The Impact of Urban Migration on the Mental Well-Being of Young Women: Analyzing the Roles of Neighborhood Safety and Subjective Socioeconomic Status in Shaping Resilience against Life Stressors

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Abstract: This study evaluates the impact of urban migration on the mental health of young women, focusing specifically on how objective life stressors, perceived neighborhood safety, and subjective socioeconomic status influence depression. Depression is the main outcome measure in this research, serving as a critical indicator of mental health in the context of urban migration. Utilizing a stratified cluster sampling approach, we collect data from 2138 young female migrants in Bao’an District, Shenzhen, employing the Life Stress Scale, Patient Health Questionnaire-9 items, Perceived Neighborhood Safety Scale, and Subjective Social Economic Status Scale to assess the corresponding constructs. Our findings highlight that life stressors directly contribute to increased depression levels among young female migrants, with perceived neighborhood safety significantly mediating this relationship. Furthermore, subjective socioeconomic status moderates the impact of life stressors on perceived neighborhood safety, underlining the intricate dynamics between objective life stressors and the social-environmental context in shaping mental health outcomes. This research underscores the importance of creating supportive and inclusive social environments to mitigate the adverse psychological effects of life stressors on young female migrants, thereby contributing to discussions on sustainability and social welfare.

Keywords: urban migration; young female migrants; life stressors; depression; neighborhood safety perception

1. Introduction

China’s urbanization has rapidly accelerated since the 1990s, with the urbanization rate surging from 26.41% in 1990 to 66.16% by 2023 [1]. This rapid urban growth has notably increased the influx of young female migrants into major cities, leading to the emergence of communities often termed “Beijing drifters”, “Shanghai drifters”, and “Shenzhen drifters”. These women, grappling with the dual vulnerabilities of gender and migrant status, face significant obstacles in their quest for integration and well-being in urban settings [2]. Notably, their mental health has been reported to be substantially worse than that of their male counterparts, underscoring the critical need for focused research and intervention [3]. The pivotal role of young female migrants in urban development and their unique mental health challenges highlight the pressing need to address their well-being, aligning with the sustainability goals of enhancing social inclusion and equity in rapidly urbanizing societies [4].

In the wake of China’s rapid urbanization, a critical but often overlooked challenge emerges in maintaining mental health, particularly the impacts of depression. As a significant contributor to the global disease burden, depression manifests through a spectrum...
of symptoms, including persistent sadness, loss of interest, and diminished energy [5], affecting nearly 280 million individuals globally as of 2019, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) [6]. Societal and economic disruptions, further intensified by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to a marked increase in anxiety and depression cases worldwide [7]. This trend underscores the heightened vulnerability of specific groups, notably women, who experience depression at rates significantly higher than their male counterparts [8,9]. In China, the situation is particularly acute among female migrants, who must navigate a complex array of stressors, including cultural displacement, employment instability, and social isolation, exacerbating their risk of depression [10]. Alarmingly, approximately one in four female migrants in China displays significant depressive symptoms, a rate that notably exceeds the national average [11]. This stark reality highlights a critical gap in our understanding and addressing of the mental health needs of this demographic, underscoring the imperative for targeted research and intervention strategies to mitigate the challenges posed by depression.

Considering the link between rapid urbanization and the heightened risks of mental health problems, it becomes crucial to delve deeper into the ramifications of such challenges. This study focuses on depression as a primary outcome measure to examine the psychological impact of migration. Using depression as a key indicator provides a clear and focused lens through which to assess mental health outcomes. Depression is a prevalent and significant public health concern, especially among female migrants, who may be more vulnerable due to social isolation, economic pressures, and adjustment challenges in new environments [10,11]. The severe impacts of depression on this group not only encompass traditional health concerns but also extend to broader social and economic dimensions. For instance, studies have revealed that depression significantly increases the likelihood of chronic health issues, including cardiovascular diseases and diabetes [12–14], further straining the healthcare system and impeding individuals’ ability to work and contribute to society [15]. Moreover, the intersection of gender and migration status amplifies these risks, as female migrants often encounter additional barriers to accessing healthcare and support services [16]. The societal stigma associated with mental health and the isolation felt by many in this demographic compound their vulnerabilities, leading to an elevated risk of engaging in high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse and suicide attempts [17]. This critical context underscores the necessity of our study, which aims to explore the specific factors contributing to depression among young female migrants and the potential interventions that could mitigate these effects.

