., “I often feel down or depressed about selecting or continuing my career”) were rated using a 6-point Likert scale (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). The higher the score, the higher

the CD experienced by participants. With a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .90, the scale indicates a strong internal reliability. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for our sample was .84.

### ***Brief Calling Scale (BCS)***

To measure the level of our participants' career calling, our moderator, which essentially represents their perception of their career goals being important, purposeful, and meaningful, we administered the Brief Calling Scale (Dik et al., 2012). We only used two of the four items, which assess the presence of a calling in participants (e.g., "I have a calling to a particular kind of work."; Praskova et al., 2015). The items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale with answers ranging from "not at all true of me" to "totally true of me". Higher scores on the scale represent a higher sense of CC felt by the participant. Previous studies have indicated that the scale demonstrates acceptable levels of reliability (Dik et al., 2012; Praskova et al., 2015). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for our sample was .77.

### ***Career Goal Downward Revision***

For our predicted variable, this study employs the 6-item scale generated by Hu et al. (2017b) to assess our participants' tendencies to downward-revise their career goals in response to receiving negative feedback. A sample item was "I need to reduce my aspirations as the occupation I am aiming for is unrealistic". Response options followed a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Higher scores imply a stronger tendency for CGDR. With a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .91, the scale shows a strong internal consistency. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for our sample was .93.

### **Procedure**

This project is part of a three-wave, longitudinal study with two weeks between the first and second wave, and one month between the second and third wave. Our study focused only on the first wave. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling and completed a survey in English, using the online program Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT).

Participants were sent the link to the survey, which they had a week to complete. In this survey, participants received information on the purpose of the study, what they would be doing, reasons for participation, how their data would be treated, and points of contact for any further information. Participants also signed a consent form before starting the survey, where they acknowledged their right to withdraw from the study at any point and that their participation was voluntary.

After signing the consent form, participants provided some demographic information, such as employment status, age, gender, work sector, and country of residence. Participants then answered questionnaires on the measures described above. The survey also included other questionnaires on other measures although they are beyond the scope of this paper. This survey took around 15 minutes to complete. There was no monetary incentive for completion of this survey. The research procedure was approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychology at the University of Groningen.

### **Statistical Analysis**

Using SPSS, we ran a preliminary analysis to investigate the quality of the data which includes initial correlations and descriptive statistics. Additionally, we checked whether the data was fit for the analysis by looking at scale reliabilities, data trends, and assumptions of linear regression. We explored significant relationships that allowed us to investigate our regression model. Our statistical analysis includes several linear regression analyses. Moreover, we made use of PROCESS macro by Hayes (2013), an extension of SPSS, in order to investigate the mediated moderation path.

## **Results**

### **Assumptions Check and Preliminary Analysis**

First of all, we tested assumptions for the linear regression between our predictor and predicted variable. To test for normality, we created a P-P plot, which shows that the residuals

are normally distributed (see Appendix for Figure 2). The assumption is therefore met. We could also not observe any deviation from linearity for the relationship between NCF and CGDR, as the residuals were randomly distributed on the scatterplot, and there is no violation of homoscedasticity (see Appendix for Figure 3). Then, we performed the assumptions tests for the linear regression between our predicting variable and our mediator. The P-P plot shows that residuals are normally distributed, meeting the normality assumption (see Appendix for Figure 4). By creating a scatterplot, we observed no violations of linearity or homoscedasticity, since there were no patterns in the distribution of residuals (see Appendix for Figure 5). With a VIF of 1.45 for both NCF and CD, the absence of multicollinearity can be assumed.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. NCF	2.37	.86	-					
2. CGDR	2.03	.84	.31*	-				
3. CD	3.03	1.07	.56*	.34*	-			
4. CC	2.94	1.15	-.24*	-.27*	-.33*	-		
5. Gender (male) <sup>a</sup>	.37	.48	.05	-.13	-.15	.06	-	
6. Age	23.52	3.02	-.08	.05	-.23*	.10	.10	-

*Note.* The analysis was run with  $N = 182$  participants. \* $p < 0.01$ .

<sup>a</sup>Two non-binary people were excluded from the gender analysis due to lacking quantity in our sample, making  $N = 180$  for the gender part.

Descriptives can be seen in Table 1. The mean for our moderator CC ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) indicates a moderate prevalence of a sense of career calling in our sample. NCF correlates positively with CGDR ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and with CD ( $r = .56$ ,  $p < .001$ ). CD was also found to correlate positively with CGDR ( $r = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Our moderator correlated

negatively with our other three variables, as reported in Table 1. Except for age and CD ( $r = -.23, p = .00$ ), there is no significant correlation between demographics and our focal variables.

