

## Mediating Role of Job Crafting in the Relationship Between Creativity and Work Exhaustion\*

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### Abstract

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Given the prevalence of emotional exhaustion at work, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical to identify ways to help employees prevent its negative effects. We administered surveys to 823 female attorneys in China and found that job crafting mediated the relationship between creativity and emotional exhaustion. Drawing from resource-gain-development (RGD) theory, our study is the first to explain the mechanism through which job crafting intervenes in this relationship to enable creativity to mitigate employees' emotional exhaustion. In addition, we found that the attorney's value of Zhongyong, which involves integrated thinking, acted as a moderator in this relationship.

### Key words

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Job crafting, creativity, work exhaustion, female attorneys

## Introduction

Employees' work environments and designs have changed considerably since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bai, Tian, & Liu, 2021). Workers' lives commonly include makeshift bedroom offices, endless video conferences, and cry-

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ing babies during work hours (Wang, Liu, Qian, & Parker, 2021). With these unexpected changes, many employees experience problems adapting, a strong sense of job insecurity, and emotional exhaustion (Spagnoli & Molinaro, 2020; Tang, Ma, Nauman, & Xing, 2020). These negative emotional experiences associated with the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to work exhaustion, also known as emotional exhaustion, a psychological stress symptom that reflects a negative response to emotional and interpersonal stressors at work (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004), which can negatively affect work performance and increase turnover (Saleem, Malik, & Qureshi, 2021).

Research has shown that female employees experience greater levels of emotional exhaustion than their male counterparts (Andrade & Neves, 2022; Teja, 2021). Thus, it is critical to explore ways to help women mitigate increased work exhaustion. In addition, employee responses to the pandemic may differ by industry. Employees in knowledge-intensive industries, who likely require a higher level of concentration to complete their tasks, may be particularly affected by the changes brought about by the pandemic. In addition, responses to work exhaustion during the pandemic may differ by sex because women have been found to experience higher levels of stress (e.g., Kneavel, 2021). Given the potential for female knowledge workers to be especially susceptible to experiencing the negative effects of stressful events, the present study focuses on female attorneys' responses to work exhaustion during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the effects of work exhaustion can be serious (e.g., Osei, Konadu & Osei-Kwame, 2022), it is crucial to identify the factors associated with its development. Previous research revealed three antecedents of work exhaustion: work or family environment, work characteristics, and employee motivation. Work or family environment includes social support from organizations, leadership style, and work-family conflict (Karatepe, 2010). Work characteristics include pressure, workload, and job complexity (Lotta, Fernandez, Pimenta, & Wenham, 2021). Research on employee motivation as an antecedent of work exhaustion has found that certain types of motivation can reduce work exhaustion (Spagnoli & Molinaro, 2020). For instance, employees experienced less exhaustion if they engaged in work tasks that they were interested in or actively chose instead of completing tasks involving external or internal pressure. Regarding employee characteristics and behaviors predicting exhaustion, some studies have explored the contribution of employees' emotional labor to work exhaustion (Kim & Leach, 2021). Given the wide-ranging effects of work exhaustion, further research is needed to clarify the contributions of other employee characteristics and behaviors to work exhaustion.

One characteristic that makes attorneys' work relatively unique is that they often work in small teams on different cases, with a constantly changing team and work environment, as opposed to a more fixed working environment. As such, attorneys' work environments generally entail a high degree of job autonomy, which requires them to rely on their own resources and abilities to solve problems and handle work rather than relying on their employers. Thus, examining the factors associated with work exhaustion in attorneys offers fruitful research opportunities that have received little scholarly attention.

One factor that we expect to mitigate attorney work exhaustion is creativity and the creation of new and useful ideas or solutions (Fisher & Barrett, 2019). As creativity can boost work effectiveness, it may be viewed as an individual resource that varies from person to person. Creativity facilitates employees' proactive behavior, perceived insider status, and career satisfaction (Bourmistrov & Åmo, 2022). Given the positive outcomes of creativity, such as increased career satisfaction and proactive behaviors, creativity seems to have the potential to reduce work exhaustion. We are not aware of any published studies on this relationship. This study examines female attorney creativity, an individual resource, as an antecedent of work exhaustion.

