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### Benevolent Sexism, Self-Depletion, Career Growth and Employee Mindfulness: A Conservation of Resources Perspective

善意性别歧视、自我损耗、职业成长与员工正念：资源保存理论视角

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#### Abstract:

**Purpose:** Drawing on conservation of resources (COR) theory, this study investigates how benevolent sexism (BS) affects women's career growth through the mediating mechanism of self-depletion, while examining the moderating role of employee mindfulness in mitigating the adverse effects of BS.

**Methods:** Data were collected from 388 female employees across multiple industries in Chinese state-owned enterprises using a snowball sampling approach, with a response rate of 86.2%. The hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling and moderated mediation analysis with Mplus 8.3 and the SPSS PROCESS macro.

**Results:** The findings demonstrate that BS negatively affects career growth both directly and indirectly by increasing self-depletion. Self-depletion

**Keywords:** benevolent sexism; self-depletion; career growth; employee mindfulness; conservation of resources theory.

#### 关键词：

善意性别歧视；自我损耗；  
职业成长；员工正念；资源保存理论



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serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between BS and career growth. In addition, employee mindfulness moderates the first stage of the mediated relationship, such that the indirect effect of BS on career growth through self-depletion is weaker when mindfulness is high.

**Conclusion:** This study develops an integrated theoretical framework that explains how BS impedes women's career growth through psychological resource depletion while identifying mindfulness as a protective psychological resource. The findings extend COR theory by revealing the resource-depleting nature of BS and demonstrating how mindfulness may help preserve psychological resources in response to workplace stressors. The study also provides a theoretical foundation for future research on additional mediating and moderating mechanisms and offers practical implications for organizational interventions.

#### 摘要:

**研究目的:** 本研究基于资源保存理论 (conservation of resources, COR), 探讨善意性别歧视 (benevolent sexism, BS)

如何通过自我损耗的中介机制影响女性职业成长,

并考察员工正念在缓解善意性别歧视负面影响中的调节作用。

#### 研究方法:

本研究采用滚雪球抽样方法, 从中国国有企业多个行业中收集了388名女性员工的数据, 问卷回收率为86.2%。研究采用结构方程模型以及有调节的中介效应分析, 并使用Mplus 8.3和SPSS PROCESS宏程序对研究假设进行检验。

**研究结果:** 研究结果表明, 善意性别歧视通过增加自我损耗, 对职业成长产生直接和间接的负向影响。自我损耗在善意性别歧视与职业成长之间发挥显著的中介作用。此外, 员工正念调节了该中介关系的第一阶段, 即当员工正念水平较高时, 善意性别歧视通过自我损耗对职业成长产生的间接影响较弱。

**研究结论:** 本研究构建了一个整合性理论框架, 解释了善意性别歧视如何通过心理资源损耗阻碍女性职业成长, 同时将正念识别为一种保护性心理资源。研究结果拓展了资源保存理论, 揭示了善意性别歧视的资源损耗属性, 并表明正念可能有助于员工在面对工作场所压力源时保存心理资源。本研究还为未来探讨其他中介和调节机制提供了理论基础, 并为组织干预措施提供了实践启示。

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## 1. Introduction

Gender inequality is still prevalent in today's workplace. This inequality manifests itself on multiple levels, from overt discrimination to implicit bias. Among the many forms of gender bias, benevolent sexism (BS) is of particular concern. Unlike hostile

sexism, BS often comes in the guise of 'caring'. This bias tends to portray women as empathetic and morally high, but it also means that they are incompetent and dependent on men [1]. BS may seem harmless and even considerate, but in fact, it creates invisible barriers to women's career development by reinforcing gender

roles and restricting career opportunities for women, ultimately leading to the emergence of phenomena such as the 'glass ceiling' [2].

Research has shown that BS makes women conform to traditional role expectations by reinforcing gender stereotypes. The study by Dardenne et al. suggests that [3] BS can shake women's self-confidence and weaken their career aspirations. This means that BS can cause women to doubt their ability to work and unconsciously accept these restrictive ideas. Although BS is often disguised as benevolent protection, its negative effects are often overlooked, even unspeakable, and a great way to fight back against such public injustice [4, 5]. If you fight back against this unfairness, it will appear that women are more "unkind". In the long run, this psychological burden can form a vicious circle. The pressure faced by women in the workplace is accumulating, but due to its insidiousness, BS does not receive enough attention and timely intervention.

