

## Article

# Beyond Physical Withdrawal: A Thematic Analysis of the States and Challenges of the Socially Withdrawn in China as Depicted on SNS

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**Abstract:** Social Withdrawal (SW) refers to a phenomenon where people, especially the young generation, avoid social activities, and confine themselves to their homes. This issue has become a significant public concern in many countries, including China, since socially withdrawn individuals (SWers), despite their potential, may contribute little to society. A major challenge in studying SW lies in the reluctance of these individuals to participate in traditional surveys or interviews, making it difficult to approach their inner worlds and lived experiences. To address this limitation, this study employed an innovative approach by analyzing the social networking site (SNS) activities of SWers. Specifically, we conducted a thematic analysis of naturally occurring data from online blog communities dedicated to SW in China. This method enabled us to explore the lives, emotions, and thoughts of SW individuals in a non-intrusive manner. Our findings revealed two overarching themes defined as: (1) the states of SW individuals, and (2) the challenges they face in reintegrating into society. Building on these insights, we discuss the implications of our findings, propose theoretical frameworks and put forward a series of practical suggestions for their social reintegration.

**Keywords:** social withdrawal; thematic analysis; states; challenges; social reintegration

## 1. Introduction

A recent NHK documentary (NHK WORLD-JAPAN, 2021) reported on a Japanese man who lived in seclusion, while refusing to interact with others and society. He relied solely on his inheritance to sustain his living for 30 years, and ultimately died of malnutrition. During the filming, his home was filled with garbage and his living environment was extremely poor. This report sparked widespread attention and discussion of this condition with similar individuals in Japanese society, and this group of people are commonly referred to as *hikikomori*, translated to “socially withdrawn people”. Social withdrawal (SW) refers to a condition where youths withdraw into the home and do not participate in society for a period of over six months, of which a mental illness is not likely to be the primary cause (Saito, 1998). Since *hikikomori* was first identified in Japan in the 1990s, SW has been reported throughout the world, including Hong Kong (Wong, 2012), the United Kingdom (Hayward et al., 2008), Korea (Lee et al., 2013), France (Chauliac et al., 2017), and Spain (Ovejero et al., 2014).

## 2. Literature Review

There is still debate about the minimum duration of SW among researchers. Some studies follow the definition of the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare, setting the criterion at six months (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2003), while other studies may set it as short as three months (Chan & Lo, 2014; Lee et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2015).



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Besides the minimum duration of withdrawal, there is also argument over the extent of physical seclusion. Some studies argue that SW people do not go out at all (Teo, 2010; Lee et al., 2013), secluding themselves in their room, often in comorbidity to addiction to internet use, such as video games and social media (Sakamoto et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2013; Teo, 2012). Other studies have found that some socially withdrawn individuals (SWers) are able to go out on occasion (Wong, 2009; Ovejero et al., 2014). Some of them only go out when necessary, such as when buying necessities (Li & Wong, 2015b), going for walks or going out regularly to hide their SW (Furlong, 2008), going out to enjoy life (Heinze & Thomas, 2014), and some even do part-time jobs (Suwa & Suzuki, 2013). Thus, SW does not necessarily mean complete isolation from the external world.

Another characteristic of SW is the lack of interpersonal relationships. Some studies have suggested that SWers distance themselves from others and barely make an effort to initiate and maintain relationships (Chong & Chan, 2012; Teo, 2010; Nagata et al., 2013). The avoidance of social contact leads to a significant decrease in communication and language skills (Wong, 2009; Li & Wong, 2015b). Other studies argue that SWers are able to maintain necessary relationships or passive and indifferent relationships (Suwa & Suzuki, 2013; Wong et al., 2015), such as with family members (Wong, 2012) and online friends (Wong, 2009; Wilson, 2010; Chan & Lo, 2014).

In terms of the challenges and difficulties SWers face, studies have shown that they avoid social contact and refuse social connections with others, as well as lacking in initiative to seek help, making it difficult to understand, approach, and help them (Teo, 2012; Liu et al., 2021). In addition, due to the lack of, or decrease in social skills, they are most often incapable of, or unwilling to earn their own living (Yong, 2008). Therefore, most SWers are under financial stress and live a difficult life. Although some of them work at low paying and insecure part-time jobs, they fall into non-standard employment, having unstable income as they age, thus making it harder for them to fit into mainstream culture, which further exacerbates their already marginalized social status (Toivonen et al., 2011).