If creativity is considered a resource that can be used to reduce work exhaustion, it is important to identify the mechanism through which employees use creativity to mitigate negative job outcomes. Our study proposes that this mechanism may be explained by job crafting, the process through which employees change their work in personally meaningful ways using their resources (Bai et al., 2021). Many studies have shown that job crafting produces positive outcomes, including increased work engagement and well-being (e.g., Rudolph, Katz, Lavigne, & Zacher, 2017). Several antecedents of job crafting have been identified, including individual characteristics (Kim & Beehr, 2021), job characteristics (Ghazzawi, Bender, Daouk-Oyry, van de Vijver, & Chasiotis, 2021), organizational policies and systems (Berdicchia, Bracci, & Masino, 2021) and leadership (Wang, Demurouti, & Le Blanc, 2017). Considering the findings of the existing research, we propose that job crafting explains how employees use creativity to access resources to mitigate work exhaustion. Accordingly, this study addressed the following question: What role does job crafting play in the relationship between female attorneys' workplace creativity and work exhaustion during the COVID-19 pandemic? Our study uses resource-gain development (RGD) theory (Shi, She, Zhou, Zhang, & Zhang, 2022) to explain how job crafting acts as the mechanism through which employees use creativity to mitigate work exhaustion. The RGD theory, a



robust framework rooted in a positive workplace, gain-sharing, and resource-based perspective, proposes that individuals are motivated to grow, develop, and pursue the highest quality of life in their work and personal lives (Shi et al., 2022). Individuals use their resources (e.g., creativity in the current study) to make positive gains (e.g., job crafting in the current study) that facilitate positive outcomes (e.g., reducing work exhaustion in the current study).

We also expected individual differences in the relationships between creativity, job crafting, and work exhaustion. Specifically, we anticipate that cultural values will enhance the positive relationship between creativity and job crafting and amplify the effect of job crafting on the relationship between creativity and work exhaustion. Some studies have begun to explore the impact of cultural values on workplace attitudes and behaviors (Fan, 2021; Sun, Guo, Wang, Sun, & Wang, 2021; Wei, Chen, Zhang, & Zhang, 2020; Yang, Ji, & Zu, 2021). This study examines *Zhongyong*, an indigenous Chinese cultural value rooted in Confucian philosophy. *Zhongyong* is generally thought to include numerous elements, but our research focuses on the integrated thinking element of *Zhongyong*, involving people's propensities to fit together various viewpoints (e.g., judgments, arguments, and thoughts) and to preserve relational accord. This type of integrated thinking may help female attorneys maximize the benefits of creativity. As such, we propose that *Zhongyong* acts as a moderator by helping attorneys in China utilize individuals' resources of creativity and buffer work exhaustion through relational crafting.

### **Creativity and Relational Crafting**

To examine the influence of creativity on work exhaustion, we explored the relationship between creativity and relational crafting. Creativity in the workplace, defined as the creation of new and useful ideas or solutions (Fisher & Barrett, 2019), is essential for innovation (Akinola, Kapadia, Lu, & Mason, 2019). Research has identified numerous antecedents of workplace creativity, such as personality (e.g., Michinov & Michinov, 2021), job design (Ikhida, Timur, & Okunmoku, 2021), social network orientation (Ozer & Zhang, 2021), and organizational support (Taylor, Ivcevic, Moeller, & Brackett, 2020).

Less scholarly attention has been paid to the effects of workplace creativity; however, a recent study called for more research on creativity outcomes (Lua, Liu, & Shalley, 2023). Some scholars have found that creativity is associated with proactive behavior (Bourmistrov & Āmo, 2022) and protégé creativity (Wang &

Shibayama, 2022). However, we are unaware of any prior studies examining the relationship between creativity and work exhaustion through relational crafting.