According to the Resource Conservation (COR) theory, individuals tend to maintain and accumulate a variety of resources, including emotional energy, self-performance, and concentration, and when these resources are threatened or lost, individuals will develop a stress response [5]. Jones et al. (2014) [6] found that women have to find a balance between contradictory expectations and implicit biases in the face of BS. This continuous process of mental adjustment leads to the depletion of emotional and cognitive resources, known as self-depletion (also known as ego-depletion). This loss of resources can have a direct impact on women's performance during critical periods of career development, such as motivation and commitment to leadership opportunities or professional skills development [6]. This study is based on the COR theory to explore how BS affects women's career development by depleting their psychological resources.

In addition, this study investigated how mindfulness—a distinct psychological resource characterized by present-moment awareness and emotional resilience [7]—might cushion these harmful effects. Mindfulness provides natural protection against BS's negative impacts. It strengthens an individual's ability to handle stressors while maintaining mental and emotional equilibrium, thereby weakening the relationship of BS and self-depletion. In particular in the workplace, mindfulness reduces BS's overall impact by minimizing self-depletion [8]. Our research both extends theoretical understanding and offers practical guidance for organizations committed to supporting women's professional growth.

This study contributes to the existing literature by elucidating the complex dynamics between BS and workplace outcomes. By examining self-regulatory resource depletion as a mediating process and mindfulness as a boundary condition, we deepen Conservation of Resources theory within workplace

gender dynamics. Specifically, this theoretical synthesis reveals how ostensibly favorable BS systematically erodes women's career opportunities. On a practical level, these findings have important implications for organizational stakeholders. In addition, mindfulness can serve as an effective organizational intervention while informing the development of evidence-based workplace policies [9]. The results also suggest that addressing BS can improve organizational operations by improving employee well-being and promote inclusion in the workplace by enhancing multifaceted organizational well-being [2].

## 2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

### 2.1. Benevolent Sexism and Career Growth

Benevolent sexism (BS) refers to a form of prejudice that, while appearing positive and protective, inherently reinforces division of gender roles and casts women as dependent, needing care, or fundamentally different from men [1,10]. While such attitude may seem supportive, it often contribute to limiting women's societal and professional roles, subtly undermining their career development opportunities.

Career growth encompasses an individual's professional advancement and development, including skill enhancement, assuming greater responsibilities, achieving promotions, and increasing overall job satisfaction. It reflects the attainment of personal career goals and the pursuit [11,12].

According to COR theory, individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect resources that they value, including both tangible (e.g., monetary rewards, promotions) and intangible resources (e.g., self-esteem, professional skills). The theory posits that resource loss is more salient than resource gain, and individuals who lack resources are more vulnerable to further resource loss, creating a 'loss spiral' [5]. In the context of career development, critical resources include professional opportunities, mentorship, challenging assignments, and psychological resources such as self-efficacy and career motivation.

BS significantly disrupts women's access to and accumulation of these vital career resources through multiple mechanisms. The systemic impact of BS on access to professional resources is manifested through multifaceted organizational mechanisms [13].

In the workplace environment, protective attitudes often lead to the exclusion of women from high-cost career opportunities, but often this risky work can promote an individual's career advancement because it limits opportunities such as developing new competencies, demonstrating leadership and creating professional networks. As a result, BS limits women's access to critical development resources [14]. From the perspective of resource conservation theory, this initial resource constraint triggers a cascading effect: reduced development opportunities lead to slower skill acquisition, which in turn affects promotion trajectories and leadership achievement [5].

In addition to limiting career development resources, BS also influences women's decisions to invest in professional resources in terms of psychological dynamics [14]. The internalization of gender expectations can unconsciously shift resource allocation from career development to traditionally prescribed roles. The COR theory suggests that individuals optimize resource investments based on perceived returns [5]. This redistributive pattern is manifested in lower labor force participation rates and more conservative occupational behaviors [15,16].

At the organizational level, BS creates structural barriers to resource access [17]. When leadership decisions become tainted by these attitudes, a troubling pattern emerges – women receive abundant verbal praise but scarce opportunities for meaningful strategic work. This imbalance typically plays out through a predictable dynamic: men securing high-visibility strategic initiatives while their female counterparts find themselves confined to supportive roles [18]. Such structural arrangements profoundly affect professional capital accumulation, limiting women's access to mentorship networks and critical organizational resources that fuel career advancement.