The heightened susceptibility of female migrants to depression underscores the role of the unique life stressors they face as a significant determinant. Research consistently shows a direct correlation between life stress and the emergence of negative emotions, including depression and anxiety [18]. Particularly, a dose–response relationship has been established, linking the intensity of life stressors with the severity of depressive symptoms [19]. Young female migrants encounter a plethora of stressors that are intricately tied to their mobility, such as economic uncertainties, job precarity, cultural dissonance, and the challenge of navigating new urban landscapes while preserving social and cultural connections [17]. These challenges, inherent to their dual identity as migrants and women, not only amplify their exposure to stress but also markedly increase their risk of depression [20,21]. The compounded effect of gender, migration, and urban adaptation subjects them to a heightened stress experience, emphasizing the need to dissect how these specific life stressors contribute to the onset of depressive symptoms [22]. Our study delves into this complex interplay, aiming to illuminate the mechanisms through which life stressors serve as catalysts for depression among young female migrants.

While life stressors are identified as a critical factor in triggering depression among young female migrants, the transition from experiencing stress to developing depression is not inevitable. The contextual environment, particularly the lived experiences and perceptions of young female migrants, plays a pivotal role in moderating this transition [23]. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping provides a framework for understanding
this dynamic, highlighting that it is essential to recognize that the impact of life stressors on mental health is significantly influenced by how these stressors are perceived and the individual’s coping mechanisms [24]. In the specific context of young female migrants, the perceived safety of their neighborhood environment emerges as a critical mediating factor. “Perceived neighborhood safety” refers to an individual’s personal perception and assessment of the level of safety in their local environment [25]. Empirical research supports the notion that environmental perceptions, including feelings of neighborhood safety, significantly influence mental health outcomes [26,27]. The sense of safety and support within their immediate living environment can act as a buffer [24,28], mitigating the potential negative impacts of life stressors on mental health [29]. Conversely, a perceived lack of safety can exacerbate the effects of these stressors, amplifying the risk of depression [30,31]. Recent research, through a large-scale, nationwide study, has shed light on the relationship between neighborhood safety perceptions and depressive symptoms, emphasizing the critical role of environmental quality and safety perceptions [30,31]. These discoveries offer a new perspective on how urban environments impact residents’ mental health and highlight the potential mediating role of neighborhood safety in the stress–depression nexus, further emphasizing the effect of environmental perceptions among young female migrants.

Although less studied, female migrants often report a diminished sense of neighborhood safety [32], which is influenced by myriad factors beyond actual crime rates—such as housing and neighborhood quality, media reports, social unrest, and gender-specific safety concerns. These perceptions, colored by personal experiences and broader socioeconomic contexts, can significantly distort their sense of security and exacerbate stress [33,34]. Studies suggest that subjective socioeconomic status—individuals’ self-assessment of their own social and economic standing—may influence how life stressors are experienced and processed [35]. Individuals with lower subjective socioeconomic status are more likely to perceive their environment as threatening [36,37], which can in turn aggravate the stress experienced [38]. Research across various domains consistently indicates that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have a more pronounced response to stressors, with subjective socioeconomic status (SES) showing a more immediate and significant effect compared to objective SES [39–41]. Additionally, there is evidence that SES profoundly influences one’s perception of their neighborhood environment [42]. Higher SES generally correlates with enhanced access to resources, quality housing, robust social networks, and residence in safer communities, thereby bolstering a sense of security [43]. In light of these findings, we posit that subjective socioeconomic status may serve a critical function by moderating the influence of stressors on the neighborhood safety perception of young female migrants.

In summary, there are close correlations between life stressors, perceived neighborhood safety, subjective socioeconomic status, and depression. Yet, the complex interplay between life stressors, perceived neighborhood safety, subjective SES, and depression has not been fully elucidated. Particularly for young female migrants, the mechanisms by which these factors interact to influence mental health outcomes remain to be clarified. In addition to these factors, marital status and education level have been shown to significantly affect the mental health outcomes of female migrants due to access to resources, emotional and social support and socioeconomic status [10]. Thus, controlling for marital status and education level is essential to accurately isolate the effects of life stressors and socioeconomic factors on depression among young female migrants [11]. By doing so, we can better understand the complex interplay between these variables and provide more targeted interventions to improve mental health outcomes in this vulnerable population.