As noted earlier, job crafting refers to the process through which employees change their work in personally meaningful ways using their resources (Bai et al., 2021). There are three types of job crafting: cognitive, task, and relational (Zhang & Parker, 2019). Task crafting entails altering a job's task boundaries by modifying the number, scope, or type of undertaking performed at work. Cognitive crafting refers to how workers perceive or frame their tasks. Relational crafting involves employees changing their relationships with the people in their workplaces (Rofcanin, Bakker, Berber, Gölgeci, & Las Heras, 2019).

Relational crafting is particularly relevant to creativity because when employees engage in creative efforts, they need to interact with their coworkers or clients to obtain their support for new ideas or solutions. For example, employees can choose to build or end relationships with their colleagues or clients. As such, relational crafting is a creative and impromptu practice that describes how employees modify their work relationships by defining their work identity. A growing body of research has empirically examined relational crafting, with most focusing on the consequences of relational crafting (e.g., Rofcanin et al., 2019; Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2014). In a survey of working adults, Slemp and Vella-Brodrick (2014) found that relational crafting focused solely on building relationships was positively associated with intrinsic needs satisfaction, which in turn was positively associated with employee well-being. In contrast, in a study involving employee work diaries, Rofcanin et al. (2019) found that relational crafting by limiting interactions with colleagues resulted in lower levels of employee performance. The authors explained their results by suggesting that while employees proactively devoted efforts to attaining a more favorable person-job fit, they neglected some of their job duties and were less likely to engage in voice behavior.

Despite the emergence of studies on the effects of relational crafting, few studies have examined its antecedents. This study proposes that creativity facilitates relational crafting among employees. Although a few studies have found that job crafting is associated with creativity as an outcome (e.g., Demerouti, Bakker, & Gevers, 2015), we are aware of only one prior study that has examined creativity as a predictor of job crafting (Ghazzawi et al., 2021). This study on nurses in Lebanon found that creativity was positively associated with job crafting, called "approach crafting," which included, among other characteristics, increasing social resources on the job, similar to relational crafting. In addition to this study examining creativity as an antecedent to a similar form of job crafting, related research has linked creativity with work proactivity to make predictions (Bourmistrov &



Åmo, 2022).

Given that relational crafting may be viewed as a form of proactive work behavior, we might expect an analogous relationship. In a study of students participating in scenario-building workshops, Bourmistrov and Åmo (2022) found that foresight interventions aimed at forming strategies in anticipation of future circumstances of the environment facilitated creativity, which, in turn, resulted in proactive behavior. As noted earlier, when employees produce innovative ideas and exert effort toward seeing the fruition of ideas, they need to communicate with their colleagues or clients to obtain support for their new ideas or solutions. Thus, creative efforts in the workplace facilitate attorneys' communication with unfamiliar colleagues and meeting new clients, which offer them a greater pool of relationships from which to choose to engage. Consequently, with more relationship choices in the workplace, attorneys are more likely to craft their present work relationships to acquire more job resources or reduce job demands (Berdicchia et al., 2021).

The self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) may also explain why creativity is positively associated with relational crafting. According to the SDT, individuals have a universal need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and when satisfied, these lead to optimal functioning. We suggest that if engaging in creative efforts allows workers' intrinsic and extrinsic needs to be met, they will be motivated to participate in activities that support these efforts (in this case, relational crafting). In the current study, we expect that women attorneys with higher levels of creativity would be more likely to be motivated, both extrinsically and intrinsically, to optimize their work and engage in relational crafting. In terms of extrinsic motivation, creativity helps attorneys have more opportunities to submit creative proposals to solve work problems or improve working processes, which can boost work performance and help them earn favors from their supervisors. We would expect that if attorneys believe that work creativity may result in recognition and promotion opportunities, they may engage in relational crafting to put themselves in a better position to excel in their tasks (Berdicchia et al., 2021).

