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ARTICLE

Positive Resilience on the Margins: The Structural Stigma of China's Rural Queer Community and the Path of Self-Confirmation

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ABSTRACT: Backgrounds: Positive psychology has increasingly been applied to marginalized populations, yet limited attention has been paid to how it explains the experiences of sexual minorities living under persistent structural stigma in non-Western rural contexts. This study examined the structural pressures, psychological dilemmas, and positive resilience pathways of sexual minorities in rural China. This study aims to examine the structural pressures, psychological dilemmas, and pathways of positive resilience experienced by sexual minorities in rural China under persistent structural stigma. **Methods:** Using cyberethnography and grounded theory, this study analyzed 264 publicly available online narratives selected from an initial pool of 8663 social media texts retrieved from major Chinese online platforms. The data were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding to identify the relationships among structural stress, psychological consequences, and recovery-oriented resources. **Results:** Three major sources of structural pressure were identified: community surveillance, family discipline, and institutional neglect. These pressures were associated with four principal forms of psychological consequence: internalized stigma, self-stress imbalance, relationship anxiety, and barriers to help-seeking. At the same time, the narratives revealed three interrelated forms of positive resilience: relational support and belonging, self-acceptance through meaning reconstruction, and emotional regulation and recovery. **Conclusions:** The findings suggest that the mental health of sexual minorities in rural China is shaped not only by persistent structural oppression but also by limited yet meaningful resources for self-repair and psychological resilience. By identifying how positive resilience is sustained under long-term stigma, this study extends the relevance of positive psychology to a non-Western marginalized context and highlights the importance of culturally grounded, community-sensitive mental health support.

KEYWORDS: Sexual minorities; positive psychology; rural areas; emotional intervention

1 Introduction

The seminal work of D'Augelli [1] was to introduce situational factors into heterosexual sexist oppression of gender-based stereotypes and social exclusion. In the social network context of contemporary China's urban-rural dual structure and the face of acquaintances, Queer groups living in rural China face more prominent stigma bias, such as structural oppression, community exclusion, and ethnic mutual

exclusion [2]. This kind of oppression stems from the legal ambiguity at the institutional level, the disregard for awareness at the educational level, and the value discipline at the family level, but also is deeply rooted in family ethics, moral discipline, and public opinion mechanisms. Compared with urban homosexuals, rural sexual minorities are often forced to live in a "Visible and dangerous" environment, and become marginalized groups, hidden groups and vulnerable groups in rural communities. In the stage of unfinished inner consciousness cognition and self-identity construction, the need to endure moral judgments and identity denials from multiple relational domains such as parents, relatives, friends, and schools [3,4]. Studies have shown that rural Queer individuals have difficulty in obtaining emotional support, community identity, and family affirmation in rural townships; they are more likely to have high levels of self-stigma, covert stress, anxiety, irritability, and social avoidance [5]. Especially in the rural society with a complex family relationship structure, a strong filial piety cultural atmosphere, and excessive exposure of private information, they are forced to follow the community requirements of "Marriage and reproduction", trapped in self-isolation, escapism, and chronic anxiety [6]. In addition, the gap between urban and rural areas in terms of educational resources, mental health services and digital information accessibility further exacerbates the lack of psychological support and public expression among this group [7]. As a result, rural Queer individuals, due to their dual identities of sexual minorities and geographical margins, constitute a typical "Vulnerable population", which has been trapped in structural discrimination, cultural exclusion, and institutional silence for a long time [8]. Paying attention to their mental health is not only to make up for the limitations of contemporary psychological research on the intersection of gender and region, but also an important step to promote the accessibility of mental health services and the inclusion of cultural diversity.

Positive psychology, as a frontier discipline devoted to the study of individual subjective well-being, resilience, and self-adjustment, since its inception, has achieved rich results in promoting individual well-being, positive emotions, and cognitive hope [9]. However, most positive psychology theories and intervention approaches are still inadequately adapted to deal with the structural stress experienced by marginalized groups [10]. Most of the traditional models are based on the theory of heterosexual individuals, emphasizing individual internal power, cognitive reconstruction and emotion regulation, however, the external risk factors such as social and cultural oppression, community stigma and public discourse silencing of Queer groups are often ignored [11]. Especially in rural settings, the psychological difficulties of Queer individuals often do not stem from personal functional deficiencies, but from the comprehensive and structural pressures generated by the social networks, family institutions, and moral norms in which they live. Community adversity and structural stress will continuously erode individuals' sense of psychological security, Self-worth, and social belonging [12]. However, in recent years, there have been some studies on positive psychology interventions (PPIs) that have attempted to extend positive psychology to sexual minorities [13], and there have been several studies on the effects of PPIS on sexual minorities, but still concentrated in urban settings and the middle class, for sexual minority individuals struggling in the rural social structure, there are still problems such as systematic neglect and targeted bias in its local experience, psychological logic and regulatory path [14]. Therefore, it is urgent to develop a theoretical model of positive psychology with cultural sensitivity and a systematic perspective to respond to the real psychological needs and repair paths of rural Queer groups in multiple oppression dilemmas.

Based on the fact that PPI is an important measure that is universally applicable and effective in individual daily life, we should pay attention to the practical problems of the marginalized and vulnerable group of Queer in rural China. This study intends to introduce "Positive psychology intervention (PPI)" into the practice of psychological recovery and self-reconciliation of Queer groups in rural China through

qualitative research methods, this paper attempts to construct an intervention understanding framework that takes into account the oppression of social structure and individual emotion regulation. Specifically, this study takes homosexuals in China's rural fringe areas as the research object, and obtains the self-cognition and true expression of this group based on network ethnography, based on the grounded theory, this paper systematically analyzes and sorts out the psychological pressure and realistic burden they encounter in the relatively backward environment of acquaintance society, family ethics, cultural discipline, medical and educational system in rural China, and further identify how to carry out self-reconciliation and spiritual salvation in a highly repressive situation, that is, the positive psychological path of individual self-generation, such as self-acceptance, meaning construction, relationship support, emotional regulation and soul anchoring and other key dimensions. Through the coding and integration of these local experiences, a positive psychological path model of rural and community-based marginalized groups with "Relational-resilience" as the core is proposed, how rural sexual minorities gradually repair self-identity, rebuild social connection and enhance psychological resilience through daily practice and symbolic expression. This model not only extends the theoretical applicability of positive psychology in the context of vulnerable groups, but also provides a basis for the development of PPI intervention strategies with cross-cultural translatability.

Taken together, the existing literature reveals three important limitations. First, research on sexual minority populations in China has remained largely urban-centered, with insufficient attention to the lived experiences of sexual minorities in rural and semi-rural settings. Second, the limited body of rural-focused research has been predominantly deficit-oriented, emphasizing stigma exposure, concealment, family conflict, and psychological vulnerability, while offering less insight into how individuals sustain meaning, self-acceptance, relational support, and emotional recovery under long-term structural oppression. Third, although positive psychology has increasingly moved toward more context-sensitive understandings of resilience in marginalized and non-Western settings, its relevance to sexual minorities in rural China has not been sufficiently examined. To address these limitations, the present study focuses on sexual minorities in rural China, a population situated at the intersection of gender marginality and spatial marginality and still insufficiently examined in existing scholarship. Rather than approaching their experiences solely through a deficit-oriented lens, this study aims to examine both the structural pressures that shape their psychological dilemmas and the limited yet meaningful forms of positive resilience through which they sustain self-regulation, relational support, self-acceptance, and emotional recovery. By analyzing publicly available online narratives through grounded theory, the study seeks to provide a culturally situated account of how structural stigma and psychological adjustment are intertwined in the lived experiences of sexual minorities in rural China. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions of marginalized mental health and extends the relevance of positive psychology to a non-Western, structurally constrained setting.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What forms of structural pressure and psychological dilemma characterize the lived experiences of sexual minorities in rural China?

RQ2: How do sexual minorities in rural China sustain positive resilience through self-regulation, relational support, self-acceptance, and emotional recovery under persistent structural stigma?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Structural Stigma and the Experiences of Sexual Minorities in Rural China

Sexual minorities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other gender- and sexuality-diverse individuals, have long been positioned at the social margins because their sexual

orientations and gender identities deviate from dominant heteronormative expectations [15,16]. One of the most persistent risks faced by sexual minority populations is structural stigma, which refers to the ways in which social institutions, cultural norms, and public discourse systematically devalue and exclude non-heterosexual identities through both institutionalized and everyday practices [17]. Such stigma is reflected not only in inequalities across education, health care, employment, and public services, but also in its internalization by individuals, which may generate shame, self-denial, identity concealment, and chronic psychological vigilance [18,19]. These experiences have been consistently associated with elevated risks of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidality among sexual minority individuals [20,21].