Therefore, this study is dedicated to unraveling the intricacies of how life stressors and depression are connected within the context of perceived neighborhood safety for young female migrants. It examines how the perceived safety of one’s environment might mitigate or amplify the mental health impacts of life stressors. Additionally, marital status and education level are included as control variables to account for their known influences on depression. We hypothesize that subjective SES may moderate the mediating effect of
perceived neighborhood safety on the relationship between life stressors and depression, after controlling for marital status and education level. We propose a moderated mediation model where life stressors, subjective socioeconomic status, and depression are interlinked. This model will help clarify whether the perception of neighborhood safety can serve as a protective buffer or a risk factor in relation to the depression of young female migrants, and how subjective SES may alter the strength or direction of these associations. The conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Hypothesized model of the effect of life stressors on depression. Arrows indicate the direction of potential causal relationships.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

This study utilized stratified cluster sampling to target a demographic of female migrants aged 18–35 in Bao’an District, Shenzhen, a rapidly developing urban area known for its high levels of industrialization and economic activity. Bao’an District was selected due to its significant influx of young female migrants seeking employment opportunities. The district’s diverse population and advanced social infrastructure provide a representative sample for examining the mental health impacts of migration. The social and health services available in Bao’an further support the investigation into how social supports can alleviate migration-related stress and depression. Data were gathered from ten streets across five areas: Yanluo, Songgang, Shajing, Xixiang, and Xinqiao.

Of the 2138 valid responses received, the effectiveness rate was 89.07%, with participants averaging 33 ± 3.97 years in age. Educational attainment varied: 19.9% had junior high school or below, 44.1% had completed high school, 25.5% had some college or an associate degree, and 10.5% held a bachelor’s degree or higher. Marital status was also considered, with 76.8% having spouses.

All the participants provided informed consent, and the study protocols were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Collaborative Innovation Center of Assessment for Basic Education Quality, Beijing Normal University (approval no. 2022-58).

2.2. Measures

In accordance with our theoretical framework, the key variables, including life stressors, depression, perceived neighborhood safety, and subjective socioeconomic status, were quantified using validated scales tailored to the unique context of young female migrants. Additionally, marital status was assessed using a single item asking participants to indicate whether they were single, married, divorced, or widowed. Education level was measured by the highest degree or level of school completed, categorized as primary education, secondary education, or higher education.

2.2.1. Life Stressors

Life stressors were measured through adapted versions of the Life Stressors Scale, designed for urban young female migrants, which evaluates stress stemming from economic hardship and interpersonal relationships, capturing stressors such as housing, healthcare, employment, and social conflicts. Responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale, with
higher scores indicating greater stressor severity. This scale’s reliability and validity have been confirmed in previous research [44]. The reliability of the scale, as measured by Cronbach’s α, was 0.91 in this study.

2.2.2. Depression

The Patient Health Questionnaire-9 items (PHQ-9) gauges depressive symptoms’ severity, comprising nine items that span the spectrum of depression, including mood, interest, and energy levels. Each item is scored from 0 to 3, offering a severity index suitable for clinical assessment. The PHQ-9 has been extensively researched and validated as a reliable tool for screening depression across diverse populations [45]. In China, the PHQ-9 has demonstrated a good reliability and validity for detecting major depression, with a recommended cutoff score of 7 or more indicating potential depression [46], with a Cronbach’s α of 0.90 in our sample indicating its high reliability.

2.2.3. Neighborhood Safety Perception

Perceptions of neighborhood safety were assessed via an 11-item Neighborhood Safety Perception Scale, addressing various aspects of community life, such as property security and crime prevention [43]. Respondents rated their sense of safety on a scale from 1 (unsafe) to 5 (safe), with the tool’s construct validity supported by correlations with related community measures in China [43]. A Cronbach’s α of 0.77 suggested its good reliability.

2.2.4. Subjective Socioeconomic Status (Subjective SES)

Subjective socioeconomic status (SES) refers to an individual’s opinion of their social class. Subjective socioeconomic status (SES) was measured using a ladder scale, where respondents placed themselves on a 1 to 10 rung representing societal strata, a method validated in prior socioeconomic research [47]. Based on relevant research, individuals’ self-assessed subjective socioeconomic position was categorized into five levels: 1 (lower class), 2 (lower-middle class), 3 (middle class), 4 (upper-middle class), and 5 (upper class). This self-assessment method can effectively reflect young Chinese female’s views of their social standing [48].

3. Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 software facilitated the statistical analysis. The analysis included examining the correlations between the study variables, assessing the mediating role of perceived neighborhood safety, and evaluating the moderating effect of subjective socioeconomic status. Appropriate regression models were applied to test the proposed hypotheses.

4. Results

4.1. Correlation Analysis among Study Variables

In this study, self-reported questionnaires were used to collect data, and the results might be influenced by common method bias. Therefore, Harman’s single-factor test was used to assess the common method bias before the data analysis [49]. The test was conducted by fixing the number of factors to one. The results showed that the variance contribution rate of this single factor was 33.803%, which is less than the critical standard of 50%. Accordingly, common method bias was not significant in this study.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistical analysis results of the Spearman correlations among the study variables and some demographic variables. Specifically, life stressors are significantly positively correlated with depression ($\rho = 0.263, p < 0.01$), indicating that more life stressors are associated with a higher likelihood of depression; life stressors are significantly negatively correlated with the neighborhood safety perception ($\rho = -0.257, p < 0.01$) and subjective socioeconomic status ($\rho = -0.220, p < 0.01$), suggesting that higher scores for life stressors are associated with lower neighborhood safety perceptions and subjective socioeconomic statuses. Regarding the impact of demographic variables on key variables,
education level is significantly positively correlated with subjective socioeconomic status ($\rho = 0.065, p < 0.01$); marital status is significantly negatively correlated with depression ($\rho = -0.123, p < 0.01$) but significantly positively correlated with subjective socioeconomic status ($\rho = 0.117, p < 0.01$).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and Spearman correlations among the variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Education Level</td>
<td>2.265</td>
<td>0.896</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Marital Status</td>
<td>0.769</td>
<td>0.422</td>
<td>-0.242**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Life Stressor</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>0.955</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Depression</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td>0.975</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>-0.123**</td>
<td>0.263**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Neighborhood Safety Perception</td>
<td>-0.092</td>
<td>0.977</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>-0.257**</td>
<td>-0.201**</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Subjective SES</td>
<td>-0.153</td>
<td>0.962</td>
<td>0.065**</td>
<td>0.117**</td>
<td>-0.220**</td>
<td>-0.150**</td>
<td>0.124**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $n = 2138$; marital status is a dummy variable, with no spouse = 0 and with spouse = 1; for education level, junior high school and below = 1, high school (including vocational school) = 2, and junior college/technical school = 3, bachelor’s degree and above = 4. Life stressor, depression, social safety perception, and subjective socioeconomic status are standardized data. ** $p < 0.01$.

4.2. Moderated Mediation Effect Analysis

To investigate the proposed hypotheses, this study employed Hayes’ PROCESS Models 4 and 7 [50]. The mediation analysis (Model 4) allowed testing of whether the indirect effect of neighborhood safety perception mediates the effect of life stressors on depression with the bootstrapping confidence interval. The PROCESS Model 7 was used for further investigation of the indirect path among life stressors, neighborhood safety perception, and depression by considering individuals’ subjective socioeconomic status. The bootstrap confidence interval estimates whether the conditional indirect effect of neighborhood safety perception on the relationship between life stressors and depression is contingent upon individuals’ level of subjective socioeconomic status (moderator).

First of all, a mediation test was conducted to build up and clearly understand the effect of life stressors on depression (H1) and the role of neighborhood safety perception in the relationship (H2). Specifically, the PROCESS Model 4 (mediation test) analyzed whether the scores for life stressors influenced the degree of depression and tested whether neighborhood safety perception mediated the effect of life stressors on depression. The demographic variables, education level and marital status were controlled.

The analysis results are presented in Table 2. The direct effect indicates that as individuals’ life stressors increase, they are likely to exhibit a higher level of depression ($\beta = 0.270$, $SE = 0.021, p < 0.01$). The relationship between individuals’ life stressors and neighborhood safety perception is also affirmed to be significant, suggesting that, as individuals’ life stressors increase, female migrants are likely to perceive a lower level of neighborhood safety ($\beta = -0.271, SE = 0.021, p < 0.001$). Bootstrapping analysis indicates that the indirect effect of neighborhood safety perception on depression is significant ($\beta = -0.110, SE = 0.021, p < 0.001, CI [0.017, 0.044]$). The direct and mediation test supports the proposed H1 and H2. The results demonstrate that when female migrants are faced with a high level of life stressors, they perceive a lower level of neighborhood safety, which mediates the effect of life stressors on depression.