In terms of intrinsic motivation, work creativity requires attorneys to put forth considerable time and energy for demanding work. When attorneys put forth this effort in their work, they were more likely to see the value of their work compared to others who did not contribute as much time and energy toward their work. Thus, creativity may increase intrinsic motivation to optimize work and engage in relational crafting (Berdicchia et al., 2021). Based on this reasoning, we propose the first hypothesis:

**H1: Creativity is positively associated with relational crafting.**

## Relational Crafting and Work Exhaustion

In addition to its positive relationship with creativity, SDT may explain why we expected a negative relationship between relational crafting and work exhaustion. As noted earlier, SDT suggests that one universal need is relatedness; furthermore, when this need is satisfied, individuals are able to function optimally. Relational crafting aligns well with relatedness because it involves the extent to which workers connect with their colleagues and thus gives them valued social resources to foster favorable relationships (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2014) and prevent exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion, a dimension of burnout, may be defined as a psychological stress symptom that reflects a negative response to emotional and interpersonal stressors at work (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). Previous studies have suggested that perceived resources influence employees' abilities to handle strain (Watkins et al., 2014). Thus, attorneys who believe they possess more resources are more likely to handle work stress more effectively and diminish the likelihood of work exhaustion.

Relational crafting in the workplace is likely to help attorneys build new relationships that may increase their social resources and enable them to acquire more information that can be viewed as a critical job resource. Attorneys with rich resources obtained through relational crafting are better equipped to manage challenges and stress, which helps mitigate work exhaustion (Demerouti et al., 2015). Relational crafting also offers attorneys the opportunity to build beneficial relationships and remove fruitful connections. Therefore, developing and maintaining work relationships through relational crafting should contribute to a positive environment with rich emotional resources that would make work exhaustion less likely. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H2: Relational crafting is negatively associated with work exhaustion.**

## Mediating Effect of Relational Crafting

As mentioned in the Introduction, the RGD theory posits that employees are motivated to grow, develop, and pursue the highest quality of life in their work and personal lives (Shi et al., 2022). Consequently, employees use their resources (e.g., creativity) to make positive gains (e.g., relational crafting), which facilitate positive outcomes (e.g., diminishing work exhaustion). According to this theory, the more resources an employee holds, the higher the likelihood that they will facilitate positive gains. We expect that attorneys with work creativity resources



would explore more possibilities and investigate more novel approaches at work that would result in lower levels of work exhaustion. We propose that relational crafting is a mechanism through which employees use creativity to mitigate work exhaustion. Developing and deepening work relationships allows employees novel opportunities to use their creativity to gain new information and connections and to facilitate the positive outcome of lower levels of work exhaustion. Following the reasoning outlined above, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H3: Relational crafting mediates the relationship between work creativity and work exhaustion.**

### Moderating Effect of Zhongyong

Given the impact of cultural values on workplace behaviors (e.g., Sun et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021), we also expect individual differences in the relationships between creativity, job crafting, and work exhaustion. In particular, we predict that the Chinese indigenous cultural values of Zhongyong (Yang, Yang, Ding, 2014) will enhance the positive relationship between creativity and relational crafting and amplify the effect of relational crafting on the creative-work exhaustion relationship. Recall that Zhongyong includes multiple dimensions, but the current study concentrates on a dimension especially relevant to attorneys' work behavior: the integrated thinking dimension of Zhongyong. This component involves employees' propensities to integrate various viewpoints (e.g., judgments, arguments, and thoughts) and maintain relational accord.