Within the Chinese context, a growing body of research has documented the close relationship between discrimination, identity concealment, family pressure, and psychological vulnerability among sexual minorities. Existing studies have mainly focused on minority stress, internalized stigma, coming-out risks, intimate relationship negotiation, and mental health consequences, and have generally shown that social prejudice, family regulation, and institutional neglect jointly shape the vulnerable conditions of sexual minority populations [22–24]. More specifically, some studies have found that sexual minority individuals frequently encounter parental expectations regarding marriage and childbearing, intergenerational obligations, and emotionally coercive family norms, such that disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity may intensify family conflict and even result in pressure to enter heterosexual marriage arrangements. Other studies have shown that, across schools, workplaces, and public discourse, sexual minorities are often exposed to labeling, stigmatizing language, and identity invalidation. These experiences not only undermine their sense of safety in expressing their identities, but also contribute to long-term psychological exhaustion and self-suppression [25–27]. Nevertheless, this line of research has remained largely concentrated on urban youth, university students, migrant populations, and digitally visible communities, revealing a clear urban-centered tendency in both research populations and experiential settings. By contrast, empirical attention to sexual minorities living in rural or semi-rural China remains relatively limited, despite the fact that these settings are often characterized by denser kinship networks, more conservative gender norms, and far fewer institutional and community-based support resources [28].

The limited but emerging literature on rural sexual minorities in China suggests that their experiences are shaped by the combined effects of familism, community surveillance, and institutional scarcity [29,30]. Some studies have pointed out that, in rural society, sexual identity is often evaluated through the moral framework of filial piety, marital obligation, and childbearing expectations [31,32]. As a result, disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity is often interpreted not merely as a personal difference, but as a violation of family duty and broader social expectations, thereby exposing individuals to persistent moral condemnation, emotional coercion, and, in some cases, domestic violenc [33,34]. Other studies have shown that the acquaintance-based social structure of rural communities significantly increases the risk of involuntary exposure, gossip circulation, and reputational sanctions, making identity concealment, emotional suppression, and spatial withdrawal common strategies for maintaining everyday social order [35,36]. In addition, some studies have shown that rural areas often lack gender-inclusive education, anti-bullying mechanisms, psychological counseling services, and sexual minority support organizations [37]. As a result, individuals frequently have few accessible, trustworthy, and sustainable channels of support when confronting school-based discrimination, medical stigma, or psychological trauma [38]. This structural deficit further intensifies feelings of isolation, helplessness, and barriers to help-seekingp [39,40].

Although these studies have revealed the depth of stigma and the severity of psychological vulnerability experienced by rural sexual minorities in China, the literature as a whole remains largely deficit-oriented. Most existing studies have focused on discrimination exposure, identity concealment, family conflict, and

psychological distress, while paying much less attention to how individuals living in highly surveilled and resource-poor environments sustain limited but crucial forms of self-regulation, relational support, identity affirmation, and emotional repair [41–43]. In other words, prior research has documented the harms produced by structural oppression more fully than the culturally and socially embedded resources through which rural sexual minorities endure, reinterpret, and partially mitigate these harms. This gap is especially consequential in rural China and constitutes the empirical and theoretical point of departure for the present study [44].

2.2 Positive Psychology in Non-Western Marginalized Contexts: From Individual Flourishing to Culturally Embedded Resilience

Since its emergence, positive psychology has emphasized that psychological inquiry should not be confined to pathology, deficit, and risk, but should also examine how individuals sustain meaning, connectedness, hope, and adaptive capacity in the face of adversity [45,46]. For the purposes of the present study, the most relevant contributions of positive psychology lie not in its broad concern with happiness or personal strengths per se, but in its conceptual resources for understanding resilience, meaning-making, self-acceptance, relational support, and emotional regulation. These concepts provide an important framework for examining how individuals maintain psychological continuity under conditions of prolonged stress, social exclusion, and identity-related conflict [47].

At the same time, scholars have noted that the early development of positive psychology was shaped to a considerable extent by Western liberal-individualist assumptions, with a strong emphasis on personal strengths, subjective well-being, and self-actualization [48]. As a result, its explanatory power has often been questioned in relation to structural oppression, social inequality, and culturally embedded forms of constraint. For marginalized populations living under conditions of stigma, poverty, racialized exclusion, gender regulation, or institutional neglect, psychological experience rarely takes the form of linear positive growth. Instead, it is more often characterized by the difficult maintenance of dignity, meaning, and everyday order within unstable, restrictive, and high-pressure environments [49]. If positive psychology is applied without sufficient attention to cultural structure and social context, it risks reducing complex experiences of marginalization to individualized narratives of optimism, coping, or emotional adjustment.

Precisely for this reason, recent scholarship has increasingly moved beyond an individual optimization framework and toward a more context-sensitive understanding of positive psychological processes. A growing body of work has examined how resilience is culturally embedded, relationally sustained, and structurally conditioned, particularly among marginalized communities [50,51]. In these studies, positive psychological functioning is understood less as the pursuit of happiness in an abstract sense and more as the capacity to preserve self-coherence, relational belonging, identity affirmation, and emotional stability under adverse conditions. This shift has been especially important in non-Western contexts, where psychological well-being is often closely intertwined with family obligation, collective values, social harmony, and culturally specific moral expectations [52]. From this perspective, positive psychology is no longer limited to enhancing positive affect or personal strengths, but is increasingly used to explain how individuals negotiate suffering, reconstruct meaning, and sustain viable forms of agency within unequal social structures.

This theoretical shift is particularly relevant to research on sexual minority populations. Existing studies have shown that, in relatively open social and community environments, relational support, self-acceptance, identity affirmation, and meaning reconstruction can help sexual minority individuals buffer stigma-related stress and maintain psychological well-being [53,54]. However, in rural China—where acquaintance-based social relations remain highly salient, family-based moral obligations are deeply entrenched, and institutional

support is often limited—the acquisition and maintenance of such positive psychological resources are likely to be far more constrained. The ways in which sexual minorities preserve psychological stability in these contexts may therefore differ substantially from the patterns identified in urban communities or Western settings. In this sense, positive psychology does not provide the present study with a simplistic narrative of optimism. Rather, it offers an important analytical lens for understanding how rural sexual minorities sustain limited but meaningful forms of self-repair, relational support, and emotional resilience under conditions of persistent structural stigma [55,56]. In the present study, positive resilience is not understood as a simple tendency toward optimism, positive affect, or generalized personal strength. Rather, drawing on both positive psychology and minority stress scholarship, it refers to the process through which sexual minority individuals living under persistent structural stigma sustain psychological continuity, identity coherence, and basic adaptive functioning through meaning-making, relational support, self-acceptance, and emotional regulation. In this sense, positive resilience does not imply the absence of suffering; instead, it captures the limited yet meaningful psychological resources through which marginalized individuals endure, reinterpret, and partially mitigate the harms of long-term oppression.

3 Research Design and Coding Presentation

3.1 Data Sources and Collection

This study employed cyberethnography in combination with a grounded theory approach to examine publicly available online narratives concerning the lived experiences of sexual minorities in rural China. Because the present research focused on textual accounts rather than direct interaction with human participants, the source population consisted of publicly accessible social media texts retrieved from major Chinese online platforms that support user-generated discussion and narrative exchange. Three widely used Chinese social media platforms—Weibo, Zhihu, and Rednote (Xiaohongshu)—were initially selected because of their high levels of user activity, public accessibility, and relevance to discussions of identity, community life, and everyday experience. To identify potentially relevant materials, the research team conducted keyword-based searches using combinations of terms such as “village”, “town”, “rural”, “community”, “queer”, “gay”, and “non-heterosexual”. The initial retrieval yielded 8663 publicly accessible text entries, which constituted the preliminary textual pool for screening. All retrieved materials were limited to publicly available textual content and did not include private messages, account information, IP addresses, or other personally identifiable data. Data collection followed platform community guidelines, and only publicly posted textual materials were retained for screening and analysis. The screening procedure was conducted in several stages. First, duplicate entries, advertisements, spam, reposts without substantive content, and other clearly non-analytic materials were removed. Second, the remaining texts were screened for topical relevance. To be eligible for inclusion, a text had to meet three criteria: (1) it explicitly referred to sexual minority identity or same-sex experience; (2) it was clearly related to rural, township, or semi-rural social contexts in China; and (3) it contained sufficient experiential or narrative detail relevant to stigma, psychological distress, coping, support, or identity-related struggles. Texts were excluded if they consisted only of general opinion statements, lacked discernible experiential content, were too brief to support meaningful coding, or were unrelated to the study focus. Following this stepwise screening procedure, 264 texts were retained for formal grounded theory analysis. The adequacy of the final sample was determined on the basis of theoretical saturation rather than numerical representativeness. Because this study relied on publicly available online narratives rather than directly recruited participants, complete demographic information such as age, gender, and precise geographic location was not consistently available and could not be verified in a standardized manner. The analytic sample was therefore characterized primarily by