Table 2. Mediation analysis results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$SE$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Stressors $\rightarrow$ Depression</td>
<td>0.270</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
<td>[0.228, 0.312]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Stressors $\rightarrow$ Neighborhood Safety Perception</td>
<td>-0.271</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>[-0.313, -0.229]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Safety Perception $\rightarrow$ Depression</td>
<td>-0.110</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>[-0.152, -0.068]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Stressors $\rightarrow$ Neighborhood Safety Perception $\rightarrow$ Depression</td>
<td>-0.030</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>[-0.044, -0.017]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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To test hypothesis 3 regarding the integrative moderated mediation, we examined whether the indirect effect of life stressors on the depression of female migrants via neighborhood safety perception was moderated by their subjective socioeconomic status. To test the conditional indirect effect, we utilized PROCESS Model 7. The indirect effect of life stressors on depression via neighborhood safety perception was estimated at high (+1SD) and low levels (−1SD) of subjective socioeconomic status with the bootstrap method.

The analysis results are presented in Tables 3 and 4. The results indicated that the indirect effect was significant for individuals of a high subjective socioeconomic status (conditional indirect effect = 0.034, SE = 0.009, 95% CI [0.022, 0.049]) and individuals of a low subjective socioeconomic status (conditional indirect effect = 0.023, SE = 0.007, 95% CI [0.012, 0.034]), but there was a larger conditional indirect effect for the former. Further calculation of the mediation effect judgment indicator with moderation provided an INDEX value of 0.006, and the 95% confidence interval was [0.002, 0.010], which excluded 0, thus supporting hypothesis 3.

Table 3. (a) Moderating effect of high SSES on the relationship between life stressors and depression. (b) Moderating effect of low SSES on the relationship between life stressors and depression.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Stressors → Depression</td>
<td>0.270</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
<td>[0.229, 0.311]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Stressors → Neighborhood Safety Perception</td>
<td>−0.271</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>[−0.313, −0.229]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Safety Perception → Depression</td>
<td>−0.110</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>[−0.151, −0.069]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Stressors → Neighborhood Safety Perception → Depression (High SES)</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
<td>[0.022, 0.049]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Stressors → Depression</td>
<td>0.270</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
<td>[0.229, 0.311]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Stressors → Neighborhood Safety Perception</td>
<td>−0.271</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>[−0.313, −0.229]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Safety Perception → Depression</td>
<td>−0.110</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>[−0.151, −0.069]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Stressors → Neighborhood Safety Perception → Depression (Low SES)</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
<td>[0.012, 0.034]</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 4. Results of the bootstrap test for mediated effects with moderation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>BootSE</th>
<th>BootLLCI</th>
<th>BootULCI</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect of neighborhood safety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High SSES</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low SSES</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediated mediating effect</td>
<td>0.244</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.201</td>
<td>0.287</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SSES = subjective socioeconomic status.

4.3. Moderation Effect Analysis

Young female migrants who experience a greater number of life stressors have a diminished feeling of neighborhood safety. A graph was generated to depict the moderation effect of subjective socioeconomic status on the correlation between life stressors and perception of neighborhood safety. The graph differentiates between female migrants based on their subjective socioeconomic level, namely those with high and low status (defined as the mean plus one standard deviation). Figure 2 illustrates that the relationship changed depending on the subjective socioeconomic status of the female migrants. Female migrants with a high subjective socioeconomic status have a greater perception of neighborhood safety than those with a lower subjective socioeconomic status, particularly when experiencing fewer life stressors. However, if the quantity of life stressors increases, the advantage is gradually reduced due to the constant presence of stressors. Female migrants, regardless of their subjective socioeconomic situation, feel equally low levels of neighborhood safety perception in conditions of severe life stressors.
5. Discussion

The complex interplay between life stressors and depression among young female migrants has been notably mediated by their perception of neighborhood safety and moderated by their subjective socioeconomic status. Our findings, aligning with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, indicate that the compounded vulnerabilities of gender and migrant status exacerbate the impact of life stressors on depression. As life stressors increase, they significantly erode the individual’s sense of safety within their community, thereby intensifying symptoms of depression.