At the individual level, women who experience BS may influence their propensity to pursue opportunities for professional development [19]. This psychological effect is consistent with the principle of resource conservation: perceived resource constraints reduce the ability to access new resources [5]. Subsequently, women who experience this type of BS may become increasingly reluctant to participate in competitive professional development opportunities, leading to a resource-constrained, self-reinforcing model. Empirical evidence suggests that women's professional resource investment decisions show sensitivity to gender role expectations [13], especially in settings characterized by BS, leading to changes in resource allocation patterns that may limit career advancement. Therefore, we recommend:

**Hypothesis 1: Benevolent sexism is negatively associated with career growth.**

## ***2.2. The Mediating Effect of Self-Depletion***

Self-depletion, also referred to as ego depletion, describes a psychological state where an individual's self-regulatory resources are gradually exhausted due to prolonged engagement in activities requiring self-control or willpower [20]. According to the ego depletion theory, self-control operates as a finite resource. When this resource is drained, an individual's capacity to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behaviors diminishes significantly, making them more prone to impulsivity and external distractions. Research indicates that individuals experiencing ego depletion not only perform worse on subsequent tasks requiring self-control but also exhibit cognitive biases. These biases include underestimating their own abilities, negatively evaluating their capacity to manage external

challenges, and adopting a more pessimistic outlook on the future [21,22]. Baumeister et al. [20] further explained that ego depletion manifests as a temporary reduction in the ability or motivation to regulate one's environment, make decisions, initiate actions, or maintain self-control.

Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [5], people naturally seek to gain, preserve, and shield valuable assets like time and mental energy. When these resources face depletion or threats, psychological stress follows. Women who face BS often exhaust their extra psychological reserves to face this subtle discrimination. The COR framework suggests that repeatedly investing resources without sufficient recovery gradually depletes one's limited self-regulatory capabilities, creating feelings of being psychologically drained. For example, assigning travel opportunities to men or subtly favoring a male's workplace model in promotion decisions – practices that often create frustration and negative emotional states among female employees, ultimately eroding their confidence in their professional abilities [23]. In addition, BS subtly encourages women to internalize gender-based stereotypes, creating inner conflicts that lead to mental exhaustion [24]. Research indicates that women who detect or experience benevolent sexism typically show greater signs of personal resource depletion compared to those who don't face such experiences [3].

Research shows that self-depletion not only hinders the completion of immediate tasks, but also undermines long-term career progress. When self-depletion occurs, it triggers self-doubt in employees during work activities, which reduces engagement and lowers the quality of performance [6]. For example, a person who questions his or her abilities is unlikely to set ambitious career goals for himself. Even for highly engaged employees, energy is an important resource for driving performance and tasks [25-27]. However, depleting an individual's energy reserves can severely impair concentration and sustained effort [20,28]. This consumption further impairs employees' ability to self-regulate, leading to disrupted or inefficient communication and increasing the need for emotional labor [29-31]. Women facing BS often spend extra psychological resources to manage their emotions to counteract the effects of negative psychological effects. The accumulated burden of these efforts creates what researchers call a "resource loss spiral," where initial depletion leads to declining performance, requiring even more energy just to maintain basic work functions, further undermining effective performance and impacting essential career advancement factors like task completion rates and overall work quality [28].

To summarize, self-depletion functions as a limited resource that, when continuously taxed through exposure to benevolent sexism, disrupts women's capacity to invest in career advancement activities. This depletion mechanism provides a crucial connection between benevolent sexism and stunted career

progression. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2: Self-depletion mediates the relationship between benevolent sexism and career growth.**

### ***2.3. The Moderating Role of Employee Mindfulness***

Mindfulness reflects a state of mind characterized by being fully aware of and focused on the current experience [7]. This cognitive orientation enhances a person's awareness of thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations while maintaining a view of external events.

The COR theory suggests that people not only work to safeguard vital resources like energy and emotional stability but actively pursue new resources while preventing resource depletion [5]. When confronting potential threats to these resources, individuals typically activate protective mechanisms to minimize depletion. As mentioned above, BS usually triggers self-consumption and is characterized by a decrease in the individual's ability to self-regulate. Women who experience BS often invest higher emotional resources, depleting their mental reserves and disrupting their ability to think, emotional, and act. Mindfulness, on the other hand, as a regulatory mechanism, can cushion the impact of BS on self-consumption by strengthening an individual's ability to manage stressors while maintaining emotional balance. Since mindfulness fosters non-judgmental awareness and acceptance of direct experience, allowing individuals to deal with external stressors less passively. This is consistent with the resource investment principle in resource conservation theory, whereby individuals utilize existing resources (mindfulness practice) to prevent future resource depletion [9, 32].