## **Main Analysis**

### ***Main Effect***

When investigating the effect of NCF on CGDR, we first ran a linear regression controlling for age and gender, in order to investigate a possible interaction effect, as these two variables are known to influence one's perception of negative feedback and the distress that can be experienced in the face of it. This analysis was run with 180 participants because of aforementioned reasons. The effect of age (the variable was standardized due to the high spread of its values) on CGDR was non-significant ( $p = .57$ ), and neither was the interaction effect of age and NCF ( $p = .85$ ). Similarly, there was no significant effect neither of gender on CGDR ( $p = .88$ ) nor of gender interacting with NFP in predicting CGDR ( $p = .51$ ). We can therefore safely say that NFP remains a steady predictor for CGDR regardless of age or gender.

As hypothesized, the overall regression model was statistically significant with  $F(1, 118) = 19.15$  ( $p < .001$ ), explaining 10 percent of the variance in the predicted variable. NCF significantly predicted CGDR ( $B = .30, p < .001$ ). Thus, H1 is met.

### ***Mediating Effect of Career Distress***

To investigate a possible interaction effect of age and gender, we ran a linear regression analysis to predict CD from NCF controlling for these two variables. Neither age ( $p = .85$ ) nor NCF interacting with age ( $p = .27$ ) was significant. Likewise, gender showed no significant effect on CDGR ( $p = .70$ ) as did NCF interacting with gender ( $p = .56$ ) in predicting CGDR. Therefore, there is no effect of demographics influencing our analysis. The regression model showed significance with  $F(1, 180) = 81.37$  ( $p < .001$ ), explaining 31% of



the variance in CD. NCF predicted CD significantly ( $B = .69, p < .001$ ).

To test for a mediating effect of CD in predicting CGDR, we ran a mediation analysis using SPSS PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013). Our model showed significance ( $R^2 = .14, F(2, 179) = 14.14, p < .001$ ). NCF still significantly predicted CGDR ( $B = .17, p = 0.04, 95\% \text{ CI } [.01, .33]$ ) but in a smaller magnitude than CD ( $B = .19, p = .00, 95\% \text{ CI } [.06, .32]$ ), indicating a partial mediation. Our hypothesis was therefore partially supported by our findings, showing that there is a partial mediating effect of CD on the relationship between NCF and CGDR.

### ***Moderating Effect of Career Calling***

We used the same means to investigate a moderating effect of career calling by running a mediated moderation analysis. Our model showed significance ( $R^2 = .16, F(4, 177) = 8.45, p < .001$ ). CC was significant in our model ( $B = -.12, p = .03, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.23, -.01]$ ). Nevertheless, CD was still significant in the model ( $B = .16, p = .02, 95\% \text{ CI } [.02, .29]$ ). This illustrates that CC did not influence the effect of CD on CGDR. With an index of  $-.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.07, .06]$ , we can infer that no significant moderation effect could be found in the relationship (see Appendix for Figure 6). Consequently, our third hypothesis was not supported by our results, indicating that high levels of CC do not strengthen the positive effect of CD on CGDR.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of negative career feedback on goal downward revision with career distress mediating that relationship and career calling moderating the effects of distress on goal revision. As negative feedback on career goal progress illustrates a discrepancy between an individual's current state and their desired outcome, it potentially initiates goal accommodative processes. We therefore predicted an increasing tendency for CGDR in individuals being confronted with NCF. Aligned with our prediction, we found that individuals who experience NCF tended to engage more in CGDR

than those who reported lower levels of NCF. When being confronted with NCF, individuals likely experience emotional responses, such as frustration, discouragement, and career distress. We assumed that CD would work as an emotional process through which NCF manifests its effects on CGDR, with enhanced distress leading to more CGDR, exhibiting a greater willingness to reduce the discrepancy and therefore the experienced distress. CD partially mediated the relationship between NCF and CGDR, which partially supports our second hypothesis. Proposing that individuals displaying high levels of career calling will have a stronger desire for alignment with their career identity, we furthermore hypothesized that a strong sense of CC will enhance the relationship between CD and CGDR upon receiving NCF, in order to reduce the discrepancy and promote realignment with and protection of their career identity and their calling. We found no evidence in our sample of a meaningful effect for CC to work as a moderator between CD and CGDR.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The relevance of NCF in predicting higher tendencies for individuals to lower their goal aspirations is clearly supported by the current findings. Our expectations were based on identity control theory (Burke, 2007), which proposes that with higher discrepancy and increasing distance between current progress and desired identity, there is an intensifying need to reduce the discrepancy, and one way of doing this is lowering one's strivings. Our results are consistent with previous research. Hu et al. (2017b) found negative career-related feedback to be linked to greater intentions to downwardly revise career goals, and Ilies and Judge (2005) reported similar results in a student sample. Widyowati et al. (2024) found consistent evidence in an Australian student sample, identifying an enhanced tendency to engage in career goal compromise and CGDR with increasing discrepancy between an individual's career goals and their progress. Our findings contribute to the existing body of research by supporting the idea that NCF is a powerful tool in highlighting goal discrepancies

and provoking goal-accommodative behaviors in professionals, seeking to reduce these discrepancies. Nevertheless, the percentage of variance explained by NCF was rather low in our study, suggesting that other factors may impact CGDR beyond receiving NCF. We assumed career distress to be one of these factors.