5.1. Life Stressors and Neighborhood Safety Perception

Our study confirms the hypothesis that life stressors correlate with higher symptoms of depression among young female migrants. This finding is in line with existing research illustrating the profound mental health challenges faced by this demographic [17]. The mediating role of neighborhood safety perception in the relationship between life stressors and depression highlights a critical psychological mechanism: as life stressors increase, they significantly erode the individual’s sense of safety within their community, thereby intensifying symptoms of depression. This mediation effect reveals a critical psychological mechanism: the perception of neighborhood safety not only directly impacts an individual’s depression [43] but also acts as a bridge between life stressors and depression symptoms. In other words, if a person perceives their community as unsafe, this perception intensifies the depressive symptoms brought on by life stressors.

This key role of neighborhood safety perception suggests that enhancing community support and safety perceptions could be crucial in mental health interventions aimed at young female migrants. Given that these interventions could foster a greater sense of security and belonging [22,43], policymakers and urban planners should consider these factors in their strategies to support this vulnerable population. These strategies will contribute to the broader sustainability goals of enhancing social inclusion and equity in rapidly urbanizing societies.

5.2. Moderating Role of Subjective Socioeconomic Status

We presented a moderated mediation model highlighting subjective SES’s influence on the relationship between life stressors and social safety perception. Our findings align with previous research indicating that subjective socioeconomic status (SES) has a direct and
significant impact on individuals’ responses to stress and their perceptions of neighborhood safety [41]. This study contributes to the existing body of research by specifically focusing on young female migrants and examining how life stressors and subjective SES interact to affect perceptions of neighborhood safety and potentially influence mental health outcomes like depression. The findings here underline the role of subjective SES as a buffer against life stressors up to a point; however, when life stressors become too great, the protective effect of a higher subjective SES on the perception of neighborhood safety diminishes.

The significance of these findings lies in their implications for mental health interventions and social policies aimed at young female migrants. By acknowledging the diminishing returns of subjective SES under high stress, policies can be tailored to provide additional support to those who may otherwise be perceived as less vulnerable. This could include more targeted mental health services, community safety initiatives, and social support programs that address both the psychological and environmental aspects of well-being.

Altogether, these results emphasize the need to consider broader socioeconomic and environmental conditions that influence mental health. They call for a multi-disciplinary approach that includes economic, social, and psychological support, highlighting sustainability in maintaining healthy migrant communities.

5.3. Role of Control Variables: Marital Status and Education Level

Our findings confirmed that both marital status and education level are indeed related to depression and subjective SES among young female migrants. Specifically, married participants and those with higher education levels reported better mental health and higher subjective SES. These findings align with the existing literature, reinforcing the importance of these demographic factors in understanding mental health outcomes.

Importantly, our hypothesized moderated mediation model held even after controlling for marital status and education level. This indicates that the core relationships we explored—such as the impact of perceived neighborhood safety on depression, moderated by subjective SES—are robust and not merely reflections of marital status or educational differences. This robustness suggests that interventions aimed at improving neighborhood safety perceptions and enhancing subjective SES could be broadly effective across different subgroups of young female migrants, regardless of their marital status or educational background.

The findings of this study have important implications for developing mental health interventions and policies for young female migrants. While tailored interventions may be necessary to address the unique needs associated with different marital statuses or educational levels, the general strategies derived from our core findings could be universally beneficial. For instance, improving neighborhood safety and addressing the socioeconomic perceptions of young female migrants can be effective strategies for mitigating depression. These interventions can be implemented alongside other supportive measures to address the specific challenges faced by different demographic groups within the migrant population.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While our study provides valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying the relationship between life stressors and depression among young female migrants, it has limitations that will guide future research directions. The cross-sectional design limits our ability to infer causality or observe changes over time. Future research should employ longitudinal methods to further understand the long-term effects of life stressors on mental health and include emotional-level variables for a deeper understanding of psychological processes. One recent research study analyzed the data waves of the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) [31], suggesting a similar approach for future research. Additionally, this article discusses the role of the neighborhood relation quality perception as a mediator, suggesting incorporating similar mediators that could influence the relationship between life stressors and mental health, such as neighborhood cohesion or environmental quality, in future studies. Furthermore, comparative studies across different urban and rural
contexts within China could be conducted to understand the variability in neighborhood safety perceptions and their effects on mental health among different populations of young female migrants.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, our research accentuates the urgent requirement for comprehensive support systems to improve the mental well-being of young female migrants. Emphasizing the enhancement of neighborhood safety perceptions and addressing socioeconomic disparities can lead to more effective support for this vulnerable demographic. The study’s findings contribute to the sustainable development discourse, emphasizing the creation of supportive urban environments to mitigate the adverse effects of life stressors.

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