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Overcoming the Social Challenge: The Destigmatization of Controversial Projects

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Table of Contents

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Executive Summary

The number of not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) infrastructure projects, such as waste-to-energy (WTE) incineration plants, nuclear power stations, and sewage treatment facilities, has steadily increased, supporting urban energy supply and circular economy development. However, these projects are susceptible to stigmatization and public resistance, leading to delays, suspensions, or cancellations.

Existing insights suggest that stigmatized projects may adopt strategies such as decoupling, straddling, and concealing to mitigate opposition. Yet these measures mainly reduce residents' exposure to negative information rather than fundamentally reshaping their understanding of the projects, allowing stigma to persist. Destigmatization thus requires a deeper shift in social evaluation. In this regard, sensemaking among surrounding residents represents a critical starting point. However, a holistic investigation of how specific sensemaking strategies influence destigmatization processes remains absent.

To address this gap, this study integrates sensemaking theory and stigma theory. First, it develops an initial conceptual model linking sensemaking, cognitive framing (i.e., the interpretive schema through which individuals perceive, categorize, and make sense of a stigmatized project), and social evaluation. Second, through dual-case analysis of the Jiufeng and Xiantao WTE projects, the study identifies emotional, symbolic, and substantive sensemaking strategies. Finally, survey data from 249 surrounding residents are analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling and bootstrapping techniques. These analyses indicate which forms of emotional engagement, symbolic communication, and substantive investment are most effective in shifting residents' perceptions and rebuilding public acceptance.

The results show that emotional, symbolic, and substantive sensemaking significantly promotes the change of cognitive frames, which in turn enhances positive social evaluation. Emotional sensemaking also exerts a direct effect on the transformation of social evaluation.

For practitioners, these findings suggest that destigmatization is not simply a matter of disclosing technical information or holding press conferences. Governments and project organizations also need to build emotional trust, provide visible and sensory evidence of project safety, and make substantive investments that improve local well-being. Rather than treating residents as passive recipients of information, practitioners should engage them as active participants whose concerns, emotions, and everyday experiences shape how controversial projects are understood. These actions can help individuals reinterpret controversial projects and help organizations rebuild public acceptance during NIMBY stigma crises.

Introduction

According to the classic definition proposed by the renowned sociologist Erving Goffman (1963), stigma occurs at the individual level, referring to a condition in which a person is discredited due to perceived defects in race, physical attributes, or character. Over the past decades, the focus of stigma research gradually expanded to the organizational level following Hudson's (2008) introduction of the concept of core stigma, which arises when an organization's deeply embedded attributes violate prevailing moral norms, resulting in negative labeling, social exclusion, and status loss. This conceptual extension facilitated the incorporation of organizational stigma into management scholarship. However, in the context of emerging technologies, accelerating industrial transformation, and rapid urbanization, scholarly attention, at the organizational level, has increasingly shifted from conventional moral controversies to more complex and pressing threats related to health and the environment. In particular, Perrow (2011) emphasizes that NIMBY infrastructure projects often involve emerging technologies that carry potential risks, including severe or even fatal industrial accidents during construction and operation.

When nearby residents perceive that their health and social well-being are substantially threatened by project deployment, tendencies toward denigration, exclusion, and resistance may arise. Such reactions can be traced to what Kasperson et al. (2001) described as technological stigma. This form of stigma differs from the moral transgressions emphasized in traditional research (Zhang et al., 2021). Rather than stemming from moral deviance, it is closely linked to the perceived threats that NIMBY infrastructure projects pose to human health and ecological systems (Kasperson et al., 2022). In response, scholars have explored both the sources of project stigmatization and potential coping strategies.

On the one hand, stigmatization of projects such as nuclear power plants, high-voltage substations, and WTE facilities often derives from residents' risk perception gaps, limited institutional trust, and negative emotions triggered by unmet expectations or perceived gaps in project communication by project investors (Slovic, 2013). On the other hand, stigmatized projects may attempt to mitigate public rejection through strategies such as decoupling (i.e., abandoning controversial technologies or practices [Diestre & Santaló, 2020]), straddling (i.e., associating stigmatized projects with socially legitimate activities [Vergne, 2012]), concealing (i.e., limiting external disclosure of controversial operations [Cappellaro et al., 2021]), and compensating (i.e., providing material restitution [Jerolmack & Walker, 2018]).

Nevertheless, these strategies primarily aim to reduce residents' exposure to negative information rather than fundamentally reshaping their underlying understanding of NIMBY infrastructure projects. As a result, the latent risk of stigmatization may persist. In this regard, Hampel and Tracey (2017) call for greater attention to destigmatization strategies that directly address audiences' misperceptions and concerns and seek to transform their evaluations at a more fundamental level. Against this background, sensemaking plays a critical role in reshaping residents' perceptions of NIMBY infrastructure projects (Weick, 1995). Through face-to-face communication and nonverbal actions, governments and project organizations can create, negotiate, and sustain particular interpretations of NIMBY infrastructure projects. Scholars have identified sensemaking as both the starting point and the core mechanism of project destigmatization (Zhang et al., 2021). Yet, as prior research has largely focused on the industry level with less attention devoted to fine-grained process analyses of specific projects, the concrete strategies and mechanisms through which sensemaking influences destigmatization remain underexplored. Thus, the dynamic processes of stigma emergence, mitigation, and reversal have often been treated as a theoretical black box.

This study investigates two research questions as follows:

1. How can a controversial project remove its stigma while retaining its core business?
2. To what extent do different kinds of strategies affect project destigmatization?