Zhongyong has been found to be associated with positive work behaviors such as enhancing psychological safety, voice behaviors (Yang et al., 2021), knowledge sharing (Fan, 2021), and wisdom (the use of logical analysis to balance competing interests) (Wei & Wang, 2020). Zhongyong has also been explored as a moderator in organizational behavior research (Sun et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2020). In a survey of Chinese entrepreneurs, Wei et al. (2020) reported that

Zhongyong moderates the relationship between perceptions of entrepreneurial self-efficacy and job satisfaction. In addition, in a manufacturing study, Sun et al. (2021) found that Zhongyong moderated the relationship between leader-member exchange and managers' promotion and bonus decisions. Although the role of Zhongyong in the relationship between creativity and work exhaustion has not been empirically examined in previous studies, some have found a positive relationship between Zhongyong and creativity (e.g., Shao, Nijstad, & Täuber, 2018; Zhou et al., 2019). This finding may be due to the fact that people who perceive a



low degree of Zhongyong tend to be more fixed in their thinking, which contradicts the adaptability required for creative thinking (Shao et al., 2018). Zhongyong allows individuals to promote and argue for novel solutions and integrate the various viewpoints essential to creative thinking (Zhou et al., 2019). In the current study, we expected that integrated thinking characterizing Zhongyong would amplify the strength of the relationship between creativity and work exhaustion. Integrated thinking may increase the willingness of attorneys to communicate with others when they have creative ideas. Attorneys who engage in more integrated thinking are more likely to understand, acknowledge, and accept others' ideas than those who engage in less integrated thinking. Thus, when attorneys engaged in integrated thinking produce creative ideas, they are more likely to consider their colleagues' opinions and promote their own ideas more effectively. With the increase in attorney communication with other people brought on by Zhongyong, instances of relational crafting are expected to increase, and attorneys are more likely to benefit from lower levels of emotional exhaustion. Based on these arguments, we propose the following two hypotheses:

**H4: Zhongyong enhances the positive relationship between creativity and relational crafting.**

**H5: Zhongyong amplifies the mitigating influence of creativity on work exhaustion via relational crafting.**

## Method

### Sample

An association of female attorneys employed in various law firms (partner law firms, special partner law firms, and private law firms) in China consented to permit their member attorneys to participate in this study. This sample was considered appropriate because attorneys use creative thinking to manage litigation and court arguments. Furthermore, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, they were expected to continue their regular work tasks and adapt to constantly evolving assignments that demanded novel approaches. Hence, the work of the participants in the current study was particularly relevant to the line of inquiry.

The association of female attorneys obtained the agreement of law firm leaders who provided the association members with links to online surveys between May and June 2020. The participants were told that participation in the study was optional and confidential. A total of 823 surveys were completed with an 86% re-

sponse rate. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 72 years, with an average age of 39 years. A master's degree was held by 49.3% of the sample, and a bachelor's degree was the highest level of education for 49.1% of our sample. The average attorney's tenure was 11 years. Moreover, 72.3% of these female attorneys were partners in a law firm, whereas the rest worked as associates of a law firm. Additionally, 68.9% of these female attorneys worked under salary-based compensation, 61.5% worked under a performance pay plan, and 98.9% held secondary jobs involving attorneys.

## Measures

The survey scales were modified from measures that were originally in English using back-translation (Schaubroeck, Demirtas, Peng, & Pei, 2022) for translation to Mandarin Chinese. All the measures used a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

**Creativity.** Creativity was measured using three items ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ) from the scale of Tierney, Farmer, and Graen (1999).

**Zhongyong.** Zhongyong was measured using five items ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) from the study of Yao, Yang, Dong, and Wang (2010).

**Relational crafting.** Relational crafting was measured using three items ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ) from Slemp and Vella-Brodrick (2014).

**Work exhaustion.** Work exhaustion was measured using three items ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) from Watkins et al.'s (2014) study.

**Control variables.** We controlled for age, education, tenure, and creative self-efficacy (using three items from Tierney and Farmer's (2002) study).