contextual relevance rather than by demographic representativeness. Rural or semi-rural relevance was determined from self-descriptions, references to village or township life, family structure, local social norms, and other contextual cues contained in the texts. Accordingly, the value of the dataset lies not in statistical representativeness, but in its ability to capture recurring experiential patterns, stigma-related narratives, and coping processes among sexual minorities who publicly articulate life under rural structural constraints. During the later stages of coding, newly screened texts largely reiterated existing categories and did not generate substantively new conceptual dimensions. In addition, a saturation check was conducted on five randomly retained original texts, which were re-coded across the three coding levels; no new concepts or categories emerged from this additional analysis. The research team therefore judged that the final dataset was sufficient to support grounded analysis of structural stigma, psychological dilemmas, and positive resilience among sexual minorities in rural China.

This study analyzed only publicly available online texts and did not address interactions or interventions with human participants. This study was conducted under the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Chang Gung University Ethics Committee (IRB number: 20250310B0, 10 March 2025). All data from this study were anonymized before analysis, and the manuscript does not include potentially identifiable images or personal data. To prevent tracing back to the personal information of the reviewers, the quoted material is anonymized and presented in a non-traceable form. Therefore, informed consent is not required.

3.2 Data Description and Analysis

This study used qualitative research methods, especially grounded theory-based research strategies, to explore the Queer group's experience in the face of mental illness and its coping strategies. Before I started writing the code, I pre-processed the text using NVivo 12 software. Fig. 1 presents the high-frequency word cloud generated during text preprocessing after the removal of irrelevant terms, providing an initial descriptive overview of the textual dataset (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Cloud map of high frequency words.

3.3 Coding Presentation

The coding process followed the logic of grounded theory and proceeded through three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. NVivo 12 was used to support data management, coding comparison, and category refinement. The purpose of this process was to identify recurrent themes in the

textual materials and to organize them into an explanatory structure linking structural stigma, psychological dilemmas, and positive resilience among sexual minorities in rural China.

In the first stage, open coding was conducted to break down the original textual materials into analytically meaningful units. Two doctoral researchers each worked with one master's student to form two independent coding teams. The textual materials were coded line by line and sentence by sentence to identify textual expressions related to stigma, emotional distress, family pressure, concealment, coping, support, and self-regulation. To enhance coding transparency and reliability, the two coding teams first conducted pilot coding on a shared subset of texts and compared their preliminary code applications before proceeding to full coding. During this process, the research team continuously compared coded segments, merged overlapping expressions, and standardized concept labels to reduce semantic duplication. Intercoder reliability was assessed using the Kappa coefficient, and a coefficient above 0.70 was taken to indicate acceptable coding consistency. Coding discrepancies were resolved through iterative team discussion and consensus meetings, during which divergent interpretations were traced back to the original textual materials. When necessary, concept labels and category boundaries were refined and the relevant materials were re-coded to ensure internal consistency. Through repeated comparison and refinement, open coding generated 23 initial categories in the antecedent dimension (A1–A23), 22 initial categories in the aftereffect dimension (B1–B22), and 13 initial categories in the adjustment dimension (C1–C13). Representative summaries of the open-coding results are presented in Tables 1–3. Following open coding, axial coding was conducted to reconnect the fragmented categories generated in the initial stage and to identify higher-order relationships among them. At this stage, the research team repeatedly compared the initial categories in terms of shared contextual conditions, causal orientation, experiential similarity, and psychological consequences. Categories were grouped not only on the basis of semantic overlap, but also according to whether they reflected common sources of structural pressure, similar forms of psychological and relational impact, or comparable forms of coping and adjustment. For example, the initial categories "acquaintance surveillance and fear of gossip", "moral judgment and dignity discipline", and "pressure to conform to dominant community norms" were integrated into the broader axial category of panoramic moral monitoring in acquaintance communities because all three described different but interrelated forms of community-based normative surveillance. Similarly, "early cognitive conflict in sexual orientation arousal" and "internalizing shame and self-resistant behavior" were linked under the axial category of internalizing the stigma cycle, as both reflected the inward conversion of external stigma into shame, self-suppression, and identity conflict. In the adjustment dimension, categories such as "relational support", "self-acceptance", "meaning-based self-affirmation", and "adaptive emotional release" were treated as analytically connected because they all reflected ways of maintaining dignity, meaning, relational connection, and emotional stability under structural constraint. Through this axial coding process, the initial categories were condensed into a smaller set of higher-order categories across the antecedent, aftereffect, and adjustment dimensions.

Selective coding was then used to integrate these higher-order categories into a coherent explanatory model. At this stage, the research team identified the central explanatory structure emerging from the data and organized the relationships among categories into a three-part structure: structural stress, psychological dilemma, and positive resilience. The antecedent dimension captured the major sources of structural pressure, including community surveillance, family discipline, and institutional neglect. The aftereffect dimension reflected the principal forms of psychological and relational consequences, including internalized stigma, self-stress imbalance, relationship anxiety, and barriers to help-seeking. The adjustment dimension represented the recovery-oriented resources that emerged under conditions of persistent stigma, including relationship construction and spiritual belonging, psychological reconstruction and positive acceptance,

and emotional recovery and psychological regulation. In the present study, these adjustment-related themes were interpreted as manifestations of positive resilience insofar as they reflected the limited yet meaningful resources through which rural sexual minorities sustained self-regulation, relational support, self-acceptance, and emotional resilience under conditions of persistent structural oppression. In addition to intercoder agreement, the study also relied on analyst triangulation in the form of independent team-based coding, cross-checking of category development, and saturation re-examination of randomly retained original texts. To further assess the adequacy of the analytic process, a saturation check was conducted on five randomly retained original texts. These materials were re-coded across all three coding levels, and no substantively new concepts or categories emerged. On this basis, the research team judged that the coding structure had reached theoretical saturation and that the final explanatory model was sufficiently stable and credible for grounded interpretation (see Tables 1–3 for the partial coding results and Tables S1–S4 for the complete coding materials).

Table 1: Antecedent-oriented effect layer open coding (abstract).

Initial Category	Free Nodes	Raw Text Data
A1 Acquaintance Surveillance and Fear of Gossip	a1 cognitive fear	In small towns and third-and fourth-tier cities, their privacy almost does not exist, will always be familiar to ask back and forth.
	a2 networking	Neighbors, village officials, parents' colleagues, and even elementary school teachers will discuss "Whose children aren't married" over dinner and drinks.
	a3 media anxiety	A tweet on my own social media, a blurry photo or even a screenshot of a chat can be "Blown up".
A2 Moral Judgment and Dignity Discipline	a4 binding filial piety	Our small place often circulates "The child does not marry is unfilial", does not have the child is unfilial" the view.
	a5 blackmail	My parents and their friends, in the name of "Persuasion" and "Education", would give a lecture to those who don't marry or fall in love.
	a6 ethical trials	Don't get married, don't fall in love, it is often said that "Parenting problems", even the social evaluation of parents also affected, will also doubt you are not by other problems.
A3 Common Demands and Imitation Pressure	a7 family demands	Parents and relatives repeatedly asked "When to get married" and "Who to marry" and were mobbed if they didn't respond.
	a8 marital stress	My Friend's family will insist on his blind date, if you don't agree with the family will always blame, and even urged every day.
	a9 disguise	I have known gay people who have been forced into heterosexual marriages, who have long lived a "Pretend family life" and whose children have become "Fig Leafs of identity". Outwardly "Normal", but inwardly broken.

Table 2: Post-result behavior layer open coding (abstract).

Initial Category	Free Nodes	Raw Interview Data
B1 Early Cognitive Conflicts of Sexual Awakening	b1 pathological cognition	When I was a child, lacking sex education and diversity enlightenment, I always thought my own desire for people of the same sex was "Pathological".
	b2 self-fear	I used to tell people that I liked people of the same sex, that they were "Perverted" or "Not normal".
	b3 difference anxiety	There is no such thing as a homosexual in my village. Almost all of us like the opposite sex, so I'm afraid to be different.