Much of the existing studies on SW have been conducted in high-income and developed countries. Likewise, China, having experienced rapid development and sharing similarities with other high-income countries, has attracted the attention of some scholars who noted that SW is indeed an issue in Mainland China (Wong et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2021). According to Wong (2009), urban living can induce SW, characterized by individualization, technological advancement, internationalized socioeconomic conditions, and higher levels of education. Adding to this, while not exactly SW, Feng et al. (2024) noted that as of 2022, 24.6% of Chinese youth suffered from depression, and that urbanicity was one of the causes. In addition, Wong et al. (2015) attribute Asian cultural values as instrumental in increasing the likelihood of SW, as parents allow their children to be harbored within their home even after graduation from university, and SWers are more lenient toward parental dependency upon adulthood. Given the above, we put our focus on China. China has undergone very rapid economic, technological, and education development within the last couple decades, all of these factors relating to SW, and it has been especially hard hit from the economic hardships arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have further exacerbated the SW situation.

Due to the avoidant and hidden nature of SWers, researchers have found it difficult to approach willing participants in their studies. Hence, there is a lack of scholarly accounts about their inner worlds and experiences (Hareven et al., 2022), and a fuller understanding of their thoughts and states has yet to be adequately probed. Therefore, such limitations warrant novel methodological solutions to access the psyche of SWers. Though many confine themselves to their rooms while engaging in solo activities, studies have noted that SWers may reveal their emotions and inner thoughts through virtual means, such as chatting and engaging with anonymous people online (Yong, 2008; Li & Wong, 2015b). Thus, tapping into their internet activities may potentially offer researchers an optimal opportunity through which to better learn about the world of SWers through first-hand information.

Qualitative research allows researchers to gain access to hidden populations, such as vulnerable groups, and to investigate human experiences within personal and social contexts (Maher & Dertadian, 2018). Li and Wong (2015a) suggested that web-based online document analysis can be effective in gathering such data. While SW people may be unwilling to engage in surveys and interviews, they do commonly communicate via the internet (Wong, 2009; Wong et al., 2015) and even seek help and support from the web (Wong et al., 2015), such as through online support groups. These groups offer blogs for SW people to share both emotional and informational content (Tsai et al., 2018). Blog data is considered to be primary and naturally occurring, and neither influenced nor hindered by the presence of the researcher, such as through other mediums including interviews and surveys (Jones & Alony, 2008). Therefore, we chose to analyze blog entries by SW people on Chinese community websites as a means of data collection, while implementing thematic content analysis. Thematic analysis draws upon naturally occurring data and has been proven to be successful as a substitute for surveys, interviews, and observations for targets who may shy away from such direct means of data collection (Ahmed, 2010; Nowell, et al., 2017). Therefore, our method of inquiry was not direct questioning of these subjects, for obvious reasons, but rather a more indirect approach through the collection, and thematic analysis, of blog data.

### 3. Research Questions

The primary objective of this study is to broaden the understanding of SW among youth in China, delving into aspects that have been under-explored in existing research. Specifically, our investigation is structured around three key aims. First, we seek to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lives of the SW population in China, with a particular focus on their living conditions and inner world. Second, we aim to identify the specific difficulties and challenges that SW youth currently face. Understanding these obstacles is crucial for developing targeted interventions that facilitate their reintegration into society. Third, building on the insights gained from exploring their lives and challenges, we hope to not only expand academic knowledge but also provide meaningful guidance for policymakers, social workers, and families working to address this pressing issue.

### 4. Method

#### 4.1. Data Collection

The criteria of data collection were generated based on the definition and results of previous studies. First, the SW subject must have been mainly at home for at least three months. Although there is no consensus on the SW threshold, which is commonly assumed to be three or six months, in order not to overlook information of blogs between 3–6 months, we used three months as the threshold (Dziesinski, 2003; Lee et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2021; Wong, 2009; Wong et al., 2015). Second, according to the previous research findings, the reasons they documented in their blogs for SW should not predominantly be attributed to mental illness (Lee et al., 2013; Li & Wong, 2015b). Third, the target could either be unemployed or work sporadically, quitting after only a short time (e.g., *freeters* or free arbiters). Some targets reported no income, sometimes working by necessity in part-time jobs without any formal status or security. Fourth, the blog should include content related to their personal states during the SW period.