Research Framework and Literature Review

Project Stigmatization

The stigmatization of projects can be traced to the concept of technological stigma, originally introduced in risk decision research to describe negative organizational evaluations resulting from industrial accidents and environmental crises (Slovic et al., 1991). Slovic (2013) further defined technological stigma as the public's tendency to experience fear and rejection toward projects employing emerging technologies when they perceive substantial threats to health and social well-being. Such stigma may attach not only to environmentally polluting or technologically hazardous facilities, such as nuclear waste plants, WTE incinerators, and radioactive landfills, but even to clean energy projects like photovoltaic or wind farms (Slovic et al., 1994).

Stigmatization generally arises from three main sources: residents' subjective or erroneous perceptions, distrust of project managers, and disappointment over unfulfilled commitments. NIMBY infrastructure projects are especially vulnerable to such stigmatization because they often involve involuntary risk exposure, rare but potentially catastrophic events, unequal risk distribution, scientific uncertainty about harm, and governance concerns related to limited capacity, conflicts of interest, and inadequate preventive measures (Gregory & Satterfield, 2002; Gephart et al., 2009). These features help explain why nearby residents may interpret such projects not simply as technical facilities, but as threats to health, fairness, and community well-being. Although scientific evidence often questions direct causal links between industrial facilities and severe health or environmental damage (Wildavsky, 1995), residents are easily influenced by mobilization and media campaigns, leading to protest and resistance (Jerolmack & Walker, 2018; Piazza & Perretti, 2020). In particular, NIMBY infrastructure projects have also become imageries of cancer, pollution, or dangerous venues. For example, Cavotta et al. (2023) show that the waste treatment plant in southern Italy was rapidly linked to cancer and food contamination imagery, triggering intense stigmatization. Similarly, nuclear and high-voltage facilities evoke negative symbolic associations that undermine perceptions of safety and normality (Cotton & Devine-Wright, 2013). Even events with limited

impacts, such as the Three Mile Island nuclear reactor incident, have reinforced long-term negative imagery surrounding nuclear energy (Cox et al., 2022).

Stigma Management Strategies

Scholars have systematically identified some general strategies concerning stigma management at the organizational level (Zhang et al., 2021; Hampel & Tracey, 2017), such as decoupling (i.e., abandoning controversial technologies or practices [Diestre & Santaló, 2020]), straddling (i.e., associating stigmatized projects with socially legitimate activities [Vergne, 2012]), concealing (i.e., limiting external disclosure of controversial operations [Cappellaro et al., 2021]), and compensating (i.e., providing material restitution [Jerolmack & Walker, 2018]). However, organizations engaging in projects with technological stigma will encounter at least two main challenges when seeking to dilute or detach themselves from their stigma: the technological feasibility of alternatives and the economic efficiency of replacements. On the one hand, although some technologies are theoretically viable as alternatives, changing the fundamental technologies in some projects means disengagement from an existing identity or project termination, as an industrial facility is defined by its core technologies or products such as a nuclear power plant (Piazza & Perretti, 2015). On the other hand, firms with low input overlap find it easier to abandon core stigmatized inputs (e.g., using potentially carcinogenic bisphenol A as raw materials).

In contrast, firms with stigmatized inputs in several business units, namely, high input overlap, will struggle to substitute a discredited technology due to "search and efficiency costs" (Diestre & Santaló, 2020, p. 2). In addition, project developers may choose a passive option, *compensating*, to avoid exiting their core operations. As Kunreuther and Slovic (1999) have indicated, compensation to surrounding residents will increase the acceptability of a WTE incineration plant or a medium-security prison but will be unable to overcome audiences' opposition to such facilities considered sufficiently hazardous, such as a facility producing high-level nuclear waste. More importantly, this pay-and-move-on strategy is too perfunctory to help us understand and manage technological stigma (Flynn et al., 2001).

In general, these strategies do not directly deal with the public perception, mistrust, and disappointment regarding the specific project using controversial and novel technologies, thus keeping "the specter of gridlock for many important private and public initiatives" (Flynn et al., 2001, p. 6) alive. Hence, a stigmatized project will no longer be considered transgressive and tainted only if it is able to alter stigmatizers' beliefs about its core characteristics (Devers & Mishina, 2019). To cope with technological stigma without having to abandon controversial technology, scholars are calling for more research on reconstructing or reshaping the values and meanings of stigma. According to Jones et al.'s (1984, p. 65) viewpoint, "the essence of stigma is fear." This point has been espoused by empirical research on both social stigma and technological stigma. Seen in this light, since the root of technological stigma is the association with widespread threats to safety and health, participants involved in stigmatized projects could adopt open and participatory processes, known as destigmatization, to help more residents understand the rationale of technology and the controllability of hazards (Flynn et al., 2001).

Sensemaking

In the research community of project management, scholars have increasingly adopted sensemaking theory. Sensemaking is typically triggered when individuals encounter novel, ambiguous, confusing, or crisis situations that violate prior expectations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In project practice, unexpected events are common (Söderholm, 2008) and may disrupt planned implementation processes or even threaten project survival (Aaltonen et al., 2010). Although early research attempted to predict or assess such events from a relatively narrow risk perspective and proposed corresponding responses, it overlooked their inherent unpredictability (Williams, 1999) and socially constructed nature (Gephart et al., 2009). Beck (1992) argues that the unknown and unintended consequences of technology increasingly shape historical and social development, indicating that environmental and ecological threats are not merely issues of probabilistic calculation but fundamentally social problems concerning people's relationships with reality.

Accordingly, Ninan et al. (2022) call for greater attention to how unexpected events are constructed and interpreted, rather than focusing solely on the hazards themselves. This is particularly salient in large-scale infrastructure projects, which involve numerous contractors, public agencies, external communities, and other stakeholders. As stakeholder interdependencies intensify over time (Clegg et al., 2011), a central task of project management becomes providing cues that facilitate collective sensemaking (Clegg et al., 2017).