More specifically, we expected the direct effect between NCF and CGDR to be mediated by CD. Our expectations were based on the assumption that discrepancy creates distress, and with increasing distress, individuals will be motivated to act in ways that alleviate the unpleasant feeling. Our findings are in line with the identity control theory model, implicating that by perceiving a discrepancy, distress is provoked, activating self-regulatory processes that will decrease the discrepancy and ease the distressed feelings. The experience of CD upon receiving NCF seems to trigger this discrepancy-reducing process, leading to the tendency of revising one's career goals, in order to minimize the negative affective experiences NCF brings. Our results align with Praskova and McPeake's (2022) research, demonstrating a higher tendency for young adults who experience stronger levels of CD to engage in goal accommodation tendencies. Consistent with these findings, Hu et al. (2017b) reported that young people with higher career-related stress had a stronger tendency to adjust their career goals towards less challenging ones. Nevertheless, we found a partial, not a full mediation, indicating that CD only accounts for some parts of the variance explained in CGDR in light of NCF. Thus, alternative mechanisms might also be involved. Drawing on social cognitive career theory (SCCT) by Lent et al. (1994), specifically self-efficacy, known to be a strong self-regulatory process regarding one's confidence in their skills and performance, can be an interesting underlying process prompting individuals to adjust their goals in order to persevere and maintain a stable career. As identity control theory does not take confidence into account, SCCT proposes that through self-efficacy beliefs, career decisions are shaped. Throughout the literature, self-efficacy has been reported as a

crucial variable in self-regulation theories for explaining the link between feedback and goal adjustment strategies (Hu et al., 2019). We speculate that, upon experiencing NCF, self-efficacy beliefs might be reduced in an attempt to decrease the goal discrepancies, leading to smaller goal strivings.

Considering our third hypothesis, we found that the level of career calling did not significantly moderate the effect between CD and CGDR. We based our expectations on Burke's ICT, assuming that in order to protect their career identity, which we considered to be crucial for an individual the higher their level of CC, they would show an increased tendency to lower their strivings after experiencing distress due to obtaining NCF. There are various reasons why our results did not support this hypothesis. First of all, we did not differentiate between employees and students in our sample, which we justified with the importance of a bigger sample. However, due to possibly limited work experience, parts of our sample may still be exploring their calling, rather than having a committed career identity. Additionally, given the young age of our participants, not all may yet be fully acquainted or engaged with the concept of CC. While some discover their calling early in life, it makes sense to assume that many individuals need time to explore various career paths to determine where they feel most drawn to. Furthermore, younger individuals with a strong sense of CC may respond differently when being confronted with negative feedback, compared to older individuals. As younger professionals are overall still relatively new to the job market, negative feedback might in fact raise their motivation. With a big part of their career still ahead of them, they might perceive that there is less to lose, in comparison to those who have spent years building their careers. The literature shows conflicting evidence regarding motivation and negative feedback. The motivation assumption of NCF was supported by a longitudinal study by Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2012), who found that music students who were supposed to imagine their responses towards negative feedback on their career goals were more likely to

defend their goals rather than considering different ones. This was true for those with a higher level of CC (Hu et al., 2017b). Nevertheless, Fonteyne et al. (2017) reported that negative feedback among university students reduced their motivation, resulting in increased goal-accommodating tendencies. It seems that there is a need for further research to thoroughly explore the connection between motivation, career calling and negative feedback.

### **Practical Implications**

Our research supports the idea that when confronted with NCF, individuals are more likely to consider less difficult goals. This outcome might be unexpected for human resource managers, employers, supervisors or teachers, as generally, providing feedback is considered to enhance a professional's performance. Our study implies that individuals might in fact become less ambitious concerning their goals, rather than more motivated in adjusting their behaviors to achieve their strivings, as NCF can be demotivating and decrease a professional's drive for improvement. When employees accommodate to easier goals upon being confronted with negative feedback, they might gradually lose motivation due to the lack of challenge. This can hinder their career progress and development, resulting in stagnation and potential dissatisfaction. Even though lowering one's strivings may feel like a relief at first and ease the experienced distress, the literature supports the idea that engaging in goal accommodating behaviors can have adverse effects on the individual's attitudes. Wrosch et al. (2003) discovered that individuals who reduce their commitment and effort to their goals may experience feelings of aimlessness and emptiness. Consistent with their findings, Creed and Blume (2012) reported a positive link between career compromise and career distress, as well as less career satisfaction. CD might not only work as a predictor of CGDR, but it might also be an outcome of it.