Table 2: *Cont.*

Initial Category	Free Nodes	Raw Interview Data
B2 Insurmountable Individual Island Perception	b4 heterogeneous perception	In our village, there are very few people who like the same sex. When I was young, I didn't often surf the internet. I couldn't see people like me in school and in the village.
	b5 self-concealment	Our third-and fourth-tier cities tend to regard homosexuality as a disease, and people are not willing to identify themselves.
	b6 identification gap	I don't want to tell my friends that I'm gay. I don't think they understand me.
B3 Internalizing Shame and Self-Resistance	b7 performance protection	I'm always afraid of what others will say about me. I often act myself in front of others and pay attention to my way of speaking.
	b8 identity denial	I'm afraid of being defined by someone else's behavior.
	b9 behavioral repression	I can't admit that I like same sex, because none of my family friends like me, so I often avoid it.

Table 3: Open coding of positive psychological adjustment factors (abstract).

Initial Category	Free Nodes	Raw Interview Data
C1 Positive Relationship Support	c1 peer recognition	I left my hometown to go to college and found someone like me. We became friends and could talk to each other
	c2 community inclusion	When I left our village to work in a big city, my colleague knew and didn't say anything. He invited me to dinner
	c3 identity perception	After I chat with a stranger on a gay dating app, I feel relaxed for a moment
C2 Accept Me from the Heart	c4 accept yourself	I'm slowly coming to terms with my sexuality and accepting myself
	c5 value recognition	I don't want to play the role of other people's good boy now, I just want to really do something I like
		I don't think it's shameful to like someone of the same sex anymore. I accept myself for who I am
C3 Self-Affirmation	c6 experiencing validation	Maybe the universe wants me to go through this so I can learn more about myself
	c7 dignity wakening	I am now beginning to understand that I exist, perhaps to prove that these people are equally worthy of respect

After the open coding, using axial coding and selective coding, we systematically integrate the existing free nodes to obtain further initial categories. At the same time, we combine the initial categories according to semantic relevance, conceptual similarity, meaning consistency, and based on repeated analysis and compression of open coding and axial coding, we integrate the initial categories according to semantic relevance, conceptual similarity, and meaning consistency, finally, three core concepts (A1 +-A3 +) were obtained in the antecedent-oriented effect layer, four core concepts (B1 +-B4 +) were obtained in the causal effect behavior layer, and positive psychological adjustment factors (C1 +-C3 +) were obtained. In addition, we performed a saturation test on five randomly retained original data texts and re-encoded them at three levels, and found that no new concepts or new categories were generated, and that the original data texts were randomly retained; therefore, the analysis mechanism of this study is considered to be highly saturated, highly credible, and powerfully persuasive. Table 4 shows this study's complete three-level coding table, Fig. 2: "Structural stress-psychological dilemma-positive regulation" antecedent and consequent regulation model.

Table 4: Complete three-level coding table.

Dimensions	Main Categories	Subcategories	Free Nodes
Dimension of antecedents	A1 + panoramic moral monitoring of acquaintance communities	A1 acquaintance surveillance and fear of gossip	a1, a2, a3
		A2 moral judgment and dignity discipline	a4, a5, a6
		A3 commonalities and mimetic pressure	a7, a8, a9
	A2 + family discipline and family structural oppression	A34 family resistance and filial manipulation	a10, a11, a12
		A8 family snooping and ethnic oppression	a21, a22, a23
	A3 + implicit disregard and mutual exclusion of consensus	A5 silent exclusion and others' indifference	a13, a14
		A6 identity alienation and workplace barriers	a15, a16, a17
		A7 relationship stress and sexual orientation stigma	a18, a19, a20
Dimension of aftereffects	B1 + internalizing the stigma cycle	B1 early cognitive conflict in sexual orientation arousal	b1, b2, b3
		B3 internalizing shame and self-resistant behavior	b7, b8, b9
	B2 + self-stress imbalance	B4 faking behavior and conscious avoidance	b10, b11, b12
		B5 pseudo-conformity and sexual deception	b13, b14
	B3 + relationship anxiety	B6 emotional anxiety and close relationship alienation	b15, b16
		B7 health fears and value identity limitations	b17, b18, b19
	B4 + extraverted help-seeking disorder	B2 insurmountable individual island perception	b4, b5, b6
		B8 emotional disorders and self-regulation out of control	b20, b21, b22
Moderating dimensions	C1 + relationship construction and spiritual belonging	C1 positive relationship support	c1, c2, c3,
		C5 authentic self-expression	c11, c12, c13
	C2 + psychological reconstruction and positive acceptance	C2 inner acceptance	c4, c5
		C3 self-meaning affirmation	c6, c7
	C3 + emotional recovery and psychological regulation	C4 healthy emotional catharsis	c8, c9, c10

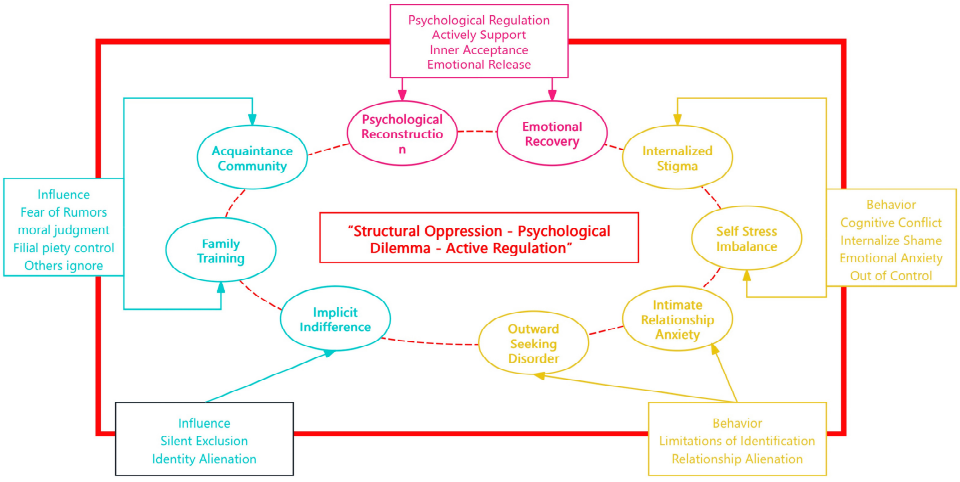

Figure 2: The antecedent-aftereffect model of structural stress-psychological dilemma-positive regulation.

4 Result

4.1 Findings Related to RQ1: Structural Pressure and Psychological Dilemma

The findings related to RQ1 show that the lived experiences of sexual minorities in rural China are shaped by interlocking forms of structural pressure arising from community surveillance, family discipline, and institutional neglect. These pressures do not remain external constraints, but are gradually internalized as psychological dilemmas that manifest in identity suppression, relationship anxiety, and barriers to help-seeking.

4.1.1 Panoramic Moral Surveillance in Acquaintance Communities

A first major source of structural pressure identified in the texts was the panoramic moral surveillance embedded in acquaintance-based rural communities [57]. In these settings, the boundary between private life and public visibility was highly permeable, and everyday interactions were shaped by dense networks of familiarity, mutual observation, and informal judgment [58]. For sexual minorities, this meant that personal relationships, daily routines, and emotional expressions were continuously exposed to collective scrutiny and moral interpretation. A recurring pattern in the narratives was that village and township life offered little room for privacy. Participants described how neighbors, relatives, classmates, and colleagues closely monitored their personal status, particularly in relation to marriage, intimate relationships, and gender performance. In such contexts, being unmarried, emotionally close to a same-sex friend, or appearing "different" could quickly trigger questioning, gossip, and suspicion. As one participant noted, "In rural towns and small third- and fourth-tier cities, my privacy doesn't exist, and acquaintances are always asking about me. If you're unmarried and in a relationship, your parents, friends, and colleagues always ask questions".