Sensemaking theory thus helps explain how stakeholders, including governments, project organizations, and the public, demonstrate adaptability, agency, and creativity in responding to nonroutine situations (Alderman et al., 2005; Kutsch et al., 2021; Luna-Reyes et al., 2021). When expectations are disrupted, stakeholders reconstruct environmental interpretations, restore cognitive order, and adjust actions to navigate complexity (Kutsch et al., 2021).

In crises triggered by NIMBY infrastructure projects, governments and project organizations must proactively engage in sensemaking to reduce uncertainty and shape collective understanding (Boin et al., 2016). By articulating persuasive narratives that clarify what is happening, why it has occurred, and what its implications are (Song et al., 2025; Song et al., 2024), they provide interpretive boundaries for public cognition (Cornelissen, 2012). Failure to do so may not only leave projects misunderstood but also expose project actors to intensified criticism.

However, Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) caution that an excessive focus on language may sideline cues derived from other modalities. As de Rond et al. (2019) note, individuals draw upon multiple senses to comprehend reality as they engage with the world, interact with their environments, and are shaped by social conditions. Accordingly, scholars should pay greater attention to more immediate forms of material and embodied sensemaking (Meziani & Cabantous, 2020), an orientation that resonates with the growing multimodal lens in organizational research (Meyer et al., 2018; Song & Song, 2025).

Although existing research has begun to explore how multimodal elements, emotions, and substantive actions contribute to sensemaking processes, it remains fragmented and lacks an integrated investigation and fine-grained explanation of diverse sensemaking strategies. Thus, this research moves beyond the language-driven view and holistically examines multiple forms of sensemaking strategies in destigmatization practices.

Methods

This research consists of two coherent subanalyses, employing qualitative and quantitative methods (see Figure 1), respectively, to examine sensemaking strategies and their impacts on the destigmatization of NIMBY infrastructure projects.

First, we adopt a dual-case research design based on the "common process" logic (Eisenhardt, 2021). The Jiufeng and Xiantao WTE incineration projects are among the very few cases that successfully overcame severe stigmatization crises and subsequently became exemplary projects recognized by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment of China for effectively addressing stigma-related challenges. Although these two cases occurred in different regions and time periods, the governments and project organizations involved employed similar sensemaking strategies during the destigmatization process.

Second, drawing on 249 valid questionnaires collected from residents across more than 10 previously stigmatized NIMBY infrastructure projects, we employ partial least squares structural equation modeling to test the hypothesized relationships between multiple sensemaking strategies and destigmatization outcomes. Compared with covariance-based structural equation modeling, partial least squares structural equation modeling seeks to maximize the explained variance of endogenous latent constructs. The former is primarily prediction-oriented, whereas the latter is verification-oriented (Hair et al., 2021). Given the absence of a well-established theoretical framework explaining destigmatization through sensemaking in our research community, developing such theoretical insights constitutes a central objective of this study. Thus, partial least squares structural equation modeling, with its emphasis on theory development and predictive capability, is particularly appropriate and aligns well with the exploratory purpose of this research.

Data Collection

Qualitative Data

First, we conducted semistructured and open-ended interviews with project participants involved in the Jiufeng and Xiantao WTE incineration projects. All interviewees had experienced the full trajectory of public protest and project resumption. They were asked to provide concrete examples of specific destigmatization strategies. Interviews lasted 45 to 120 minutes. We also interviewed nearby residents who had participated in or been affected by protest activities, asking them to reflect on their evolving understandings and attitudes toward the projects (30 to 60 minutes each). All interviews were transcribed immediately after completion. To clarify ambiguities identified during analysis, such as the respective roles