Considering the implied consequences resulting from our study and previous research, evaluators should focus on ways to minimize the distress experienced by the receiver when

delivering feedback. Instead of solely providing NCF, offering constructive feedback that the employee agrees with and understands can be more beneficial, and might mitigate the experience of distress, while promoting better mood at work and increased job satisfaction (Sommer & Kulkarni, 2012). It may be especially important to protect more sensitive professionals from lowering their strivings too much, as they could potentially be more prone to do so in the face of distress. Offering support by acknowledging distressing feelings and collaboratively finding ways to achieve their goals might facilitate feedback acceptance and can help employees persevere in their strivings. A recently popular method for delivering constructive feedback is the sandwich feedback approach, where a negative statement is embedded between two positive ones. This method has been proven to be effective and to correlate with higher task performance (Prochazka et al., 2020). By planting a negative statement between two positive ones, the negative experiences associated with receiving NCF might be buffered, potentially reducing the experience of CD. Other research also supports the employment of mixed feedback sequences. Choi et al. (2018) found that feedback containing positive and negative statements reduced emotions such as nervousness, anxiety, and discouragement. Mitigating negative feelings at work and promoting an environment of encouragement and support can be beneficial for work behaviors overall: While negative work feelings can constrain professionals to devote resources towards coping with the situation that provoked those emotions, positive work-related attitudes promote organizational citizenship behavior among employees (Frijda, 1988; Belschak & Den Hartog, 2009). Therefore, offering employees constructive feedback that guides their focus, assures them support, highlights positive contributions, and avoids exclusively focusing on negative feedback on their progress can be considerably beneficial for the overall work behavior of employees.

### **Limitations and Strengths**

We aimed for 170 to 200 participants for this study, with our final sample consisting of approximately 180 individuals. We regard this large sample size as a significant strength of this research, as it enhances the statistical power of our analysis. Although our participants stemmed from diverse backgrounds including non-European countries, strengthening our study's generalizability to a broader population, we need to consider that a notable limitation of the present study is its reliance on a relatively young sample, restricting its applicability to a wider age range. Judging by our predominantly young sample, an older population with a longer experience in the organizational sector might deal differently with NCF. Additionally, their level of career calling could differ substantially due to more years of experience and possibly more career exploration, potentially influencing their reactions to setbacks in light of accumulated know-how.

Furthermore, this research draws from identity control theory in predicting the connections of our variables. Considering our non-significant effects of CC, a different approach to that theoretical framework might provide clearer insights into its moderating potential. It might be that instead of engaging in CGDR to protect their identity standard, individuals with a strong sense of CC in fact stick to their goals, view NCF as a motivation and adjust their behaviors to promote better achievement of these goals to in turn reduce the discrepancy between NCF and their career identity.

### **Future Research**

We assumed that based on ICT, higher levels of CC prompt individuals to lower their strivings to protect their ought career identity in the face of distress, however, our study did not find evidence for CC to work as a protective factor in our model. As older and younger professionals might be more or less committed to their career path and experience higher or lower levels of calling, future research should focus on using a larger age range, possibly splitting up age groups to infer comparative differences among them. A sample with an

overall stronger sense of CC might be able to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how protecting career identity can influence behavior. Additionally, investigating other factors that might be relevant regarding the protection of an individual's career identity and the mitigation of CD could be a fruitful area for further work. Resilience and trust towards the person delivering the feedback can be possible factors to be explored, as resilience might support perseverance towards a goal and promote protection of career identity, and trust as well as a positive relationship with the feedback provider might buffer the adverse effects of NCF (Ni & Zheng, 2024). Furthermore, future research can help shed light on a possible connection between NCF, motivation, CC, and career goal outcomes. An interesting approach may be to explore whether young individuals, when confronted with NCF, would rather engage in self-regulating strategies that promote a behavioral change to facilitate the achievement of these goals, instead of considering less difficult or demanding ones. A moderating effect of career calling on motivation could be investigated.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored how career goal-related negative feedback affects young individuals' tendencies to revise their goals towards less challenging ambitions upon experiencing distress caused by the discrepancy between their current state and their career identity. By investigating the potential of career calling to function as a protective factor for maintaining an individual's career identity, we found that it did not moderate the reduction of strivings in response to career distress. Nevertheless, we discovered that individuals lower their strivings when confronted with accumulated negative feedback about the progress they are making toward their goals. The more CD they experience upon receiving NCF, the higher the tendency to decrease their aspirations, illustrating the importance of contemplating emotional reactions when delivering feedback. Based on our findings and the existing literature, we suggest that instead of exclusively providing professionals with negative



feedback, and thereby increasing distressful feelings, employers should focus on delivering constructive feedback, assuring them support and motivating them in realistic strivings. This may be more effective in encouraging professionals' work engagement and increasing their career satisfaction.

The study adds to our understanding of self-regulatory behaviors individuals engage in when facing setbacks in their careers, and leaves room for future research to explore factors that potentially regulate their tendencies to exhibit goal-adjusting behaviors.