Mindfulness builds mental resilience through distinctive cognitive processes that facilitate objective observation of one's environment. This mental approach helps women maintain emotional stability when facing benevolent sexism at work. By fostering awareness of present attitudes, mindfulness creates cognitive space between experiencing biased treatment and the resource-consuming responses that might follow [32]. This psychological distance enables working women to view BS as an social or organizational phenomenon rather than a personal affront, thereby conserving valuable psychological resources.

Mindfulness enhances cognitive resource management by improving attention control and emotional processing, and mindfulness practices help develop workplace adaptability and resilience in the face of challenges [9, 33]. Mindfulness allows individuals to pause for reflection and deliberate responses, thereby reducing unnecessary energy expenditure. In professional settings, mindful employees frequently display remarkable capacity to sustain effective personal resource allocation while reinterpreting difficult interactions, avoiding impulsive

reactions to BS. Beyond immediate stress reduction, this proactive mental stance strengthens one's resilience against long-term workplace challenges [8, 34]. Research consistently demonstrates that more mindful individuals exhibit superior emotional self-regulation and resource preservation when confronting workplace stressors [35].

Base on COR theory, mindfulness serves as a crucial personal resource that can buffer against the resource-depleting effects of BS by enhancing individuals' capacity for non-reactive awareness and emotional regulation. Therefore, this study establishes the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3: Employee mindfulness moderates the relationship between benevolent sexism and self-depletion, such that this relationship will be weaker when employee mindfulness is high than when it is low.**

### ***2.4. The Moderating Role of Employee Mindfulness in the Indirect Effect of Benevolent Sexism on Career Growth***

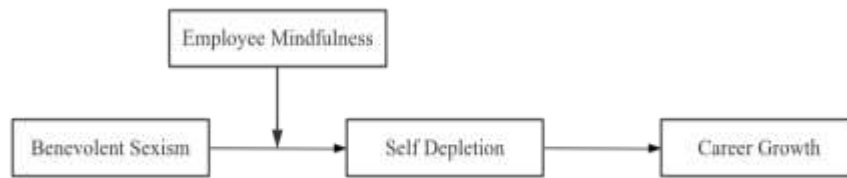
According to COR theory [5], the depletion of psychological resources due to stressors can cascade into broader negative outcomes, such as reduced career growth. This resource loss spiral can be interrupted or weakened when individuals possess protective resources that help them cope with initial resource threats. Benevolent sexism imposes psychological demands that drain individuals' emotional and cognitive resources, leading to self-depletion and, consequently, impairing their ability to engage in proactive career behaviors.

Mindfulness has been shown to buffer the effects of workplace stressors by promoting psychological resilience [8]. Research found that mindfulness can affect attention, which can lead to cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physiological effects. These effects, in turn, affect key workplace outcomes, including performance, relationships, and well-being [33]. Mindfulness can disrupt the chain of resource loss by encouraging non-judgmental acceptance of external stressors, helping individuals maintain their focus and productivity despite adverse circumstances [9]. For instance, mindfulness can reduce overreaction to discriminatory treatment, helping individuals detach from its emotional consequences and conserving resources essential for career development.

Furthermore, mindfulness supports individuals in maintaining their focus and persistence on career goals, even under stress. When individuals possess high levels of mindfulness, the resource drain caused by BS is less likely to translate into career-limiting behaviors and decisions [33]. By fostering cognitive flexibility and emotional stability, mindfulness mitigates the negative effects of BS-driven self-depletion, ensuring individuals remain capable of pursuing opportunities for advancement.

Therefore, mindfulness acts as a protective resource buffer, weakening both the initial resource loss from BS to self-depletion and the subsequent cascade of depletion effects on career growth. This dual-stage buffering effect aligns with COR theory's emphasis on resource protection and conservation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 4: Employee mindfulness moderates the the indirect effect of benevolent sexism on career growth through self-depletion, such that the mediated relationship will be weaker when employee mindfulness is high than when it is low. (Figure 1)**



**Figure 1.** Proposed moderated mediation model.

### 3. Research Methods

#### 3.1. Sample and Procedure

In this study, we employed a snowball sampling method to distribute questionnaires. To minimize potential sampling bias inherent in snowball sampling, we implemented several control measures. We collaborated with local associations in Macau to target female employees from 103 state-owned enterprises, ensuring geographical and organizational diversity. After obtaining approval from the Secretariat of the Macau Chinese Enterprises Association, we contacted the HR departments of member companies, inviting each to select 2 to 10 female employees to participate in the study based on predetermined criteria to ensure representativeness. We explained the research objectives, assured participants of confidentiality, and emphasized voluntary participation before distributing the questionnaires.