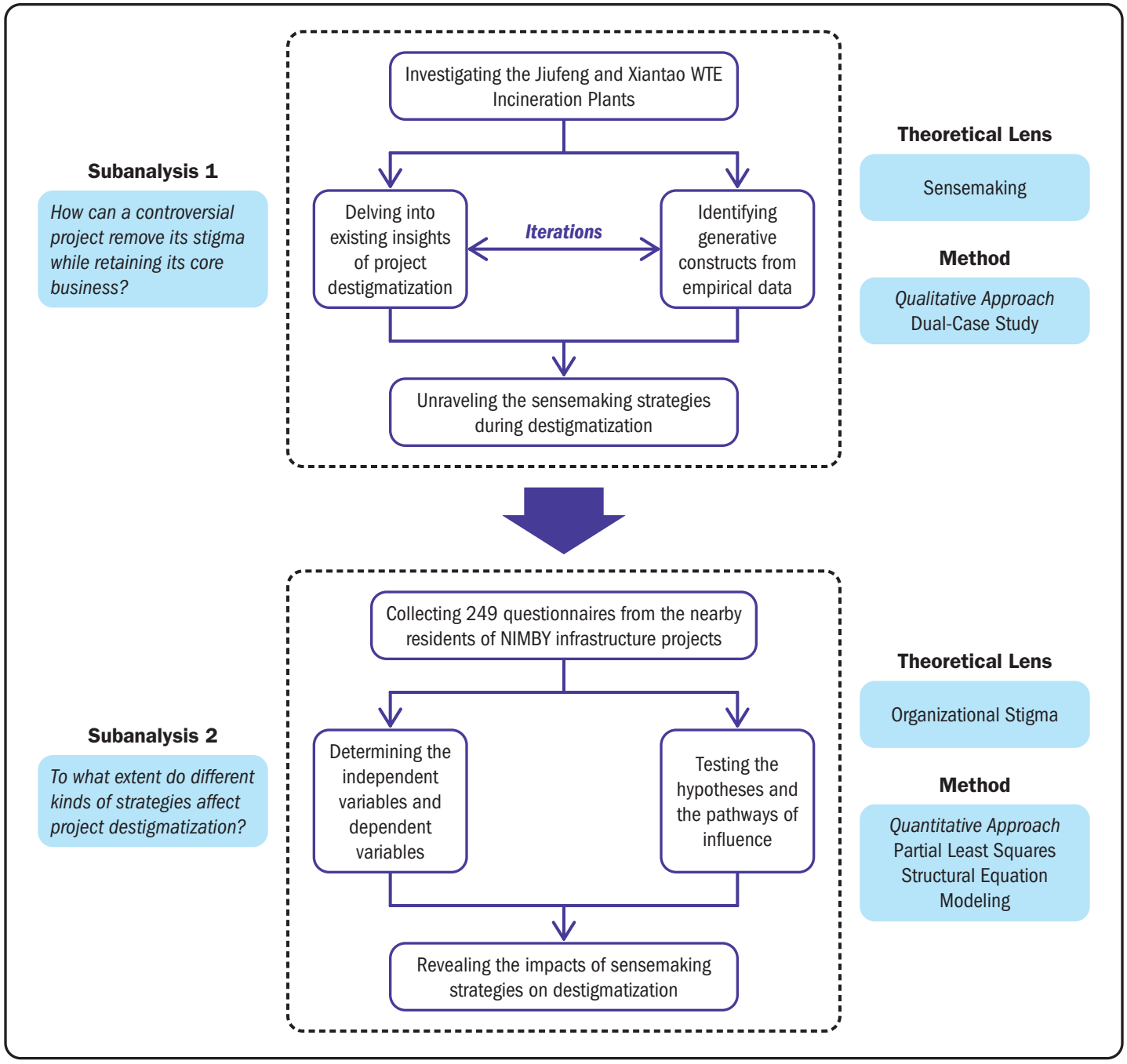


Figure 1. Research roadmap.

of project organizations and local governments, we also conducted follow-up interviews. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, when additional data no longer generated new theoretical insights (Charmaz, 2006).

Second, we conducted site visits to triangulate interview findings. Accompanied by project managers, we observed daily operations across key facilities (e.g., waste pits, control rooms, incineration lines) and documented physical settings and sensory elements, including landscape design, architectural features, and ambient conditions.

Finally, we collected documentary materials (e.g., meeting minutes, evaluation reports, news coverage, social media posts, and video interviews) to supplement and validate interview data. Given the retrospective nature of interviews and potential recall bias, publicly available video materials featuring project participants and residents were reviewed to enhance reliability and ensure methodological fit (Howard-Grenville et al., 2021).

Quantitative Data

The authors' research team conducted a survey of more than 10 NIMBY infrastructure projects that continued operating after undergoing stigmatization crises. These projects were located across multiple provinces in China, including Liaoning, Shandong, Hubei, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Guangdong, and encompassed energy, environmental, and technological facilities.

As stigmatization constitutes a form of social evaluation whose emergence and mitigation hinge on the subjective perceptions of specific social groups, this study focused on residents living in communities surrounding the controversial projects. A total of 310 questionnaires were distributed and 266 were returned. After excluding 17 responses due to straight-lining or clearly patterned answering behavior, 249 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Analysis

Step 1: Constructing the Timeline. Although this white paper primarily focuses on sensemaking strategies in the destigmatization process, recent scholarship suggests that destigmatization should be better understood as a subprocess within the broader evolution of stigmatization to avoid partial interpretations (Zhang et al., 2021). Thus, we examined the full trajectory of stigmatization in the Jiufeng and Xiantao WTE incineration projects. Through immersive reading of our raw data, we identified key events and constructed a detailed process narrative. Using temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999), we divided the evolution into three phases: *encountering stigmatization*, *eliminating stigmatization*, and *maintaining social legitimacy*.

Step 2: Open Coding. Following the Gioia method (Gioia et al., 2013), the first author and a research team member independently conducted open coding using informant-centric terms to generate first-order concepts (see the Appendix). After iterative comparison and discussion, overlapping codes were merged or eliminated, resulting in 36 empirical first-order concepts. For example, activities such as "building green gardens" and "redesigning architectural appearance" were combined into a broader concept labeled "creating harmonious landscapes."

Step 3: Developing Theoretical Constructs. We compared similarities and differences among first-order concepts and iteratively engaged with relevant literature to develop second-order themes and aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). Drawing on framing theory, six first-order concepts were abstracted into three second-order themes—*frame emergence*, *frame reconstruction*, and *frame consolidation*—reflecting different temporal stages of framing processes (e.g., Song & Song, 2025).

Building on organizational stigma theory, 18 first-order concepts were theorized along three evaluative dimensions of stigmatization—destructiveness, controllability, and centrality (Devers et al., 2009; Slovic, 2013; Zhang et al., 2021). These were grouped into six second-order themes and further aggregated into two overarching dimensions: *stigmatizing evaluation* and *normalizing evaluation*, consistent with the binary logic often underlying stigma judgments (Pollock et al., 2019). Importantly, extant sensemaking research remains heavily language-dominant (Whittle et al., 2023), often privileging narrative and discourse over material and embodied modalities (Cornelissen et al., 2014). However, our cases reveal that when authorities responded to public resistance with scientific or evidence-based narratives (Suddaby et al., 2017), such efforts failed to alleviate emotions or build trust. Instead, emotional atmosphere (e.g., empathy), multimodal cues (e.g., odor, architectural aesthetics), and substantive investments (e.g., compensation arrangements) played indispensable roles in destigmatization.