### References

- Anderson, K. L., & Mounts, N. S. (2012). Searching for the self: An identity control theory approach to triggers of occupational exploration. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology, 173*(1), 90–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221325.2011.573027>
- Belschak, F. D., & Den Hartog, D. N. D. (2009). Consequences of positive and negative feedback: the impact on emotions and Extra-Role behaviors. *Applied Psychology, 58*(2), 274-303. <https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1111/j.1464-0597.2008.00336.x>
- Bunderson, J. S., & Thompson, J. A. (2009). The Call of the Wild: zookeepers, callings, and the double-edged sword of deeply meaningful work. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 54*(1), 32-57. <https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2009.54.1.32>
- Burke, P. J. (2007). Identity Control Theory. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosi002>
- Choi, E., Johnson, D. A., Moon, K., & Oah, S. (2018). Effects of positive and negative feedback sequence on work performance and emotional responses. *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management, 38*(2–3), 97–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01608061.2017.1423151>
- Creed, P. A., & Blume, K. (2012). Compromise, well-being, and action behaviors in young adults in career transition. *Journal of Career Assessment, 21*, 3–19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1069072712453830>
- Creed, P. A., & Hood, M. (2014). Disengaging from unattainable career goals and reengaging in more achievable ones. *Journal of Career Development, 41*(1), 24-42. <https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1177/0894845312471195>
- Creed, P. A., Wamelink, T., & Hu, S. (2015). Antecedents and consequences to perceived career goal–progress discrepancies. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 87*, 43–53. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2014.12.001>

Creed, P. A., Hood, M., Praskova, A., & Makransky, G. (2016). The Career Distress Scale:

Using Rasch measurement theory to evaluate a brief measure of career distress.

*Journal of Career Assessment, 24*(4), 732–746.

Dik, B. J., Eldridge, B. M., Steger, M. F., & Duffy, R. D. (2012). Development and

Validation of the Calling and Vocation Questionnaire (CVQ) and Brief Calling Scale (BCS). *Journal of Career Assessment, 20*(3), 242–263.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072711434410>

Dobrow, S. R., & Tosti-Kharas, J. (2012). Listen to your heart? Calling and receptivity to career advice. *Journal of Career Assessment, 20*, 264–280.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1069072711434412>

Donovan, J. J., & Williams, K. J. (2003). Missing the mark: Effects of time and causal attributions on goal revision in response to goal-performance discrepancies. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 88*, 379–390. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.3.379>

Duffy, R. D., & Dik, B. J. (2013). Research on calling: What have we learned and where are we going? *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 83*(3), 428–436.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2013.06.006>

Fonteyne, L., Eelbode, A., Lanszweert, I., Roels, E., Schelfhout, S., Duyck, W., & De Fruyt,

F. (2017). Career goal engagement following negative feedback: Influence of expectancy-value and perceived feedback accuracy. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance, 18*(2), 165–180.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-017-9353-2>

Frijda, N. (1988). The laws of emotion. *American Psychologist, 43*, 349–358.

Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach*. Guilford Press.

Hu, S., Hood, M., & Creed, P. A. (2017a). Negative career feedback and career goal

- disengagement in young adults: The moderating role of mind-set about work. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *102*, 63–71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2017.07.006>
- Hu, S., Creed, P. A., & Hood, M. (2017b). Career goal revision in response to negative feedback: Testing a longitudinal cross-lagged model. *Journal of counseling psychology*, *64*(3), 335–345. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000193>
- Hu, S., Creed, P. A., & Hood, M. (2017c). Development and initial validation of a measure to assess career goal feedback. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, *35*(7), 657–669. <https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1177/0734282916654645>
- Hu, S., Hood, M., & Creed, P. A. (2018). Career goal importance as a moderator in the relationship between career feedback and career-related stress. *Journal of Career Development*, *45*(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845316667847>
- Hu, S., Creed, P. A., & Hood, M. (2019). Does socioeconomic status shape young people's goal revision processes in the face of negative career feedback? *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *110*, 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.11.011>
- Huang, X., Chen, H., Gao, Y., Wu, J., Ni, Z., Wang, X., & Sun, T. (2022). Career calling as the mediator and moderator of job demands and job resources for job satisfaction in health workers: A cross-sectional study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.856997>
- Ilies, R., & Judge, T. A. (2005). Goal regulation across time: the effects of feedback and affect. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *90*(3), 453–467. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.90.3.453>
- Ilies, R., Judge, T. A., & Wagner, D. T. (2010). The influence of cognitive and affective reactions to feedback on subsequent goals: Role of behavioral inhibition/activation. *European Psychologist*, *15*(2), 121–131. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000011>
- Jawahar, I. M., & Shabeer, S. (2019). How does negative career feedback affect career goal