The narratives further showed that this form of community surveillance took several recurring forms. First, acquaintance networks functioned as everyday sites of observation, placing individuals in a state of constant exposure and interpretation [59]. Second, dominant local norms rendered non-heterosexual identity legible as a sign of deviation, making same-sex intimacy vulnerable to moral labeling and public shame. Third, prolonged exposure to such conditions led many participants to adopt concealment strategies in order to minimize attention and reduce social risk [60]. These strategies included limiting self-disclosure, withdrawing from social interaction, disguising emotional attachment, and suppressing self-expression in both offline and online contexts. This pressure was particularly evident in participants' accounts of digital self-censorship within rural social networks. Even routine forms of online self-presentation, such as posting on WeChat Moments, were described as risky because screenshots, inquiries, and rumors could circulate rapidly through overlapping acquaintance circles. One participant wrote, "There are only so many people on WeChat Moments in the countryside. If you post a photo with a friend today, they don't know each other, so they must come and ask you. I hesitated for a long time to even post a message on WeChat Moments for fear that screenshots would be forwarded. Then I stopped posting at all". These accounts indicate that community-based moral surveillance was not occasional, but ongoing, shaping both the visibility of identity and the everyday management of social risk. To clarify how community-based normative regulation operates as a form of structural oppression, Fig. 3 summarizes the broader pathway through which external pressure is generated in the rural lives of sexual minorities in China (see Fig. 3).

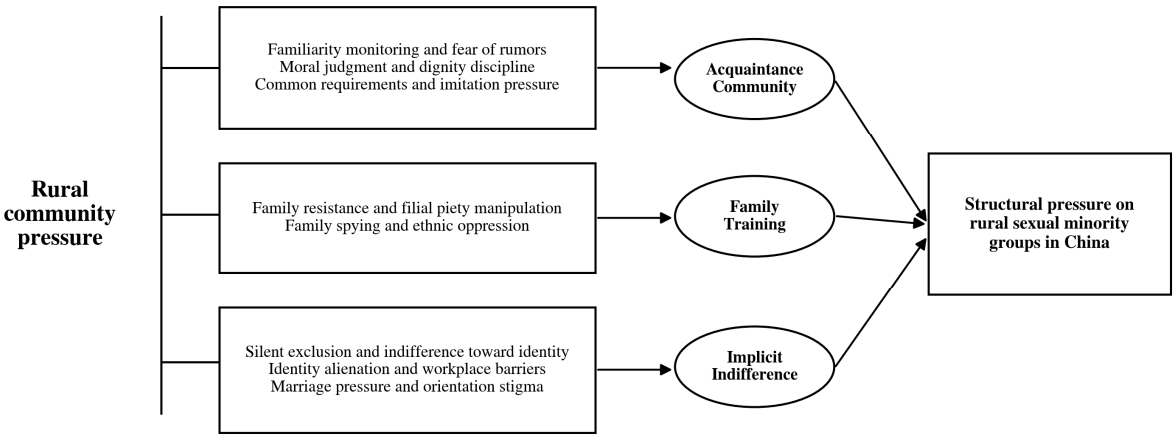

Figure 3: The Path of Oppression in the Structure of Rural Sexual Minorities in China.

4.1.2 Family Discipline and Filiality-Based Regulation

A second source of structural pressure emerged from family discipline organized around filial piety, marriage obligation, and reproductive expectations [61]. In the narratives, family was described not as a private sphere of unconditional support, but as a normative institution that regulated sexuality through intergenerational authority, emotional obligation, and expectations of heterosexual conformity. For sexual minorities in rural China, this regulation was often experienced as persistent pressure to reconcile personal identity with family expectations. A recurring pattern in the texts was that non-heterosexual identity was framed within the family not as an individual difference, but as a threat to kinship continuity and parental dignity. Participants frequently described being urged to marry, have children, and conform to conventional gender roles in order to meet family expectations and avoid social embarrassment [62]. In many cases, these demands were not expressed as isolated requests, but as repeated forms of discipline embedded in everyday family interaction. As one participant explained, “Because my parents are from the countryside, I can’t come out, because I know they really want me to get married and have children. Sometimes I even think about finding someone to marry just to make them stop worrying”.

The narratives also showed that family pressure often took emotionally coercive forms. Participants described parental disappointment, moral accusation, and persistent pressure as common responses to deviation from heterosexual marriage expectations. Some attempted to delay or avoid confrontation by using work, distance, or temporary excuses to postpone marriage arrangements, while others described living in a prolonged state of psychological conflict between self-identity and filial obligation. In such contexts, family discipline was experienced not only as external pressure, but also as an enduring source of guilt, self-doubt, and emotional exhaustion [63]. This pattern was especially evident in accounts of how marriage was treated as a compulsory social task rather than a personal choice. Participants described family intervention in the form of blind dates, repeated questioning, and direct pressure to establish heterosexual partnerships, even when such arrangements conflicted with their own emotional orientation. One participant wrote, “My family keeps arranging blind dates for me. They say that if I stay single for too long, people in the village will start talking. I know they are afraid of losing face, but every time they bring it up, I feel like I am being pushed further away from myself”. Taken together, these accounts show that family discipline in rural China was closely tied to filial duty, marriage obligation, and the maintenance of family reputation, thereby exerting sustained pressure on sexual identity and self-expression [64].

4.1.3 Institutional Neglect, Identity Denial, and Internalized Stigma

Beyond community surveillance and family discipline, the texts also revealed a more implicit form of structural pressure in the form of institutional neglect, identity invalidation, and the gradual internalization of stigma [65]. Unlike direct accusation or overt punishment, this pressure was often expressed through silence, omission, and the routine absence of recognition in schools, workplaces, media environments, and other public settings [66,67]. For many sexual minorities in rural China, such neglect did not merely restrict access to resources, but also weakened their sense of social recognition and legitimacy. A recurring pattern in the narratives was the experience of being socially unseen. Participants described how same-sex relationships and gender diversity were rarely acknowledged in formal education, public discourse, or workplace culture, leaving them without meaningful points of identification or recognition. One participant noted, "There is no mention of same-sex relationships in school textbooks, boys 'Niang' and girls 'Too Manly' are openly mocked and we never hear about 'me' groups". These accounts indicate that institutional silence was associated with the difficulty of articulating, recognizing, and affirming sexual minority identity [68].

The narratives further showed that this form of invalidation was often accompanied by withdrawal and identity denial. In the absence of social recognition and supportive reference points, many participants described moving into cycles of self-concealment, social retreat, and emotional disconnection. Some reported avoiding situations in which their identity might be exposed. Others described actively suppressing or denying same-sex desire in order to preserve a minimal sense of belonging. One participant wrote, "Gay people do not exist in my village. Most of us like people of the opposite sex, so I'm afraid of being different. I can't say I like people of the same sex because I don't have any friends in my family like me, so I run away from it all the time". Fig. 4 illustrates (see Fig. 4) the pathway through which prolonged structural stigma was internalized into self-avoidance, identity denial, and psychological imbalance among rural sexual minorities in China. A further pattern was the gradual formation of internalized stigma and self-pressure imbalance. Participants described how long-term exposure to external denial, ridicule, and moral judgment could be absorbed into self-perception, generating shame, confusion, and a persistent sense of being "wrong" or socially unacceptable. This tendency was especially pronounced in contexts where sex education, identity-related knowledge, and supportive social references were limited. As one participant reflected, "I thought I was abnormal and wrong, and I felt ashamed of who I was. It wasn't until I was older and learned more about different sexual orientations and identities that I realized there was nothing wrong with me. I was just different, and that was okay. I wish I had known that sooner; it would have saved me a lot of pain and confusion". In addition to shame, participants also described long-term tension between self-identity and social role expectations, leading to emotional exhaustion, cognitive conflict, and chronic psychological strain. Taken together, these accounts show that institutional neglect and identity invalidation were closely associated with self-denial, internalized stigma, and sustained psychological strain [69].

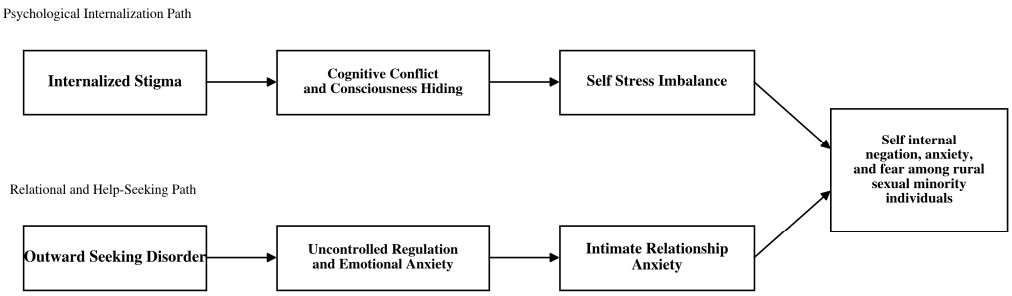

Figure 4: Self denial Path of Rural Sexual Minorities in China.