A total of 102 blogs met the above criteria during the data collection years (2018 thru 2021) and we asked for the consent of these blogs' authors for using their blogs as research material and promised that their information would be anonymous though their blogs and comments that would be visible to the public. Due to some authors no longer logging into the website or having deleted their accounts, they could not all be contacted, thus a total of 68 authors agreed to allow us to use their blogs. Word counts ranged from 170 to 14,598 (84,851 words in total), and 269 comments were used from those posted under these blogs on the online support groups of Douban (the largest Chinese community website, providing group communication services) and Zhihu (a high-quality Q & A community and internet platform for creating original content). Collectively, this data was collected and then merged into a word document. These blogs include content about different aspects of the SWer's states, such as their relationships, financial situations, and daily life.

#### 4.2. Data Analysis

All blogs are in Chinese, and the data was analyzed by the first and second authors, who are both native Chinese speakers. The blogs were first translated from Chinese to English by the first author and subsequently were checked by the second and third author. All steps were carried out under the supervision of the third author, from January 2022 to February 2023 aided by NVIVO 10. Braun and Clarke's (2006)'s six-phase thematic analysis was adopted in this study as their guide is straightforward and explains why each step is essential to this method. First, we read through and familiarized ourselves with all the collected data. During this process, we searched for patterns in the data and noted down a list of initial ideas for later code generation, for example, some blogs described SWer's lives, while others focused primarily on their emotions. Second, we identified meaningful features from their descriptions, sentence by sentence, through reading and re-reading the original data and grouping related features to initial codes. For example, some people described feeling arm soreness during SW due to infrequent activity, so we identified this as a physical feature that occurs during SW life. Consequently, we referred to this feature as a body side effect, and then after other features were generated, we compared such instances with other features and coded this feature as "consequence". We carried out the first two steps separately and discussed them after we generated all the codes. For different codes, we re-visited the original data and the features, re-coded them and engaged in thorough discussions until a consensus was achieved. For example, the second author initially categorized low material desire as a financial status, but after revisiting the blog data and engaging in further discussion, we concluded that it was more accurately a consequence of their SW life. Then we checked all the codes to ensure that they were relevant to the data. Third, we sorted different codes to potential themes using maps. During this process, we mapped our sub-themes and themes, discussed and reviewed our codes and features multiple times, and ultimately formed our framework of themes. And we also checked the themes and

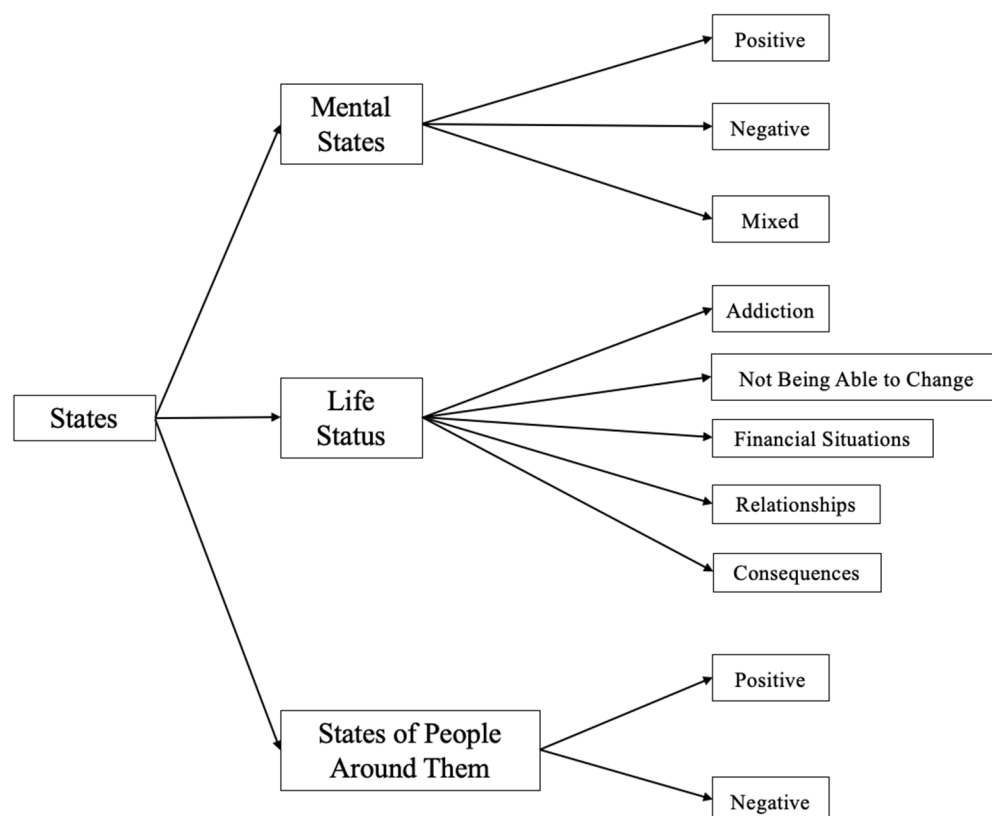
sub-themes to ensure we had covered all codes, and once there were no new themes and sub-themes present, saturation was established. Fourth, we reviewed the data and refined some themes, for example, at first, we classified feelings of loneliness under the theme of life status, but later on, after reviewing the theme of mental states and consulting the literature on mental states, we agreed that it would be more appropriate to categorize it under “mental states”. Fifth, we officially named the themes and sub-themes. Sixth, we organized our themes and sub-themes, along with explanations and details for each theme, and compiled them into a report.