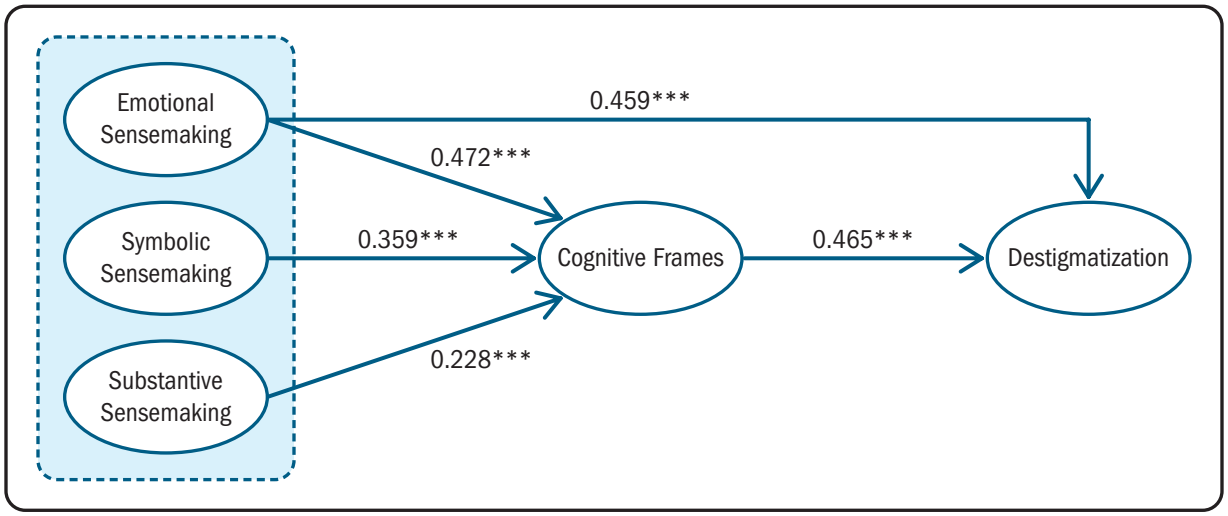
While recent studies acknowledge the importance of nonverbal modalities (Song & Song, 2025), their specific mechanisms during destigmatization remain undertheorized. Through process tracing in a stigmatization context, our analysis identified 12 additional first-order concepts related to sensemaking activities, which were abstracted into six second-order themes and three aggregate dimensions. Inspired by Pfeffer's (1981) distinction between symbolic and material actions, we label these aggregate dimensions as: *emotional sensemaking* (shaping meaning by transforming emotional climates), *symbolic sensemaking* (constructing meaning through verbal and nonverbal symbols), and *substantive sensemaking* (reshaping meaning through changes in processes, technologies, or material practices).

Quantitative Analysis

We used SmartPLS (Version 4.1.0.6) structural equation modeling software to calculate the relevant parameters. The variables and items (see Table 1) and conceptual model (see Figure 2) follow.

Table 1. Variables and Questionnaire Items

Variable	Item Description
Emotional Sensemaking	ES1 I can perceive proactive communication from the government and project company.
	ES2 I can perceive patience from the government and project company.
	ES3 I can perceive empathy from the government and project company.
	ES4 The government and project company regularly and actively communicate with us.
Symbolic Sensemaking	SS1 I can perceive that the government and project company use clear and understandable expressions.
	SS2 I can perceive that the government and project company provide sufficient and credible evidence.
	SS3 I can perceive that the government and project company use multiple forms (e.g., brochures, educational videos, exhibitions, on-site visits) to communicate.
	SS4 I can perceive the positive significance of this project for social development.
Substantive Sensemaking	SBS1 I can perceive environmental improvements made by the government and project company.
	SBS2 I can perceive equipment upgrades implemented by the government and project company.
	SBS3 I can perceive reasonable financial compensation provided by the government and project company.
	SBS4 I can perceive investments that improve local conditions and promote employment.
Destigmatization	D1 I believe the project does not pose a threat to health.
	D2 I believe the project does not negatively affect housing prices.
	D3 I believe the safety of the project is well-guaranteed.
	D4 I believe the transparency of the project is well-guaranteed.
	D5 Even if there are negative impacts, they are not limited to this community alone.
Cognitive Frames	CF1 I acknowledge that I previously had misunderstandings about the project.
	CF2 I acknowledge the feasibility of the project.
	CF3 I trust the project staff.
	CF4 I trust the local government.



Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 2. Conceptual model.

Results and Discussion

The Impact of Emotional Sensemaking on Destigmatization and Cognitive Frames

Existing literature suggests that emotions often exert a negative influence on the evolution of cognitive frames. On one hand, intense emotions can cause individuals to prematurely cease cue collection and cognitive processing, leading to an overreliance on obsolete frames and the entrenchment of erroneous judgments (Weick, 1993). On the other hand, emotional sensemaking is frequently linked to the emergence of stigmatized cognitive frames. For instance, Ferns et al. (2022) demonstrated that stigmatized frames surrounding petrochemical projects are often orchestrated by environmental organizations that strategically evoke public anger, distress, sympathy, and pride to shape collective perceptions.

In contrast, this study provides evidence for a contrary conclusion: Emotional sensemaking plays a positive role in the change of cognitive frames. This finding resonates with the work of Klein and Amis (2021), who argue that emotions such as sympathy, shame, solidarity, and indignation can be leveraged to construct cognitive frames for positive evaluation. This occurs because emotional sensemaking generates a "hot" state that transcends "cool" rationality (Voronov & Weber, 2016), rapidly igniting an individual's passion for judgment and activating a broader relational atmosphere among stakeholders.