The data collection was conducted from July to September 2024. Questionnaires were distributed through online format to ensure convenience and anonymity. To mitigate common method bias, we divided the data collection into three phases, which were released in July, August, and September. A total of 450 questionnaires were distributed, and after excluding invalid responses ( $n = 62$ ), we obtained 388 valid responses, resulting in an effective response rate of 86.2%.

In the 388 valid employee questionnaires, the age distribution was concentrated in the 18–25 (22.4%), 26–30 (20.4%), and 31–40 (22.2%) age groups, indicating that the sample primarily consisted of working age women. Educational qualifications were mainly concentrated in bachelor's (30.2%) and associate degrees (24.7%), with a significant portion (19.8%) holding postgraduate or higher degrees, suggesting a relatively well-educated sample. The majority of participants were junior staff (56.4%), while entry-level and mid-level managers accounted for 15.7% and 15.6%, respectively, and senior managers made up 12.3%. The industry distribution was led by hospitality and food services (32.0%), followed by wholesale and retail (11.3%), real estate (7.5%), IT/software (7.2%),

and government institutions (6.4%). Other industries accounted for 31.0%.

The sample characteristics suggest good representation across age groups, education levels, and organizational positions. The predominance of young and well-educated participants aligns with the demographic profile of female employees in Macau's state-owned enterprises. The industry distribution reflects the economic structure of Macau, with a strong presence in the service sector.

#### 3.2. Variable Measurement

This study employed validated measurement instruments that have demonstrated reliability across diverse research contexts. Given that our study was conducted in a Chinese-speaking context, we undertook a comprehensive translation process involving multiple bilingual experts to ensure measurement equivalence. All items were scored on a five-point scale (1='completely disagree' to 5='completely agree').

**Benevolent Sexism in the Workplace.** To assess workplace benevolent sexism, we utilized Warren et al.(2023) [36] 19-item scale. This instrument captures subtle forms of gender-based discrimination masked as protective or seemingly positive attitudes. Representative items include 'Men should protect women from difficult workplace situations' and 'Women deserve special consideration in the workplace.' The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92.

**Self-Depletion.** Self-depletion was measured using the 25-item Self-Depletion Scale developed by Christian and Ellis [37]. This scale assesses participants' perceptions of their mental and physical exhaustion due to self-regulatory efforts. Sample items included: 'I feel mentally drained after making decisions' and 'Controlling my impulses throughout the day leaves me feeling exhausted.' The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale was 0.81.

**Career Growth.** This study adopted Career Growth Scale developed by Weng & Xi (2011) (38) which included 15-item instrument to measure career growth. This scale evaluates various dimensions of professional advancement, including skill development

and goal attainment. Illustrative items include 'I am gaining experience that contributes to my professional goals' and 'My current role provides opportunities for career advancement.' The reliability coefficient was 0.90.

**Mindfulness.** Employee mindfulness was measured using Hülshager et al.'s (2013) [9]15-item workplace mindfulness scale. This instrument assesses individuals' capacity for present-moment awareness and non-judgmental attention in work settings. Example items include 'I maintain focus on my current task despite distractions' and 'I respond thoughtfully rather than reactively to workplace pressure.' The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale was 0.91.

**Control variables.** To address possible confounding elements, our analysis included several demographic and professional factors including participant age, educational level, present occupational position, and industry sector.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

In this study, SPSS version 24 was used for data processing, mainly to complete descriptive statistical analysis, to test the internal consistency of the measurement scale, and to investigate the correlation between the variables. To assess the degree of fit of the measurement model, the research team performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using Mplus software (version 8.3).

To test the hypothesis proposed, the PROCESS macro of SPSS was applied [39]. This analytical tool offers significant benefits for exploring complex relationships. First, it serves as a comprehensive path analysis tool capable of simultaneously analyzing mediation, moderation, and moderating mediating effects. Second, it provides a moderately mediating index that allows direct testing of moderate mediating effects. Finally, Model 7 employing the PROCESS macro was used in this study to test the mediating and moderating mediating effects of the first-stage

regulation. A sample of 5,000 bootstraps was used for analysis, and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated to determine the significance of the hypothetical effect.