4.1.4 Intimacy Resistance and Barriers to Help-Seeking

These structural pressures further extended into participants' intimate relationships and help-seeking practices, producing resistance to closeness and silence around psychological support. The texts showed that community surveillance, family discipline, and identity concealment were closely associated with difficulties in emotional intimacy, trust, and help-seeking. A recurring pattern in the narratives was resistance to intimate relationships. Participants described how prolonged stigma, repeated concealment, and fear of exposure made it difficult to form or sustain emotionally secure bonds. Same-sex intimacy was often experienced not simply as a source of affection, but also as a source of risk, because closeness could increase the possibility of disclosure, shame, and social consequences [70]. Some participants described withdrawing from relationships preemptively, while others remained emotionally guarded even when intimacy was possible. In this way, relationship anxiety was closely linked not only to interpersonal insecurity, but also to broader social conditions in which intimacy was vulnerable to surveillance and moral judgment.

The texts also showed that this relational strain was closely connected to barriers to help-seeking. Many participants reported that they were unwilling to disclose their distress to family members, counselors, or local institutions because they feared misunderstanding, ridicule, or further exposure [71]. In rural settings where sexual minority identity was already difficult to articulate publicly, psychological suffering was often managed privately rather than communicated outwardly. One participant wrote, "I know I'm under a lot of pressure, but I don't know who I can talk to. My family wouldn't understand, and if people in the village found out, it would only make things worse". Such accounts indicate that help-seeking was constrained by limited trust, weak support systems, and the anticipation of stigma [72]. A further pattern was the routine practice of emotional self-containment. Participants described enduring sadness, anxiety, and confusion alone, often because external support was perceived as unavailable, unsafe, or ineffective [73]. In this context, silence functioned both as a protective strategy and as a source of continued distress. Taken together, these accounts show that intimacy resistance and barriers to help-seeking were closely associated with structural stigma, long-term concealment, and fractured trust in rural social life [74].

4.2 Findings Related to RQ2: Positive Resilience under Persistent Structural Stigma

The findings related to RQ2 indicate that, despite persistent structural stigma and psychological strain, sexual minorities in rural China described limited but meaningful forms of positive resilience. These recovery-oriented resources did not remove the pressures described above, but appeared in the narratives as ways of sustaining emotional stability, self-recognition, and everyday psychological continuity. Across the texts, such resources were primarily expressed through relational support and a sense of belonging, self-acceptance through meaning reconstruction, and emotional regulation and recovery.

4.2.1 Relationship Building and a Sense of Belonging

One important form of positive resilience was expressed through supportive relationships and a sense of belonging. Although many participants described rural social life as marked by surveillance, misunderstanding, and emotional isolation, the narratives also showed that some individuals were able to form selective but meaningful interpersonal ties after entering universities, cities, or more open online spaces. These relationships did not erase structural pressure, but created limited zones of safety in which participants could speak more freely, feel less isolated, and temporarily distance themselves from the stigma surrounding them [75].

A recurring pattern in the texts was that being understood by "someone like me" or by a trusted other reduced the sense of psychological isolation associated with long-term concealment. Participants

described how friendship, peer recognition, and emotionally safe interaction provided experiences of recognition and acceptance that were difficult to obtain in their home communities. In these accounts, support did not necessarily come from formal organizations or stable collective communities; rather, it often emerged through a small number of trusted peers, online contacts, or accepting acquaintances who allowed participants to feel seen without immediate judgment or correction [76]. One participant wrote, "I left my hometown to go to college and found someone like me with whom I could talk and be friends, and after chatting with strangers on same-sex dating apps, I felt very relaxed for a moment". The texts further showed that this sense of belonging was closely tied to the possibility of authentic expression. When participants encountered relationships in which they could disclose feelings, speak without excessive self-monitoring, or simply avoid being treated as deviant, their psychological burden was partially alleviated. In these moments, belonging was not expressed as abstract inclusion, but as the practical experience of being able to exist, speak, and relate without immediate fear [77]. At the same time, the narratives suggest that these forms of support were often selective, fragile, and difficult to generalize beyond a few trusted relationships, which made them particularly significant under conditions of persistent structural stigma.

4.2.2 Meaning Reconstruction and Self-Acceptance

A second form of positive resilience was reflected in processes of meaning reconstruction and self-acceptance. Beyond supportive relationships, the narratives showed that some participants gradually developed a more stable understanding of their sexual identity and began to reinterpret experiences of stigma in less self-rejecting ways. This process did not remove earlier pain or social pressure, but it provided a limited psychological basis for maintaining dignity and continuity under persistent structural constraint. A recurring pattern in the texts was the gradual abandonment of self-denial. Participants described moving from fear, avoidance, or moral self-rejection toward a more accepting view of their own sexual orientation. In many cases, this shift was not sudden, but emerged through repeated self-reflection, emotional struggle, and the gradual realization that non-heterosexual identity did not make them inherently wrong or shameful. One participant stated, "I don't think it's shameful to be gay anymore. I want to accept myself for who I am. I don't want to be a good kid anymore; I just want to do what I love". These accounts suggest that self-acceptance was experienced not as abstract self-esteem, but as a partial release from prolonged self-surveillance and moral self-rejection.

The narratives also showed that meaning reconstruction played an important role in this process. Some participants described reinterpreting suffering, stigma, and marginality in ways that allowed them to retain a sense of personal worth and reaffirm the legitimacy of their own existence. Rather than viewing these experiences solely as damage, they gradually incorporated them into a broader understanding of selfhood, dignity, and life significance. One participant wrote, "Maybe God put me through this so that I could understand myself better, and now I know that I exist. Or maybe it was to prove that these people are worthy of respect as well". In these accounts, meaning reconstruction did not imply complete recovery, but it helped transform self-negation into a more sustainable sense of identity continuity and personal value. At the same time, the texts suggest that such self-acceptance remained fragile and uneven. It was often achieved in the absence of stable community support and could be interrupted by renewed family pressure, community judgment, or social isolation. Nevertheless, these processes of meaning reconstruction and self-acceptance appeared to provide an important recovery-oriented resource, allowing some participants to partially reframe stigma, reduce self-rejection, and maintain a more coherent sense of self under long-term oppression [78].

4.2.3 Emotional Regulation and Recovery

A third form of positive resilience was expressed through emotional regulation and everyday practices of recovery. The narratives showed that, in the absence of stable psychological services, reliable community support, or emotionally safe family environments, some participants gradually developed self-directed ways of managing distress and restoring emotional balance. These practices did not remove structural pressure, but they provided limited means of coping with accumulated anxiety, shame, and exhaustion in daily life. A recurring pattern in the texts was the use of ordinary, self-initiated activities as emotional outlets. Participants described turning to music, writing, exercise, solitary reflection, and other small routines when they felt overwhelmed by pressure or emotional stagnation. In these accounts, emotional recovery did not depend on formal intervention, but was often embedded in repetitive and manageable acts that allowed them to momentarily distance themselves from conflict, release tension, and regain a sense of inner stability. One participant wrote, “Every time I get stuck, I do something that makes me happy, and I don’t have to worry about my sexuality”.

The narratives also showed that emotional regulation often involved an effort to shift from suppression to release. Rather than continuing to absorb distress in silence, some participants described learning to notice, name, and ease emotional fluctuations in ways that felt safer and more sustainable. This process was not presented as complete relief, but as a gradual reduction in emotional overload and a more workable way of enduring everyday pressure. In contexts where disclosure remained risky and external support remained limited, such self-regulatory practices became one of the few available channels through which participants could preserve a minimum level of psychological continuity. At the same time, the texts suggest that these recovery practices remained fragile and individually sustained. They were often developed in isolation and could be interrupted by renewed family conflict, community pressure, or identity-related crises. Nevertheless, these everyday forms of emotional regulation constituted an important recovery-oriented resource, allowing some participants to relieve distress, regain temporary emotional stability, and continue negotiating life under persistent structural stigma. To summarize the recovery-oriented dimension of the analysis, Fig. 5 illustrates how relational support, meaning reconstruction, self-acceptance, and emotional regulation operate as interconnected forms of positive resilience under persistent structural stigma.