- disengagement? The mediating roles of career planning and psychological well-being. *Journal of Career Development*, 48(4), 385–399.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845319853637>
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45(1), 79–122. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027>
- London, M. (2003). Job feedback: Giving, seeking, and using feedback for performance improvement. *Psychology Press eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410608871>
- Mesurado, B., Idrovo Carlier, S., Rodríguez, O., Debeljuh, P., & Crespo, R. F. (2022). Work orientation and flourishing life in twelve Ibero-american countries. *Revista Latinoamericana de Psicología*, 54, 94-103. <https://doi.org/10.14349/rlp.2022.v54.11>
- Miller, G. E., & Wrosch, C. (2007). You’ve gotta know when to fold ’em: Goal disengagement and systemic inflammation in adolescence. *Psychological Science*, 18(9), 773-777. <https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01977.x>
- Ni, D., & Zheng, X. (2024). Does negative performance feedback always lead to negative responses? The role of trust in the leader. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 97, 623–646. <https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1111/joop.12485>
- Nicklin, J. M., & Williams, K. J. (2011). Self-regulation of goals and performance: Effects of discrepancy feedback, regulatory focus, and self-efficacy. *Psychology*, 02(03), 187–201. <https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2011.23030>
- Parola, A., Zammitti, A., & Marcionetti, J. (2023). Career calling, courage, flourishing and satisfaction with life in Italian university students. *Behavioral sciences (Basel, Switzerland)*, 13(4), 345. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13040345>
- Pitacho, L., & Cordeiro, J. P. (2023). The relationship between career calling and workaholism: The mediating role of career orientation. *Social Sciences*, 12(10), 564.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12100564>

Praskova, A., Creed, P. A., & Hood, M. (2015). The development and initial validation of a career calling scale for emerging adults. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 23(1), 91–106.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072714523089>

Praskova, A., & McPeake, L. (2022). Career goal discrepancy, career distress, and goal adjustment: Testing a dual moderated process model in young adults. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 30(4), 615–634. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10690727211063372>

Prochazka, J., Ovcari, M., & Durinik, M. (2020). Sandwich feedback: The empirical evidence of its effectiveness. *Learning and Motivation*, 71, 101649.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lmot.2020.101649>

Sheppard, S., Hood, M., & Creed, P. A. (2020). An Identity Control Theory approach to managing career identity in emerging adults. *Emerging Adulthood*, 8(5), 361-366.

<https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1177/2167696819830484>

Sommer, K. L., & Kulkarni, M. (2012). Does constructive performance feedback improve citizenship intentions and job satisfaction? The roles of perceived opportunities for advancement, respect, and mood. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 23(2), 177–201. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.21132>

Straub, L. M., Lin, E., Tremonte-Freydefont, L., & Schmid, P. C. (2023). Individuals' power determines how they respond to positive versus negative performance feedback.

*European Journal of Social Psychology*, 53, 1402–1420.

<https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1002/ejsp.2985>

Widyowati, A., Hood, M., Duffy, A., & Creed, P. (2024). Negative career goal discrepancy and goal adjustment in young adults: The underlying mechanism of negative emotions.

*Journal of Career Development*, 51(2), 234-253.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/08948453241235406>

- Williams, K. J., Donovan, J. J., & Dodge, T. L. (2000). Self-regulation of performance. Goal establishment and goal revision processes in athletes. *Human Performance, 13*, 159-180. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327043hup1302\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327043hup1302_3)
- Wrosch, C., Scheier, M. F., Miller, G. E., Schulz, R., & Carver, C. S. (2003). Adaptive self-regulation of unattainable goals: Goal disengagement, goal reengagement, and subjective well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 29*, 1494–1508. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167203256921>
- Wrzesniewski, A. (2003). Finding positive meaning at work. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton & R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline* (pp. 296–308). Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Appendix