## Results

### Confirmatory Factors Analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the discriminant validity of the variables. The goodness-of-fit indices of the proposed four-factor model were  $\chi^2/df = 3.88$ , RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.968, TLF = 0.959, and SRMR = 0.033 (Table 1). When we combined all four variables into one, the indices of the one-factor model were  $\chi^2/df = 37.81$ , RMSEA = 0.211, CFI = 0.498, TLF = 0.414, and SRMR = 0.159. The indices of the two-factor model



(Zhongyong, creativity, relational crafting combined into one factor, and work exhaustion as a separate factor) included  $\chi^2/df = 28.63$ , RMSEA = 0.183, CFI = 0.628, TLF = 0.560, and SRMR = 0.145. The indices of the three-factor model (combining Zhongyong and creativity into one variable and relational crafting and work exhaustion separately) included the following:  $\chi^2/df = 15.80$ , RMSEA = 0.134, CFI = 0.860, TLF = 0.560, SRMR = 0.122. Hence, the four-factor model offered a superior fit. Given the accepted guidelines that CFI, NFI, and TLI values should be greater than 0.90 (Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008), the discriminant validity of the variables was deemed acceptable.

**Table 1**  
*Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)*

	$\chi^2/d$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
One-factor	37.81	0.211	0.498	0.414	0.159
Two-factor	28.63	0.183	0.628	0.560	0.145
Three-factor	15.80	0.134	0.860	0.764	0.122
Four-factor	3.88	0.06	0.968	0.959	0.033

### Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

Table 2 reports the correlations, means, and standard deviations in our study. A significant positive association was found between relational crafting and creativity ( $r = 0.488$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In addition, exhaustion was negatively related to creativity ( $r = -0.200$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and relational crafting ( $r = -0.241$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Zhongyong was positively related to creativity ( $r = 0.388$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), relational crafting ( $r = 0.253$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and exhaustion ( $r = 0.143$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 2**  
*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations*

	Mean	Std	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1) Creativity	3.91	0.519	<b>0.889</b>			
(2) Relational crafting	3.73	0.64	0.488**	<b>0.841</b>		
(3) Exhaustion	2.98	0.68	-0.200**	-0.241**	<b>0.917</b>	
(4) Zhongyong	4.17	0.412	0.338**	0.253**	0.143**	<b>0.843</b>

Note. \*\*  $p < 0.01$

### Common Method Variance

To examine the potential for survey-based source bias, common method variance (CMV) was examined. First, the correlation matrix in Table 2 shows that none of the correlations was greater than 0.9 (Bagozzi, Yi, & Phillips, 1991), indicating that CMV is not a major threat in these data. Second, we performed a more rigorous full-collinearity test developed by Kock (2015). The lowest value of the variance inflation factor (VIF) was 1.069, and the highest value was 2.432. Given that all VIF values were less than 3.3, the CMV was not a serious concern.

### Hypotheses Testing

To test our hypotheses, a path model was used to simultaneously estimate all coefficients presented in Table 3. The results showed that creativity was positively associated with relational crafting ( $b = 0.451, p < 0.001$ ). Thus, H1 is supported. Relational crafting was negatively associated with work exhaustion ( $b = -0.202, p < 0.01$ ), thus supporting H2. Analyses from 5000 bias-corrected bootstrap (Hayes, 2013) revealed a significant indirect effect ( $b = -0.091$ , Boot SE = 0.029, 95 percent CI = [-0.150, -0.036]) of creativity on work exhaustion via relational crafting, as zero is not contained in the 95 percent confidence interval for the indirect effect. Hence, H3 is supported.

**Table 3**  
**Path Analysis**

Variables	Relational crafting		Work exhaustion	
	<i>b</i>	S.E.	<i>b</i>	S.E.
Intercept	3.174***	0.196	4.300***	0.331
Control variables				
Age	0.003	0.003	-0.007	0.004
Education	-0.047	0.037	0.026	0.054
Tenure	0.0001	0.0003	0.0000	0.0004
Creative self-efficacy	0.140***	0.039	-0.217***	0.058
Independent variables				
Creativity	0.451***	0.047	-0.058	0.069
Mediator				
Relational crafting			-0.202***	0.050
Interaction				
Creativity * Zhongyong	0.176*	0.075		
R <sup>2</sup>	0.265		0.083	

*Note.* The results came from one path model that simultaneously estimated all coefficients.  
\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



Furthermore, as shown in Figure 1 and Table 3, Zhongyong's moderating effect on the relationship between creativity and relational crafting was significant ( $b = 0.284, p < 0.001$ ). Thus, H4 is supported.