Furthermore, this research indicates that emotional sensemaking can bypass cognitive frames to exert a significant direct positive impact on social evaluation. This path demonstrates relatively high effect intensity. The rationale lies in the nature of stigma which, unlike image or reputation, emphasizes social judgments rooted in affect and morality (Pollock et al., 2019). Consequently, out of fear or aversion, specific projects are often reflexively labeled as unacceptable. For example, Hochschild (2018), in her study of a U.S. community's attitude toward petrochemical projects, noted that locals harbored a natural hostility toward the government while maintaining an irrational trust in private enterprises, leading them to stigmatize any government-led initiative without further deliberation.

Beyond this direct path, our findings show that the change of cognitive frames mediates the relationship between emotional sensemaking and the transformation of social evaluation. This conclusion suggests that emotional sensemaking triggers positive shifts in social evaluation by first positively influencing cognitive frames.

The Impact of Symbolic Sensemaking on Cognitive Frames

The empirical results of this study demonstrate that symbolic sensemaking exerts a significant positive influence on the change of cognitive frames. When operationalizing the constructs for symbolic sensemaking, this study did not treat linguistic and nonlinguistic symbols as independent latent variables; instead, they were consolidated into a single integrated latent variable. This choice reflects the fact that individuals exist within a flesh-and-blood reality (Goffman, 1974) rather than a purely abstract cognitive domain. In the real world, people engage with their environment through sensory experiences that operate in tandem with cognition, allowing them to update the knowledge schemas used to interpret their current situations (Creed et al., 2020).

Consequently, strictly segregating the effects of different semiotic modalities is both unrealistic and overly reductionist. Following Höllerer et al. (2019), even when government or project representatives provide verbal explanations to local communities, their speech and physical gestures work simultaneously to reshape cognitive frames. This, essentially, indicates an epistemological shift toward a holistic multimodal perspective, wherein multimodal symbols in daily life are analyzed as an intertwined whole rather than in isolation (Jancsary et al., 2017).

Our findings indicate that the symbolic sensemaking strategies employed by government and project organizations integrate diverse multimodal elements, including language, materiality, odor, sound, and touch. This ensemble effectively prompts residents to dismantle stigmatized cognitive frames surrounding NIMBY infrastructure projects and begin constructing new frames with positive value orientations. This effectiveness stems from the way multimodal symbols complement and reinforce one another, conveying information and cues that a single modality cannot provide alone (Meyer et al., 2018). For example, while language provides structured information suited for cognitive systems, odors and bodily sensations offer prereflective and instinctive cues (Zilber, 2018). Although these sensory cues are often difficult to articulate, they inject vivid and immediate

interpretations into existing cognitive frames, facilitating deep-seated change.

The Impact of Substantive Sensemaking on Cognitive Frames

The empirical results also indicate that substantive sensemaking exerts a significant positive influence on the change of cognitive frames. This challenges prevailing perspectives on monetary compensation, which argue that while cash or material offsets may attenuate the intensity of public opposition, they remain insufficient to alter the underlying stigmatized perceptions of NIMBY infrastructure projects (Slovic, 2013).

In contrast, our findings suggest that substantive sensemaking facilitates a positive shift in the cognitive frame. This is because substantive sensemaking transcends mechanistic monetary payouts to include developmental investments and the promotion of local employment. Such initiatives move beyond the reductionist stereotype of residents as victims, helping to recast NIMBY infrastructure projects as opportunities rather than threats.

This discovery resonates with Pellow's (2002) seminal study on community attitudes toward WTE incineration projects in Chicago, which highlighted how job creation, direct compensation, and commercial development can foster a welcoming environment. For local stakeholders, the project represents an economic opportunity to improve livelihoods rather than a site for abstract ideological contention. Similarly, Jerolmack and Walker (2018) noted that while residents occasionally complained about water pollution or traffic congestion caused by shale gas extraction, they perceived these issues as normalized inconveniences in light of the substantial returns and employment prospects the project delivered.

Importantly, these phenomena should not be dismissed as residents merely enduring NIMBY facilities for financial gain (Malin & DeMaster, 2016). Instead, it reflects a deeper cognitive reevaluation: By weighing the tangible benefits and conveniences, residents transform their overall perception and tone toward the project, which fundamentally signifies a frame transition. Supporting this view, McAdam and Boudet (2012) provide an even more extreme case where certain communities actively solicit NIMBY infrastructure projects to revitalize their local economy, such that the positive valuation of these projects becomes an integral part of the local cultural fabric.

The Impact of Cognitive Frames on Destigmatization

The empirical results demonstrate that the change of cognitive frames has a significant positive impact on the transformation of social evaluation. This finding suggests that cognitive frames serve as anchors for an individual's positive, negative, or neutral attitudes, functioning as a heuristic for forming social judgments (Lewicki et al., 2020). While emotional sensemaking possesses the potential to bypass cognitive frames and directly influence social judgment, in most instances, sensemaking efforts aimed at destigmatization primarily target cognitive frames. The evolution of these frames, in turn, triggers a shift in broader social evaluation.

Synthesizing the data from the qualitative subanalysis, during the initial phase, stigmatized cognitive frames regarding NIMBY infrastructure projects defined the semiotic boundaries, resident identities, and interaction modalities associated with such projects (Murphy et al., 2021). However, because frames are fundamentally socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), sustained interaction between governmental and project organizations and local residents allows these stigmatized frames to be recast into normalized ones. This shift leads to a reconfiguration of meaning boundaries, identities, and interaction patterns.

In essence, as the overarching tone and perspective toward NIMBY infrastructure projects shift toward the positive, local residents begin to prioritize different cues, or assign entirely new meanings to existing ones, when assessing dimensions such as destructiveness, controllability, and centrality. These empirical results provide robust quantitative support for the "reframing" noted by Zhang et al. (2021).