Figure 2

*P-P Plot for Dependent Variable CGDR*

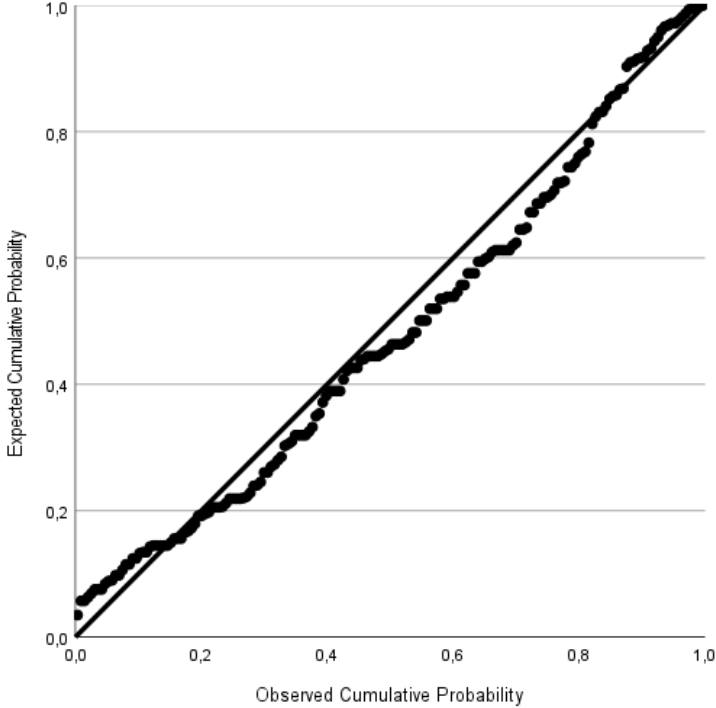
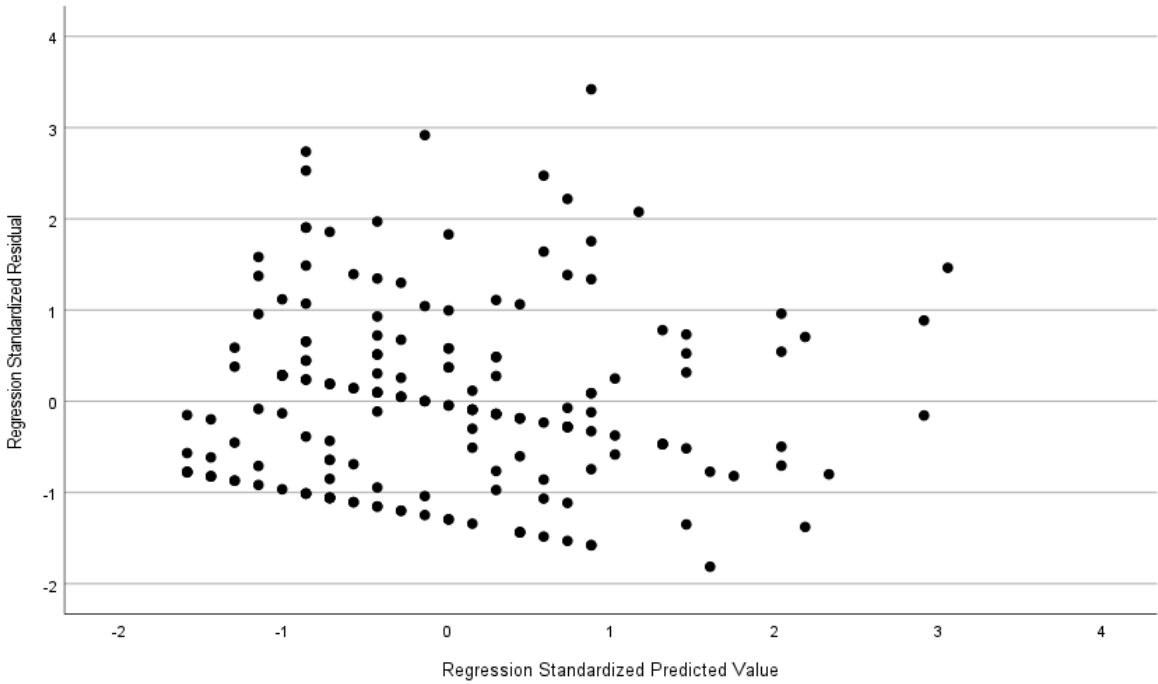


Figure 3

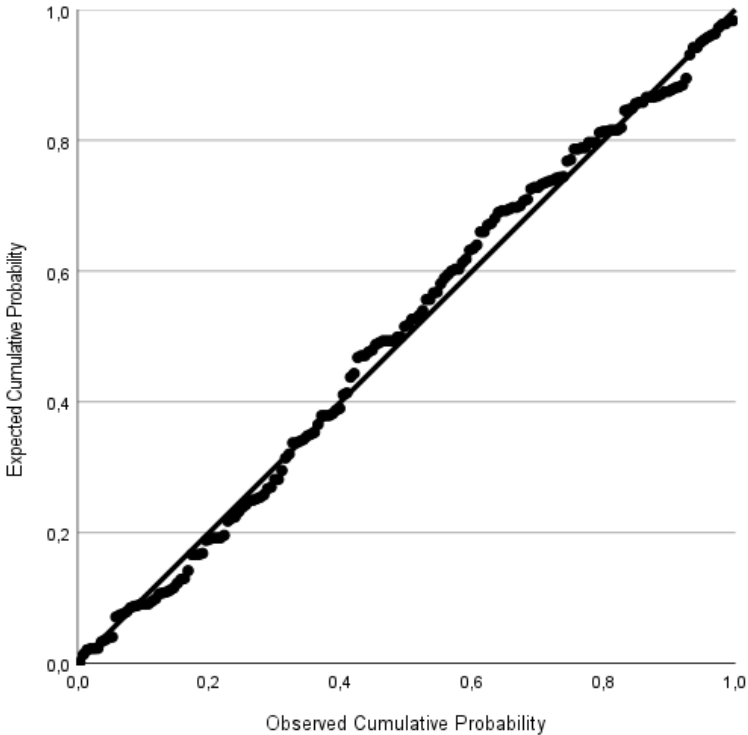
*Scatterplot for Dependent Variable CGDR*