## 5. Results

The founder of the online support group on Douban used the term “NEET = Not in Employment or Training” and designated the group as the “Chinese SW Association” in Japanese (中国引きこもり協会, CHK), which is prominently displayed on the homepage. All blog entries included in the study met the established collection criteria, such as all authors explicitly stating their duration of SW, all of which exceeded three months. Although demographic details of these bloggers are unavailable, as blogs constitute naturally occurring data, according to Douban’s data release in September 2023, the user base is predominantly aged between 25 and 34, with no gender distribution information provided. In terms of Zhihu’s users, the profile in 2023 shows that 70% of users were concentrated between the ages of 18–35, with 60% being male users. Two main overarching themes emerged during the analysis and discussion of the collected data.

### 5.1. Theme 1: States

The contents of the blogs were extracted and organized into two main themes. The first theme dealt with the SW bloggers’ personal states, named “States”, which were later subcategorized into “Mental States”, “Life Status”, and “States of People Around Them”. Figure 1 depicts our thematic analysis based on these three subcategories.



**Figure 1.** Theme 1 and the Sub-themes.

#### 5.1.1. Mental States

*Negative states.* Some individuals expressed feelings of guilt and numbness about their SW life, often accompanied by negative emotions such as anxiety and depression. For instance, some authors stated in their blogs:

*I stayed in the rental house, feeling very angry, denying myself, and a sense of decadence. (Blog 48)*

*Most of the time, my mentality collapses, and my body and mind are very unhealthy. In severe cases, I don't want to wake up every day. Dawn is the thing I fear most, and I especially expect the arrival of every night, because it can alleviate my sense of guilt.* (Blog 15)

Some even resort to alcoholism to escape this state:

*When it's (my state) serious, I got drunk every day, bottles all over the floor, I was frustrated.* (Blog 15)

Although they actively or passively reduce or even cut off contact with people around them, some of them still feel lonely.

*I sometimes even chat with the person who called to scam for a while.* (Comment 23)

Some are looking for friends online, eager to have someone to share their life and to chat with:

*Is there any chat room here? I want to talk.* (Blog 58)

*Another day of SW, I really want to confide in someone, because I am very lost and lonely by myself.* (Blog 43)

Some even recruit friends in the online support group:

*Make friends sincerely, both boys and girls are OK. Just talk to me. I have many thoughts in my mind.* (Comment 45)

Moreover, some authors describe their suicidal thoughts in their blogs, some of which involve extreme attempts or actions that are very dangerous and should not be taken lightly. We found three situations:

- (1) The expression of death thoughts is just a way to vent their emotions. They are under great pressure, and they may think:

*Living is really not easy at all. It seems like you can only watch yourself go downhill, sinking deeper and deeper into the abyss, but you have no way out. I have been wanting to die for a long time.* (Blog 16)

- (2) They tend to self-destruct and think that death is a way of release or escape. However, because they still have hope and loved ones and are unwilling to die like this, at present, they only have intentions rather than actions.

*Death doesn't seem so terrible. On the contrary, I can get spiritual relief and physical and mental peace, but considering the love of my family, I think I should live.* (Blog 1)

However, such people are still at high risk of suicide.

- (3) Some described not only the intention to die, but also the tendency to take action. Some even tried to commit suicide but failed:

*I once swallowed a bottle of melatonin (sleeping pills are strictly controlled in China), but I didn't die.* (Blog 53)

These people are prone to taking self-destructive actions and require great attention and intervention.