To evaluate our sample size adequacy for hypothesis testing purposes, we employed power calculations through G\*Power 3.1 analytical software. Based on effect sizes reported in similar studies examining workplace discrimination and career outcomes, we established a moderate effect parameter ( $f^2 = 0.15$ ), significance threshold  $\alpha = 0.05$ , and target power of 0.90. Considering our research framework incorporating both moderation and mediation pathways, the computational analysis suggested a minimum necessary participant count of 172 individuals to ensure sufficient statistical detection capability. Our final sample of 388 valid questionnaires substantially exceeded this threshold, providing sufficient statistical power for testing the hypothesized relationships.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted to examine the discriminant validity of the research variables. Table 1 presents the fit indices for the tested models. The hypothesized four-factor model, which includes benevolent sexism, self-depletion, employee mindfulness, and career growth, provided a significantly better fit compared to all alternative models [ $\chi^2(2621) = 3380.04$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.29$ , RMSEA = 0.03, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.91, SRMR = 0.05]. In contrast, the alternative models demonstrated significantly poorer fit. Chi-square difference tests confirmed that the hypothesized four-factor model provided a significantly better fit to the data compared to all alternative models. Additionally, Harman's single-factor test suggested that common method bias was not a significant concern.

**Table 1.** The results of confirmatory factor analyses.

Measurement model	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Four-factor Model	3380.04	2621.00	1.29***	0.03	0.91	0.91	0.05
Three-factor Model (combining SD and CG)	4184.00	2624.00	1.59***	0.04	0.82	0.81	0.06
Two-factor Model (combining SD, EM and CG)	6413.01	2626.00	2.44***	0.06	0.55	0.54	0.10
One-factor Model (combining BS, SD, EM and CG)	7560.08	2627.00	2.88***	0.07	0.42	0.40	0.11

Note: N = 388; \*\*\* p < 0.001; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; RMSEA = root mean square of approximation; BS = benevolent sexism; SD = self-depletion; EM = employee mindfulness; CG = career growth.

**4.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations**

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables in this study. First, benevolent sexism showed a significant positive correlation with self-depletion ( $r = 0.16, p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that higher levels of benevolent sexism were associated with increased psychological resource depletion. Second, self-depletion demonstrated a significant negative correlation with career growth ( $r = -0.25, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that depleted psychological resources were linked to reduced career development.

Third, benevolent sexism exhibited a significant negative correlation with career growth ( $r = -0.39, p < 0.001$ ). These results provide preliminary support for Hypotheses 1 and 2 and meet the necessary conditions for testing the mediation effect proposed in Hypothesis 3.

The control variables (age, education, and industry) showed relatively weak correlations with the main study variables ( $|r| \leq 0.20$ ), suggesting their limited influence on the hypothesized relationships. Furthermore, the correlation coefficients among the main variables were all below 0.70, indicating no serious multicollinearity concerns.

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

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Age	3.71	1.42						
2.Education	3.35	1.23	0.02					
3.Industry	11.57	6.76	0.09	-0.19***				
4.Benevolent sexism	2.46	0.63	-0.17**	0.20***	-0.14**			
5.Self-depletion	3.08	0.49	0.07	0.05	-0.06	0.16**		
6.Employee mindfulness	2.77	0.64	-0.01	-0.06	-0.00	-0.23***	-0.09	
7.Career growth	3.34	0.64	0.09	-0.05	0.04	-0.39***	-0.25***	0.02

Notes: N = 388; SD: standard deviations; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**4.3. Hypothesis Testing**

To test the proposed hypotheses, we conducted multiple regression analyses and bootstrapping techniques to examine direct and mediating effects. Table 3 presents the results for direct effect models and the mediation model.

Model 1 examined the direct link between benevolent sexism and career growth (Hypothesis 1). The results revealed a significant negative association ( $\beta = -0.403, p < 0.001$ ), explaining 15.5% of the variance in career growth ( $R^2 = 0.155, F = 17.545$ ). This finding provides strong support for Hypothesis 1, suggesting that higher levels of benevolent sexism are associated with diminished career growth opportunities. Our mediation analysis followed Baron and Kenny's classical 1986 approach [40], complemented by more recent bootstrapping methods. In Model 2, we found benevolent sexism significantly predicted increased

self-depletion ( $\beta = 0.132, p < 0.001$ ). Model 3 then demonstrated that self-depletion negatively affected career growth ( $\beta = -0.334, p < 0.001$ ). When testing the complete mediation model (Model 4), we observed that both benevolent sexism ( $\beta = -0.369, p < 0.001$ ) and self-depletion ( $\beta = -0.403, p < 0.001$ ) maintained significant relationships with career growth, with this integrated model accounting for 19.3% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.193, F = 18.316$ ).

To test the mediation effect proposed in Hypothesis 2, we conducted bootstrapping analysis with 5,000 resamples. The results revealed a significant indirect effect of benevolent sexism on career growth through self-depletion (indirect effect = -0.034, SE = 0.015, 95% CI [-0.068, -0.009]). The absence of zero in the confidence interval provides strong support for the mediating role of self-depletion, confirming Hypothesis 2.