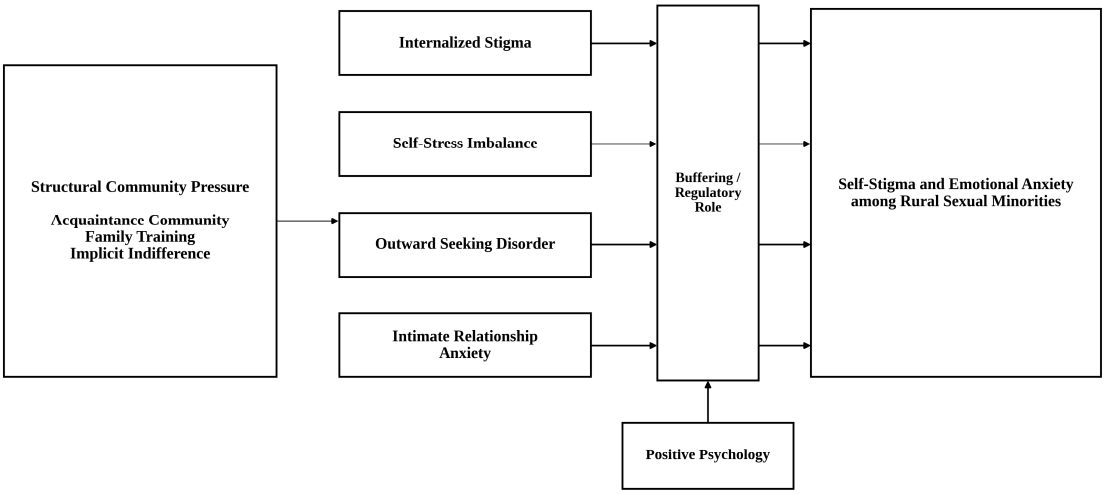

Figure 5: Negative regulatory mechanism of positive psychology in the relationship between structural stress and self-stigma.

5 Discussion

5.1 Structural Stigma in Rural China as Intensified Minority Stress

The present findings suggest that the difficulties faced by sexual minorities in rural China are best understood not as isolated interpersonal tensions, but as the cumulative effects of structural stigma embedded in everyday rural life. In this context, structural violence is expressed less through overt coercion than through the routine intertwining of social inequality, moral discipline, and restricted social recognition, all of which continuously narrow the social space available for identity expression [79]. A key feature of this process is the dense visibility of acquaintance-based rural communities. As the results show, community pressure in rural China operates through persistent observation, gossip, reputational evaluation, and public moral judgment, turning difference into a condition of ongoing exposure. In such settings, individuals are not simply judged after disclosure; rather, they often anticipate exposure in advance and are pushed toward self-regulation and self-censorship under constant social scrutiny [80]. This helps explain why identity concealment in the present study appeared not merely as a personal coping choice, but as a socially induced strategy for maintaining minimal safety.

The findings further indicate that this external pressure is gradually transformed into internalized self-negation. In rural contexts, moral judgment is not experienced as a temporary social reaction, but as a repeated and emotionally charged message that can be absorbed into self-perception. In this respect, the present results are consistent with prior work showing that external stigma may be converted into shame, self-suppression, and emotional avoidance [81,82]. At the same time, the present study extends this line of research by showing that such internalization becomes especially intensified when stigma is sustained across overlapping local relationships rather than confined to a single institutional domain. Family discipline and institutional silence further deepen this structural dilemma. In the narratives, family pressure was closely tied to filial piety, marriage obligation, and reproductive expectation, so that sexual identity was treated not only as a personal matter, but also as a challenge to kinship continuity and family reputation [83,84]. Under these conditions, obedience may be naturalized as a moral and emotional duty, making identity suppression appear necessary, responsible, or even caring [85]. At the same time, the limited visibility of sexual minority identities in schools, workplaces, and other public settings weakens recognition and reinforces symbolic exclusion. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that the pressures identified in this study are not separate burdens, but interlocking forms of minority stress that become especially persistent in rural China [86].

Compared with findings drawn mainly from urban or relatively resource-rich settings, the present study highlights a more constrained social ecology in which exposure risks are higher, exit options are fewer, and supportive alternatives are weaker. The contribution of these findings therefore lies not only in confirming the psychological burden of stigma, but also in showing how the rural configuration of acquaintance society, filial obligation, and institutional under-recognition intensifies minority stress and makes it more pervasive, continuous, and difficult to escape.

5.2 From Structural Pressure to Internalized Stigma, Relational Anxiety, and Help-Seeking Silence

The present findings further suggest that the consequences of structural stigma are not limited to external constraints, but are gradually internalized into durable psychological and relational patterns. In this sense, self-avoidance among sexual minorities in rural China should not be understood simply as an individual coping style, but as a defensive response formed under repeated exposure to moral judgment, identity invalidation, and anticipated rejection [87]. The results indicate that long-term concealment,

self-suppression, and emotional withdrawal emerged not because individuals lacked self-awareness, but because visible nonconformity was repeatedly associated with social risk. Under such conditions, self-avoidance became a way of maintaining minimal social safety at the cost of emotional openness.

This process can be more clearly understood through the lens of internalized stigma. As previous studies have shown, stigma does not remain external when individuals are continuously exposed to social devaluation; rather, it may be absorbed into self-evaluation and transformed into shame, self-doubt, and emotional inhibition [88]. The present findings are consistent with this pattern, but further show that in rural China such internalization is intensified by the overlap between community surveillance, family obligation, and institutional silence. In other words, self-avoidance in this context is not merely a reaction to isolated discrimination, but the psychological extension of a broader social order that repeatedly marks non-heterosexual identity as inappropriate, risky, or morally problematic. The findings also help explain why identity suppression becomes relationally disruptive. Prior research on impression management has suggested that stigmatized individuals often rely on identity performance, concealment, and discursive control in order to remain socially acceptable [89]. In the present study, however, such strategies were not confined to surface-level identity management. Rather, they appeared to produce ongoing internal friction, especially when participants were required to move repeatedly between the expectations of the "obedient child" and the demands of the "authentic self" [90]. This helps explain why the relationship difficulties documented in the results were not simply interpersonal problems, but reflected a deeper erosion of trust, spontaneity, and emotional security under prolonged concealment.

A similar logic applies to help-seeking silence. Existing studies have shown that identity concealment is often associated with higher levels of anxiety and isolation, while internalized stigma may further undermine trust in intimate relationships and psychological support [91]. The present findings extend this line of research by showing that, in rural China, help-seeking is constrained not only by personal hesitation, but also by a lack of trusted channels through which distress can be disclosed safely. Once disclosure itself becomes socially risky, individuals may come to anticipate misunderstanding, ridicule, or further exposure before help is even sought. This dynamic helps explain why some participants in the present study remained silent despite evident distress, and why emotional suffering was often managed privately rather than communicated outwardly. Taken together, the present findings suggest that help-seeking difficulties among stigmatized groups may follow a circular pattern in which shame generates defensiveness, defensiveness reinforces avoidance, and avoidance further deepens isolation [92]. However, the current study shows that this cycle is not solely intrapsychic. In rural China, it is reinforced by a local social ecology in which family discipline, community surveillance, and weak institutional recognition reduce both the safety and the legitimacy of disclosure. As a result, the movement from structural pressure to internalized stigma, relational anxiety, and help-seeking silence becomes a patterned social-psychological process rather than a series of disconnected individual reactions.

5.3 Positive Resilience as a Limited and Relational Form of Recovery under Structural Constraint

The present findings suggest that positive resilience among sexual minorities in rural China should not be understood as complete recovery from structural oppression, but as a limited and relational form of psychological survival under persistent constraint. In a rural social environment shaped by acquaintance surveillance, moral judgment, and limited social recognition, recovery does not usually take the form of full liberation or stable social inclusion. Rather, it emerges through small but meaningful resources that allow individuals to remain emotionally intact, preserve self-recognition, and continue everyday life under pressure. In this sense, the present study extends discussions of positive psychology by showing that, in

marginalized rural settings, resilience is often partial, fragile, and deeply embedded in social relationships rather than expressed as triumphant self-transformation [93,94].

A first implication of the findings is that supportive relationships function as a crucial, if limited, condition of resilience. Existing relational perspectives have emphasized that identity is shaped through being seen, responded to, and emotionally validated by others [95]. The present study supports this view, but also shows that in rural China such recognition rarely comes from broad community acceptance. Instead, it is often concentrated in a small number of trusted peers, intimate ties, or relatively open online and urban spaces. This makes relational support less a stable social resource than a selective and fragile form of protection against stigma. In line with previous studies, the findings suggest that close relationships, peer acceptance, and a sense of community belonging can buffer exclusion and sustain psychological endurance [96,97]. At the same time, the current results indicate that these ties are especially important in contexts where formal and structural support remains weak, because they provide one of the few spaces in which participants can speak without immediate correction, judgment, or concealment.