Practical Applications of Findings

While the stigmatization of NIMBY infrastructure projects often stems from information asymmetry, the role of engagement gaps cannot be overlooked. Historically, gaps in communication channels and opportunities for meaningful public participation during the planning and operational phases have exacerbated these crises. Against this background, this study suggests that establishing a "warm" crisis communication interface, with an empathetic emotional atmosphere, multimodal engagement, and substantive investment, offers a viable strategic path for government and private stakeholders. The following recommendations translate the study's findings into practical actions for project owners, public agencies, and community engagement teams.

Building Emotional Trust Before Explaining Technical Details

Practitioners should first recognize that stigma is often rooted in fear, anger, and distrust. When residents feel ignored or excluded, technical reports and expert explanations may be interpreted as manipulative rather than reassuring. Public agencies and project organizations should therefore create regular opportunities for face-to-face dialogue before relying on formal announcements or press conferences.

In practice, this means listening patiently to residents' concerns, acknowledging uncertainty, responding to emotional reactions with empathy, and maintaining stable communication channels throughout the project life cycle. For example, the public communication practices of the Hongyanhe Nuclear Power Plant team illustrate the importance of sustained local engagement. Public reports describe how the project team established a one-on-one contact mechanism with nearby communities, through which project staff and village-level representatives communicated regularly, learned about residents' concerns, and carried out educational campaigns and community support activities.

This example illustrates how procedural mechanisms that enable genuine public participation (e.g., grievance channels, community liaison roles, and transparent reporting) can become structural foundations for institutional trust, not merely tactical communication tools.

Providing Visible and Sensory Evidence of Project Safety

Practitioners should not rely merely on written reports, technical indicators, or official statements to demonstrate project safety. For many residents, concerns about NIMBY infrastructure projects are experienced through daily sensory cues such as odor, noise, visual intrusion, traffic, and perceived pollution. Therefore, governments and project organizations need to provide evidence that residents can see, hear, smell, and evaluate for themselves.

In practice, this means organizing site visits, open-house days, guided tours of comparable facilities, public exhibitions, real-time monitoring displays, and accessible explanations of environmental data. For example, media reports of the Haiyang Nuclear Power Plant show that the project has used open-house days, educational activities, and visits to the nuclear power plant to help residents and students understand technological rationale, radiation protection, and safety systems of nuclear power plants. Such activities can translate highly technical safety systems into more understandable and credible experiences for local communities.

A similar example is the Yantian Energy Ecological Park. Instead of presenting the facility merely as a WTE incineration plant, the project has been developed as an energy ecological park with science education, environmental exhibition, and industrial tourism functions. This kind of design helps residents and visitors compare imagined risks with actual operating conditions. It also makes safety, cleanliness, and environmental performance more visible in everyday experience.

Investing in Local Well-Being, Not Only Risk Compensation

Practitioners should treat substantive investment as a primary component of destigmatization rather than as a secondary response after opposition has emerged. Monetary compensation may reduce immediate dissatisfaction, but it is often insufficient to change the underlying interpretation of a stigmatized project. Residents are more likely to reinterpret a controversial project when they can see tangible improvements in environmental quality, public services, employment opportunities, and community development.

In practice, this means upgrading equipment, improving odor and leachate treatment systems, investing in surrounding communities, supporting local employment, and improving public facilities. For example, at the Heimifeng Solid Waste Treatment Facility, the overburdened landfill once generated problems such as odor, mosquitoes, community complaints, and road-blocking traffic incidents. Later upgrades in clean incineration, leachate treatment, and environmental remediation helped shift the waste treatment system toward cleaner and more integrated operations.

This example shows that practitioners should address the physical triggers of stigma rather than merely managing public opinion. If residents' concerns are tied to odor, leachate, truck traffic, or visible environmental degradation, then technical upgrades and environmental improvements become part of destigmatization itself. They help residents reinterpret the project not only as a potential risk, but also as a project that can be improved, monitored, and governed.

Conclusion

Through empirical analysis, this study reveals the positive impact of different types of sensemaking strategies on the destigmatization of NIMBY infrastructure projects. Furthermore, the findings highlight the role of emotional sensemaking in providing cognitive shortcuts and mediating the change of cognitive frames. These insights offer valuable guidance for governments and project organizations facing NIMBY stigma crises. Specifically, these strategies become most effective when embedded within robust governance frameworks that institutionalize transparency, procedural fairness, and structured public participation, enabling trust to accumulate across project phases rather than having to be rebuilt from zero at each moment of crisis. They show that effective destigmatization depends not only on technical disclosure, but also on emotional trust building, visible evidence of safety, substantive investment in local well-being, and sustained community engagement.

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List of Outputs

Journal Articles

Song, L., Sun, Y., & Gao, X. (2025). Maintaining legitimacy through the integration of discursive and visual strategies: A multimodal study of incumbents' clean energy facilities in China. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, *55*, 100961. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2024.100961

Song, L., Song, J., & Hudson, B. A., Rising from the ashes: Removing core stigma through cross-level interactions [Manuscript in preparation].