**Table 3.** Regression results for direct effect model and mediation model.

Variables	Model 1 X→Y	Model 2 X→M	Model 3 M→Y	Model 4 X→M→Y
Constant	4.274***	2.650***	-.260***	4.964***
Age	0.011	0.034	0.049	0.020
Education	0.010	0.003	-0.022	0.011
Industry	-0.002	-0.003	0.00	-0.002
Benevolent sexism	-0.403***	0.132***		-0.369***
self-depletion			-0.334***	-0.403***

R <sup>2</sup>	0.155	0.036	0.077	0.193
F	17.545	3.607	7.949	18.316

Bootstrap results for indirect effect

Effect	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI
	-.034	.015	-.068	-.009

Notes: N = 388; \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001; unstandardized regression coefficients are reported; bootstrap sample size 5000; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; CI = confidence interval

#### 4.4. Moderating Effect Testing

Table 4 presents the regression results for the conditional indirect effect of benevolent sexism on career growth through self-depletion, moderated by employee mindfulness.

The moderated mediation analysis revealed conditional effects in our theoretical framework. The regression results indicated a significant interaction between benevolent sexism and employee mindfulness (B = -0.388, p < 0.001) in predicting self-depletion, suggesting that the relationship between benevolent sexism and self-depletion varies at different levels of employee mindfulness.

Further examination of the conditional effects showed that the relationship between benevolent sexism and self-depletion was significantly positive when employee mindfulness was low (B = 0.394, SE = 0.051,

95% CI [0.293, 0.496]). In contrast, at high levels of employee mindfulness, the relationship became significantly negative, albeit with a smaller magnitude (B = -0.105, SE = 0.048, 95% CI [-0.199, -0.010]). These findings highlight employee mindfulness as a critical boundary condition that moderates the impact of benevolent sexism on self-depletion.

To validate the moderated mediation model, a bootstrap analysis with 5,000 resamples was conducted. The index of moderated mediation yielded significant results across varying levels of employee mindfulness, confirming that the indirect effect of benevolent sexism on career growth through self-depletion is contingent on employee mindfulness levels. These results provide robust empirical support for the hypothesized conditional indirect effect model.

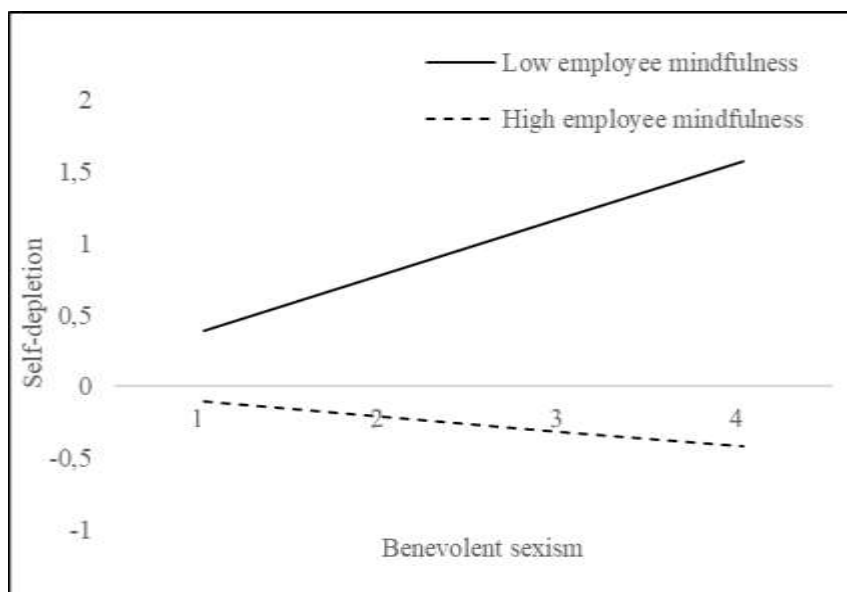
**Table 4.** Regression results for conditional indirect effect.