*Positive states.* On the other hand, some may take a break from punctuality, heavy work, and stress, and are enjoying their SW life. And most of these types have a regular lifestyle and a happy mood:

*The second time (SW) was after resigning last year, I planned to take a break for a while, but before I knew it, I took a year off. During this time, I almost did everything I wanted to do, and I didn't need to answer a phone call, I didn't have to worry about work anymore. I got up whenever I wanted. I finally understand that every day and every moment make up our lives. Life is not about an end, but about paying attention to our current feelings.* (Blog 9)

*Mixed states.* We found that their mental state is not a binary of positive and negative aspects, but a continuum of varying degrees, and in the middle of this continuum, there is a coexistence of positives and negatives. For example:

*When I am positive, I feel like I am not hindering others and enjoying my life well. When I am negative, I feel like I am a cancer and a waste of society.* (Blog 10)

We believe this may be related to their endorsement of SW and is fluid rather than fixed and unchanging. Some individuals, for instance, may initially experience a sense of positivity and relief in their SW lifestyle. However, as time progresses, they often begin to feel increasingly anxious or emotionally numb about their future. Though the exact duration before these negative states and emotions emerge remains unclear, it is evident that the initial sense of liberation can gradually give way to more troubling psychological responses.

*SW is very enjoyable, but gradually I also feel unreconciled, hating myself while unable to control my decadence.* (Blog 23)

And when they hold a relatively positive view of SW, recognizing its value or significance, they tend to experience a considerably more fulfilling period during their SW. They treat it as their time to rest, heal, or even seek life goals and meaning.

*I don't regret this period (SW). I have done everything I wanted to do, and the torment of five years of being corporate cattle does require some gap time to heal myself.* (Blog 42)

On the other hand, those who do not embrace this state often perceive this period as a squandering of time and youth, even viewing it as a dark chapter or a stain on their lives. Typically, these individuals tend to be in a more negative emotional and psychological state.

*Wasting a whole year at the best age in my twenties is a failure. Every day, I relied on games and novels, lived aimlessly, and became increasingly decadent.* (Blog 26)

### 5.1.2. Life Status

*Addicted to SW.* For some young people, returning to their room is more like an escape and self-protection. Many SWers seek refuge from reality through online games and fiction, immerse themselves into idealized virtual realms that contrast with the real world, and are unable to break the cycle. Giving up reality seems easier and more accessible than confronting it.

*My previous life (SW) was like a drug, and once I started, it was so difficult to quit.* (Blog 22)

*This (SW) is like drug use, it's easy and simple to feel satisfied. She (the author's girlfriend is a SWer) spends her days aimlessly, relying on e-books, mobile games, and endless TV dramas, living in her own small world.* (Blog 35)

*Not being able to change.* Many young people are not satisfied with or endorse their current SW life, thinking that it is a waste of time. They also have thoughts of changing their state or going out, but most SWers have not put such thoughts into action or cannot persist in their actions. They seem to suffer from inertia, and it is difficult to adjust their pattern through their own effort.

*I am not satisfied with the current life, and I also want to change, but I am still in the stage of thinking.* (Blog 27)

*I play with my phone during the day and stay up late emotionally at night. I know that this (SW) is not a solution, but I just don't want to change, maybe I just don't know what to do, or maybe it's because I subconsciously fear change.* (Blog 63)

This finding resonated with a previous study that found the participants felt powerless over their situation and could not change the SW state (Yong, 2008).

*Financial situations.* Basically, there are four types of SWers' financial states in this study.

- (1) Some of them live on their own savings from their previous job or money earned from other sources.

*I rely on my previous savings, live on interest, have low material desires, and I don't eat much either.* (Blog 5)

- (2) Some live with their parents and rely on their parents for living expenses or are supported by their siblings or friends.

*My friends support me, and my family can also give me some money.* (Blog 21)

Some people even have romantic partners and get the financial support from their partners.

*I rely on my boyfriend to support my daily expense.* (Blog 31)

- (3) Some SWers occasionally come out to take on part-time jobs or work for a few months, while others turn to freelancing or managing finances from home when they run out of money.

*After becoming a SWer, I work for no more than six months each time. When I have money to live, I don't go out to work. At the SW, my expenses are very small.* (Blog 37)

*I used my savings to invest in the stock market, the market was good, and the profit was barely enough to cover a month's expenses.* (Blog 61)

- (4) Some people who are short of money, but who are unwilling or unable to go out to work or make money at home, may borrow money on the internet (online loans). In most cases they are heavily in debt, which is very dangerous because they do not have the ability to repay their loan.