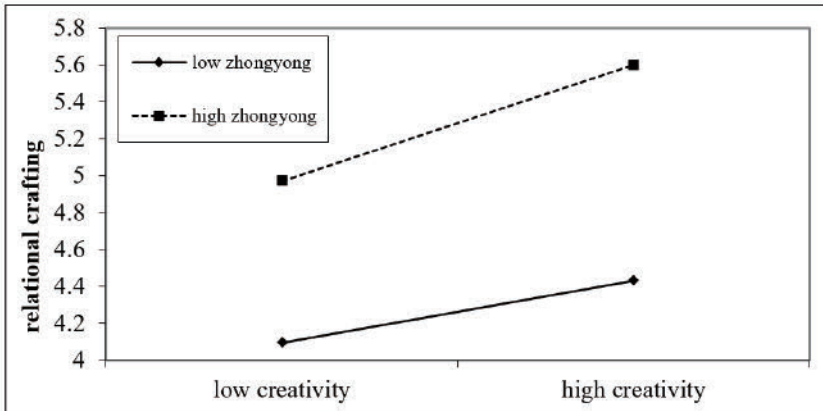


Figure 1. Moderating effect of Zhongyong

The regression results are shown in Figure 1. Table 4 shows the conditional indirect effects of creativity on work exhaustion via relational crafting at the lower, average, and higher Zhongyong levels. The higher and lower levels of the moderators were plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean, respectively. The results showed that the mediation effect was significant ( $b = -0.010, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that H5 was supported.

Table 4  
Moderated mediation model

Moderator	$b$	S.E.	$p$ -value	Bias-corrected bootstrap 95% confidence interval	
Zhongyong	Low Zhongyong (-1SD)	-0.085	0.031	0.005	[-0.178, -0.013]
	Average	-0.090	0.032	0.005	[-0.190, -0.013]
	High Zhongyong (+1SD)	-0.096	0.034	0.005	[-0.202, -0.014]
	Difference (High-Low)	-0.010	0.004	0.004	[-0.020, -0.001]

## Discussion

One of the many negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers worldwide is emotional exhaustion (Spagnoli & Molinaro, 2020), with female employees experiencing higher levels than their male counterparts (Andrade & Neves, 2022; Teja, 2021). A key finding of our study on female attorneys in China is that employees can engage in relational crafting to maximize the benefits of creativity in preventing emotional exhaustion. This finding complements previous research, which found that job crafting is required for creative ideas to be facilitated into a related positive outcome: subjective well-being (Ghawazzi et al., 2021).

Our mediation finding may be explained by the RGD theory, which proposes that workers are motivated to grow, develop, and pursue the highest quality of life in their work and personal lives (Shi et al., 2022). Thus, we found that they used creative resources to elicit positive gains in the form of relational crafting, which facilitated the benefit of lower levels of emotional exhaustion. In keeping with the RGD theory, the more creative resources attorneys perceived, the greater the likelihood of positive gains because they used their resources to obtain new information by building and maintaining work relationships, which had the added benefit of lower exhaustion. Prior to our study, existing literature on creativity and exhaustion lacked an empirical explanation of how employees' creative efforts might mitigate their emotional exhaustion. In summary, the most important finding of our study is that relational crafting is the mechanism through which employees use creativity to mitigate work exhaustion.