Moderation model	Self-depletion			
Variables	B	SE		
Constant	0.132	0.378		
Age		0.016		
Education	0.034*			
Industry	-0.005	0.019		
Benevolent sexism	-0.002	0.003		
Employee mindfulness	1.219***	0.14		
Benevolent sexism × employee mindfulness	0.891***	0.12		
	-0.388***	0.048		
	Index of moderated mediation			
Moderated mediation model	0.101	0.025	0.053	0.149
	Estimate	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Employee mindfulness – Low (mean – 1SD)	0.394***	0.051	0.293	0.496
Employee mindfulness – High (mean + 1SD)	-0.105*	0.048	-0.199	-0.01

Notes: LL: lower limit; UL: upper limit; CI: confidence interval; unstandardized regression coefficients are reported; Bootstrap sample size = 5,000; N = 388; \*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.001

Figure 2 illustrated the moderating effect of employee mindfulness on the relationship between benevolent sexism and self-depletion. For employees with low mindfulness, there is a strong positive slope, indicating that as benevolent sexism increases, self-depletion increases markedly. In contrast, for

employees with high mindfulness, the relationship exhibits a slight negative slope. This indicates that high mindfulness not only buffers against the depleting effects of benevolent sexism but may even help individuals maintain their psychological resources in the presence of benevolent sexist attitudes.



**Figure 2.** Moderating effect of employee mindfulness on self-depletion.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Theoretical Contributions

This research advances the understanding of workplace benevolent sexism and career development in several aspects. First, this study combined COR theory with benevolent sexism in the workplace to illuminate the underlying psychological processes through which benevolent sexism affects women's professional advancement [41], we illuminate the psychological mechanisms through which benevolent sexism impedes women's career growth. Our findings extend prior work by demonstrating that benevolent sexism operates through resource depletion processes, rather than just structural barriers or overt discrimination.

Secondly, this study considers self-depletion as a key mediating mechanism connecting BS and women's career development. This study shows how seemingly well-intentioned sexism can trigger an individual's internal resource consumption process, thereby limiting professional development [42]. This insight enriches the theoretical understanding of the nature of benevolent sexism in professional settings and workplaces.

Third, identifying mindfulness as an important boundary condition expands resource conservation theory in the context of workplace bias. Our results suggest that mindfulness practice acts as a psychological resource to provide mental protection for women who have experienced discrimination, can effectively prevent the consumption of psychological resources based on gender discrimination, and can even help women to shape strong psychological content and transform the benevolent sexism they suffer into a source of motivation for career advancement (9,33). This finding advances a theoretical understanding of

how an individual's mental abilities modulate the relationship between workplace stressors and resource conservation processes.

### 5.2. Practical Implications

Our research offers valuable practical insights for organizations. First, HR professionals need to be aware that protective attitudes towards women, though seemingly positive, can harm career development by draining mental and emotional resources [6]. This awareness calls for improved workplace training that focuses on recognizing and addressing workplace benevolent sexism.

Second, our findings highlight the value of mindfulness practices in workplace development programs. Given that mindfulness helps protect against the negative effects of gender bias, organizations would benefit from adding mindfulness training to their leadership development and employee support programs. Such programs could provide practical tools for maintaining focus and emotional balance in challenging workplace situations.

Third, for career advisors and mentors, understanding how benevolent sexism affects professional women's mental resources is crucial. This knowledge can help them develop better strategies to support women's career growth while dealing with workplace benevolent sexism.

### 5.3. Research Limitations and Future Research

The study presents several constraints that highlight potential future research opportunities. The cross-sectional nature of our data collection might limit our ability to observe the evolution of these relationships over time. The sampling method currently

used might not fully encompass the diverse experiences of professional women in different organizational contexts. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs that track changes across multiple time points, as well as more diverse sampling strategies that include various organizational types and professional levels.

This study focused on a specific cultural context, which may limit the wider applicability of our results. Future cross-cultural research on how cultural differences affect benevolent sexism and career career will greatly enrich our understanding. Comparing these dynamics in different cultural contexts provides a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural factors shape workplace gender dynamics.

Self-reported data collection inherently risks social desirability bias, where respondents may adjust their answers to align with perceived social norms. To address this limitation, subsequent research should consider incorporating more objective measurement approaches, including direct behavioral observations and independent evaluations from third parties, thereby strengthening data integrity and minimizing subjective reporting biases.

## 6. Conclusion

Our research contributes to the conservation of resources theory by demonstrating how benevolent sexism impedes women's career progress through self-depletion. The results indicate that employee mindfulness plays a vital role as a boundary condition in this process, offering strong empirical support for gender equity efforts in the workplace. This research develops an evidence-supported framework for fostering fair and inclusive career development by investigating the wide-ranging effects of benevolent sexism on professional growth.

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**Ethical Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Guangzhou College of Commerce, (protocol code 2025-010, 15 December, 2025).

**Consent Statement:** Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the study. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw voluntarily without penalty, and their data confidentiality was guaranteed.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly

available due to privacy restrictions and the confidential nature of the responses.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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