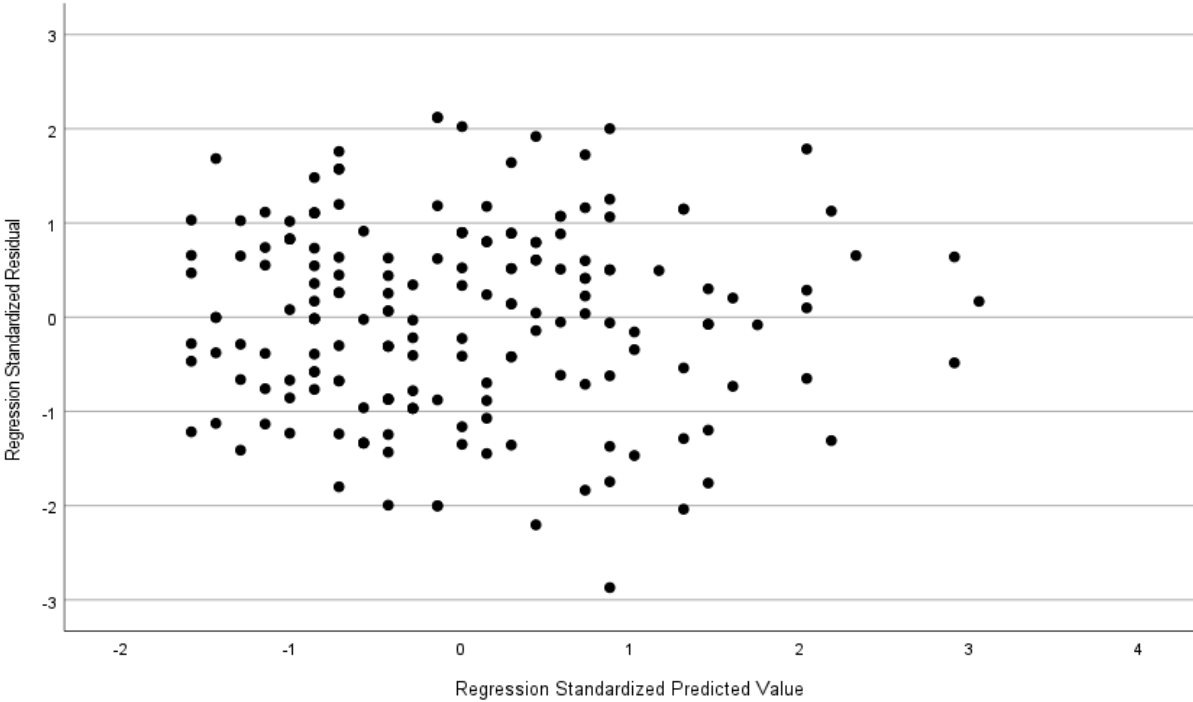
**Figure 4**

*P-P Plot for Dependent Variable CD*



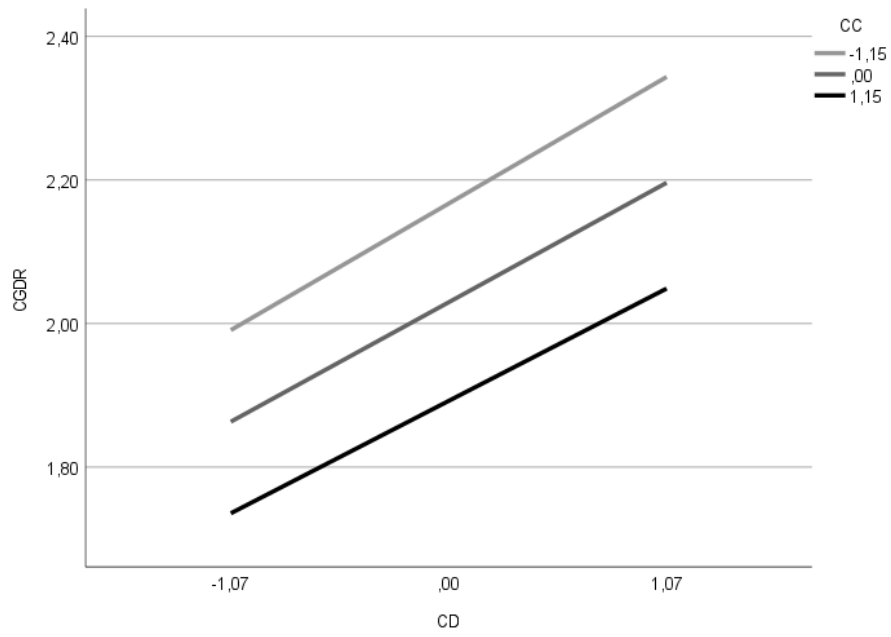
**Figure 5**

*Scatterplot for Dependent Variable CD*



**Figure 6**

*Moderation Graph*



*Note.* Values were standardized for clearer visualization.