Conference Presentations

(2024, July 17). Song, L. [Conference presentation]. 2024 International Summer Workshop of Management Research, Dalian University of Technology, China. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/aPcEU696-9PlmammtznTDw

(2025, July 19). Song, L. [Conference presentation]. 2025 Young Academic Forum for Project Management, Baotou, China. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ViXOlHJOBzPb8AplUL983g

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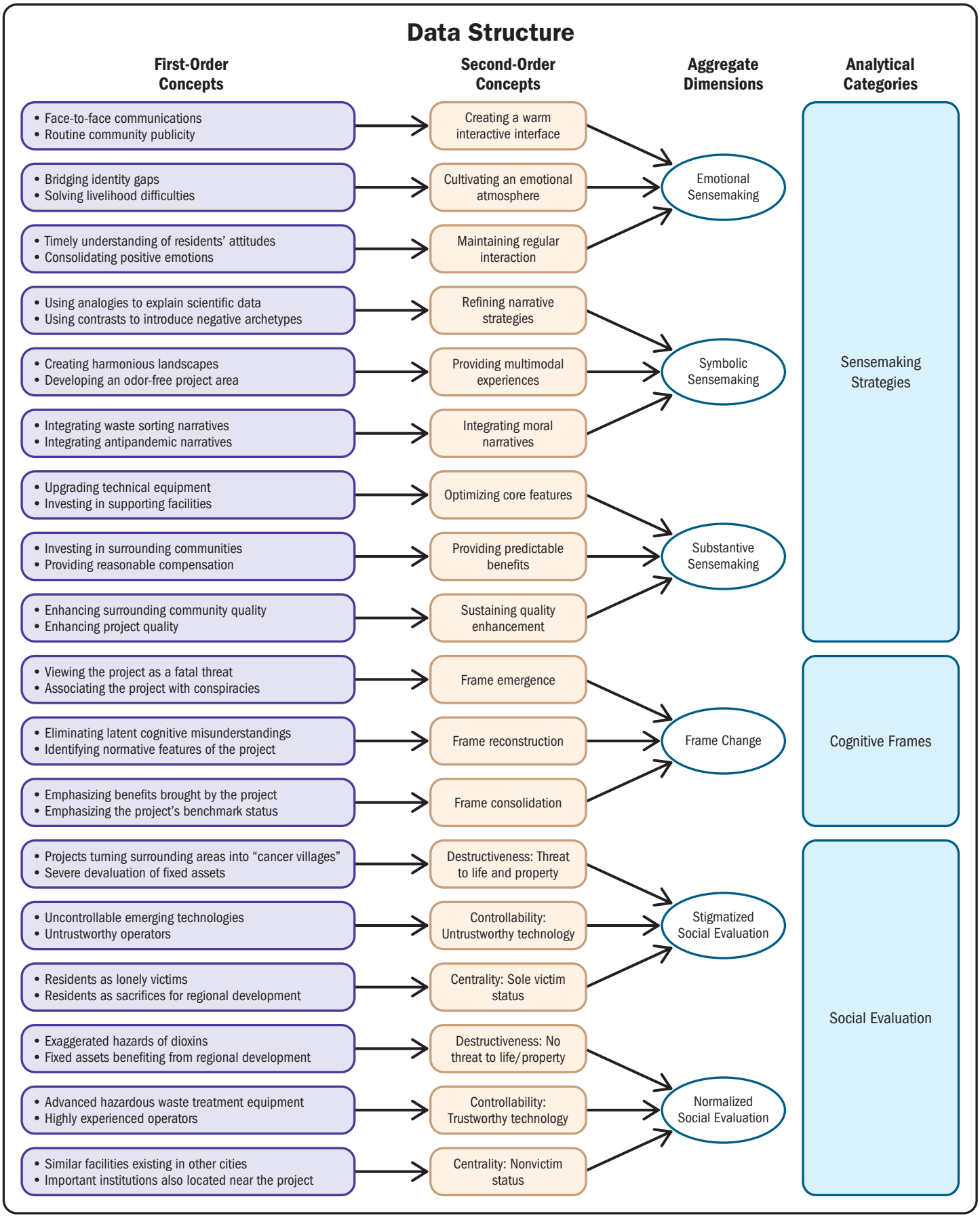
Appendix.


Data Structure
First-Order Concepts
Second-Order Concepts
Aggregate Dimensions
Analytical Categories
• Face-to-face communications
• Routine community publicity
Creating a warm interactive interface
• Bridging identity gaps
• Solving livelihood difficulties
Cultivating an emotional atmosphere
Emotional Sensemaking
• Timely understanding of residents' attitudes
• Consolidating positive emotions
Maintaining regular interaction
• Using analogies to explain scientific data
• Using contrasts to introduce negative archetypes
Refining narrative strategies
• Creating harmonious landscapes
• Developing an odor-free project area
Providing multimodal experiences
Symbolic Sensemaking
Sensemaking Strategies
• Integrating waste sorting narratives
• Integrating antipandemic narratives
Integrating moral narratives
• Upgrading technical equipment
• Investing in supporting facilities
Optimizing core features
• Investing in surrounding communities
• Providing reasonable compensation
Providing predictable benefits
Substantive Sensemaking
• Enhancing surrounding community quality
• Enhancing project quality
Sustaining quality enhancement
• Viewing the project as a fatal threat
• Associating the project with conspiracies
Frame emergence
• Eliminating latent cognitive misunderstandings
• Identifying normative features of the project
Frame reconstruction
Frame Change
Cognitive Frames
• Emphasizing benefits brought by the project
• Emphasizing the project's benchmark status
Frame consolidation
• Projects turning surrounding areas into "cancer villages"
• Severe devaluation of fixed assets
Destructiveness: Threat to life and property
• Uncontrollable emerging technologies
• Untrustworthy operators
Controllability: Untrustworthy technology
Stigmatized Social Evaluation
• Residents as lonely victims
• Residents as sacrifices for regional development
Centrality: Sole victim status
Social Evaluation
• Exaggerated hazards of dioxins
• Fixed assets benefiting from regional development
Destructiveness: No threat to life/property
• Advanced hazardous waste treatment equipment
• Highly experienced operators
Controllability: Trustworthy technology
Normalized Social Evaluation
• Similar facilities existing in other cities
• Important institutions also located near the project
Centrality: Nonvictim status

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