The second key finding is that work creativity directly facilitates the relational crafting of female attorneys. By establishing a link between creativity and relational crafting, we gain insight into how creativity contributes to positive workplace dynamics. We are aware of only one previous study that examined creativity as a predictor of job crafting (Ghazzawi et al., 2021). Our results suggest that when employees use their creative resources to generate ideas, they gain new resources by interacting more deeply with their coworkers, including those with whom they are not well acquainted, to further develop their ideas or gain their support. Therefore, under stressful circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, to encourage attorneys to reshape their social relationships to enhance their work, supervisors can take action to cultivate female attorneys' work creativity. For example, organizations can flatten their organizational structures by allowing attorneys to choose their work relationships and gain more control over their work.

Third, our study found that attorney relational crafting helped mitigate exhaustion.



Our sample of female attorneys in China practices law in a knowledge-intensive industry; thus, emotional exhaustion has the potential to have a more harmful effect on their performance than that of workers in less knowledge-intensive industries. Our finding that relational crafting prevents exhaustion is consistent with previous research, which found that relational crafting is positively associated with well-being at work (de Devotto, Freitas, & Wechsler, 2020). It appears that employees who devote efforts toward building and maintaining work relationships enjoy the benefits of positive well-being and lower levels of work exhaustion because these efforts increase their pool of resources. This finding contributes to our understanding of the ways to prevent emotional exhaustion among female employees through work relationships.

It is important to note that the benefits to the workplace may extend beyond mitigating the negative effects of emotional exhaustion. Given the positive relationship between creativity and relational crafting, fostering creativity can lead to collaborative and harmonious work environments. Employees adept at using creative skills to build and nurture relationships are likely to contribute positively to teamwork and cooperation. By teaching employees how to leverage their creative abilities to build connections and improve workplace relationships, organizations can enhance teamwork and interpersonal effectiveness.

The link between creativity and relational job crafting and lower levels of women's emotional exhaustion may also be considered within the context of the literature on women's unique workplace challenges. Building and nurturing relationships are essential for career advancement. Women often face unique challenges in male-dominated industries, and strong networks can provide valuable support, mentorship, and access to opportunities. Although networking relationships are critical in every industry, they have been suggested to be even more important for women in the legal profession (Teja, 2021).

Additionally, the negative relationship between relational crafting and exhaustion should be considered in the context of China's collectivist culture. The attorneys in this study may have been especially likely to reap the benefits of deepening work relationships, given that collectivist cultures value social support as a particularly desirable resource. Thus, less emotional exhaustion may have been perceived as a result of knowing that they have satisfied their need for social support in accordance with cultural norms.

Finally, our results revealed that the integrated thinking component of the Chinese indigenous cultural values of Zhongyong (Yang et al., 2014) enhanced the positive relationship between creativity and relational crafting and amplified the effect of relational crafting on the creative-work exhaustion relationship. Attorneys

who excel in integrated thinking are more likely to interact with coworkers regarding their creative ideas. They are expected to seek, accept, and incorporate their colleagues' suggestions in comparison to attorneys who are less skilled in integrated thinking. Accordingly, when attorneys practice integrated thinking and generate creative ideas, they are more likely to interact with colleagues to increase the probability of their ideas reaching fruition. Furthermore, they enjoyed the benefits of lower emotional exhaustion to a greater extent than those with low levels in the integrated thinking dimension of Zhongyong. Managers can hold training sessions to boost integrated thinking.

### **Limitations**

This study has some limitations. First, we cannot rule out common method bias; however, our empirical tests suggest that this is unlikely to be a serious problem for these data. Future research should examine variables from multiple sources (e.g., employees and their supervisors or coworkers) and time periods. Second, our study focused on female attorneys in China; therefore, the study should be replicated in other countries, industries, and populations with greater gender diversity before drawing conclusions about generalizability. Finally, we chose to examine Zhongyong because of its relevance to the integrated thinking requirements of the occupations in our sample. Future research should examine other cultural values while considering the fit with occupations and research questions.



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