A second implication concerns meaning reconstruction and self-acceptance. The present findings show that positive resilience was not only interpersonal, but also rooted in meaning reconstruction. Some participants gradually moved away from shame, self-denial, and moral self-rejection by reinterpreting their suffering and marginality in ways that preserved dignity and personal worth. This supports prior arguments that identity repair depends not merely on symptom reduction, but on the ability to sustain purpose, value, and self-consistency under pressure [98]. At the same time, the present study adds an important qualification: in the rural Chinese context, self-acceptance was rarely complete or stable. It was often uneven, vulnerable to renewed pressure, and achieved without strong collective affirmation. For this reason, the value of meaning reconstruction in the present study lies not in signaling full identity resolution, but in showing how some individuals were able to maintain a minimally coherent sense of self under continuing social constraint. This point also resonates with recent developments in positive psychology that place greater emphasis on the agency, voice, and affective resources of marginalized individuals in difficult social settings [99].

A third implication concerns emotional regulation as an everyday practice of recovery. Prior research has shown that positive emotions and small restorative practices may buffer distress and support adaptive coping under adversity [100,101]. The present findings are consistent with this perspective, but indicate that in rural China such recovery often depends on self-directed and low-barrier practices, such as music, writing, exercise, and self-dialogue, rather than on formal counseling or professional intervention. These practices did not eliminate stigma, but they helped participants manage emotional overload, regain temporary stability, and reduce the sense of being overwhelmed by persistent pressure. Importantly, the findings also suggest that such practices emerged in a context where professional support was often absent, inaccessible, or perceived as unsafe. This means that emotional regulation should not be understood here as a sign that structural inequality has been overcome, but as a pragmatic and necessary means of enduring it. In this respect, the present study supports the value of culturally grounded, non-stigmatizing, and low-threshold mental health resources for marginalized rural populations, while also showing that such resources remain insufficient when broader structural exclusion is left unchanged [102].

Taken together, the findings indicate that positive resilience among rural sexual minorities is best understood as relational, constrained, and everyday. It is relational because it depends heavily on selective forms of recognition and support; constrained because it unfolds under continuing stigma rather than after its removal; and everyday because it is sustained through small, repeated acts of meaning-making and emotional regulation rather than dramatic transformation. This interpretation not only deepens

understanding of how resilience operates under long-term structural oppression, but also extends the relevance of positive psychology to non-Western marginalized contexts in which recovery is necessarily partial, situated, and socially conditioned.

6 Conclusions

Based on the grounded theory approach, this study constructs a theoretical model of oppression-psychological dilemma-positive regulation for the Queer community in rural China. It reveals how the moral monitoring of acquaintance society, family discipline, and institutional indifference systematically lead to the psychological consequences of individual internalized stigma, identity disguise, relationship anxiety, and help-seeking barriers. The study further finds that although rural sexual minorities are in multiple marginalized positions, they develop unique positive psychological resources in real expression, internal acceptance, and emotion regulation, forming a self-healing mechanism in adversity. The findings not only expand the application boundaries of positive psychology in non-Western cultures and socially disadvantaged groups but also highlight the importance of positive psychology in the context of social development, providing theoretical support and a practical path for promotion. A more culturally sensitive and structurally responsive psychological intervention system.

7 Theoretical Implications and Practical Contributions

This study deepens the applicability of the minority stress model in the context of rural China at the theoretical level and presents three meaningful contributions: (1) taking rural China as the field, this paper refines the functional path of stigma-psychological dilemma, emphasizes the cultural pressure structure in Chinese rural communities, and complements the adaptation path of the minority pressure model in a collectivist society; (2) through grounded theory analysis, this paper finds that China's rural Queer groups still show key dimensions such as positive relationship construction, identity acceptance, meaning reconstruction, and emotional recovery in a highly oppressive situation, puts forward the triple path of a positive psychological adjustment mechanism, and expands the integration of positive psychology in socially vulnerable groups in the dimension; (3) this study extracts a set of structural Models with locality and transferability from empirical materials, which provides a methodological paradigm and theoretical framework for subsequent minority and marginal research.

At the practical level, the research results show that it is urgent to strengthen gender education and psychological support system construction in rural areas from the policy and education levels. Three practical suggestions are presented: (1) systematically introduce gender equality and sexual minority education into the basic education curriculum, promote cooperation between community organizations, and establish offline sanctuary spaces and online mutual assistance platforms; (2) in the intervention design, localize positive psychological dimensions such as expression, empathy construction, and meaning empowerment, for example, through story writing, community narratives, peer sharing, and other forms to strengthen the individual's positive cognition of self and others, activate group resilience resources, and reduce the psychological internalization of structural depression; (3) build a more inclusive social and cultural ecology in rural areas. In rural areas, it is necessary to establish a community anti-discrimination accountability mechanism and conduct institutional intervention against gender-biased speech.

8 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study is limited by the time period, human input, and access restrictions, and there are still some limitations in the study design and results promotion. However, it also provides some directional

implications for future research. The main limitations are as follows: (1) Limitations of research methods. This study mainly uses qualitative interviews and grounded theory for data analysis. Although it reveals the relationship mechanism between structural oppression and the psychological construction of Queer groups in rural China, due to the limitations of sample size and data sources, there is still a lack of multi-perspective support from other methods (such as quantitative measurement, questionnaire surveys, or cross-regional comparisons), which may affect the robustness of the theoretical model. (2) Limitation of data scope and representational coverage. Because this study relied on publicly available online narratives rather than directly recruited participants, complete demographic information such as age, gender, and precise geographic location could not be consistently verified. The dataset therefore should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all sexual minorities living in rural China. In addition, online narratives are more likely to capture individuals who had digital access and were willing to express their experiences in public or semi-public spaces. Those who lacked internet access, avoided online self-expression, or remained silent because of stigma and safety concerns were less likely to be included. Accordingly, the findings are better understood as analytically informative and contextually grounded rather than demographically representative. (3) Limitations of theoretical variables: This study focuses on the moderating mechanism between community structural oppression and positive psychological resources and has not systematically incorporated key variables such as social support, religious beliefs, gender temperament, and digital social media use. These factors may have an important impact on the process of psychological regulation and identity construction. (4) Lack of longitudinal follow-up and intervention studies: Because the research is mainly based on retrospective interviews, it cannot present the dynamic changes and development trajectories of individuals experiencing structural stress, psychological stress, and the recovery process in the time dimension.

In view of the above limitations, future research can be expanded and deepened in the following directions: (1) A mixed-methods design, combined with quantitative structural modeling and qualitative interview analysis, can be used to study the relationship between gender and gender. (2) In terms of samples, it is suggested to extend the model to sexual minorities from different geographical, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds in China, in order to test the applicability and differences of the theoretical model in different social structures and cultural contexts. (3) In the variable design, factors such as digital culture participation, intergenerational education level, social class identity, and media exposure can be further introduced to enrich the theoretical understanding of the recovery mechanism and risk transformation path. (4) In the research path, it is suggested to combine the Design of long-term follow-up, intervention experiments, or comparative studies, etc. Objective: to observe the medium and long-term effects of positive psychological resources on identity growth, trauma repair, and community participation. Through the systematic advancement of these paths, future research can further deepen the understanding of the mental health mechanisms of Queer groups in rural China. It also provides more empirical intervention strategies for the social integration and psychological empowerment of marginalized communities.

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provision by Chao Liu; initial manuscript drafting by Sihang Liu; manuscript revision and proofreading by Tsai-Hsuan Tsai; illustration creation by Sihang Liu; project oversight by Hao Chen and Tsai-Hsuan Tsai; financial support obtained by Hao Chen and Tsai-Hsuan Tsai. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials: The dataset includes public Chinese social media texts collected from Weibo, Zhihu and RED (Little Red Book). To respect platform terms and participant privacy, verbatim raw text that can be traced back to the original poster will not be publicly released, and the full coding framework will be placed in the supplementary dataset; Upon reasonable request and institutional approval, Requests to access these datasets should be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics Approval: This study analyzed only publicly available online texts and did not address interactions or interventions with human participants. This study was conducted under the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Chang Gung University Ethics Committee (IRB number: 20250310B0, 10 March 2025). All data from this study were anonymized before analysis, and the manuscript does not include potentially identifiable images or personal data. To prevent tracing back to the personal information of the reviewers, the quoted material is anonymized and presented in a non-traceable form. Therefore, informed consent is not required.

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