*I always stay in a rental house, using credit cards and Huabei (online loan platform) for consumption, and I have a lot of debt.* (Blog 56)

*I have been living in seclusion at home for half a year, heavily in debt, with a bunch of debt collection calls. This is despair.* (Blog 64)

In general, they try to keep their material desires low and reduce living expenses to maintain a living.

**Relationships.** Previous studies showed that the SWers are not able to maintain personal relationships with others (Nagata et al., 2013; Teo, 2010; Teo & Gaw, 2010) or with those outside family members (Hattori, 2006; Suwa & Suzuki, 2013) or only have online friends (Li & Wong, 2015b). This study also found a similar situation:

*In reality, it (SW) has been a few years, and I have no friends anymore.* (Comment 92)

*I only maintain necessary interpersonal communication and do not take the initiative to contact others, so I tend to avoid interpersonal communication.* (Blog 27)

However, this finding is not generalizable to all cases. We also found that some people can maintain relationships with others and even cultivate some intimate relationships. As mentioned in some previous blog examples, some SWers receive psychological and financial support from their close friends or romantic partners.

*My boyfriend has been with me for the past two years' (SW). He comforted me and didn't complain about me, but he didn't want me to do nothing. He was self-disciplined and diligent, but after spending too much time with me, he also became bedridden all day playing with his phone, doing nothing.* (Blog 12)

*I have been with boyfriend since last year, both my parents and boyfriend take care of all my expenses.* (Blog 33)

**Consequences.** We found several consequences of being SW; however, not everyone will have all of the following consequences.

- (1) They feel a decline in their abilities and skills, including poor memory, slow thinking, and decreased language communication skill.

*The biggest problem SW brings me is severe degradation of language function. If I go out now, I have to deal with things like talking, which I find quite difficult. Before I speak, I always feel very nervous and tired, so I never make phone calls.* (Blog 31)

*My thinking becomes dull, my reaction has slowed down, and I am not able to concentrate.* (Blog 33)

This may be due to the absence of face-to-face contact, which leads to further deskilled communication and socialization, and, accordingly, heightening both negative self-perceptions and objective isolation (Wong, 2009).

- (2) They have lost the sense of time and feeling that time is static (Yong, 2008).

*It's already 10 pm every day when I start thinking about doing something.* (Blog 5)

*I locked myself in my room like a pig for a whole day, without even having the concept of a whole day.* (Blog 19)

- (3) They feel that their desires have decreased, their emotions have become apathetic (Teo, 2010), and gradually they no longer have any interest in anything.

*I used to be very anxious, but now I don't feel anything anymore. I have no facial expressions every day and even do not have emotions when watching TV dramas.* (Blog 37)

*I'm not interested in anything anymore, I feel like the whole world doesn't exist anymore.* (Blog 64)

- (4) They become socially phobic and afraid of communicating with others.

*I have withdrawn for a year and can no longer communicate with people. And I have become socially phobic. I don't want to interact with people.* (Blog 8)

*I have been at home for a long time and I am extremely afraid of socializing and communicating with others.* (Blog 62)

- (5) They feel that their physical health has been affected and their body is getting worse (Nakagaito et al., 2010; Yuen et al., 2018; Nonaka & Sakai, 2021).

*I'm not in a good state, so I overeat and get sick.* (Blog 62)

*At SW, I play my phone and read fictions every day. I cannot lift my entire arm, and my waist still hurts. My body is getting worse and worse.* (Blog 33)

- (6) They have lost confidence and become insecure.

*I always feel that I'm the only one trapped in the same place, and I completely lose confidence in myself.* (Blog 51)

*Long term unemployment has left me feeling very unconfident. I am so anxious that I have a headache and can't fall asleep. The thought of one day I have to work makes me scared. (Blog 20)*

- (7) Some people have suicidal thoughts and are at risk of suicide (Yong, 2008).

*I stayed at home and wanted to die, but I didn't have the courage. Now that I'm standing on the rooftop, I want to jump off. (Blog 25)*

*I was disgusted with myself. I've been lying by the window several times, wanting to end (my life). (Blog 40)*

### 5.1.3. The States of People around Them

*Positive/supportive state.* As mentioned earlier, some people in this study are able to maintain relationships, and their family and friends around them have different attitudes and behaviors towards their SW. Some family members and friends choose to support and encourage them and are willing to help them go out and return to normal life.

*My friend advised me, "you must do something that makes you proud. This thing can give you endless confidence. Whenever you think of it, you will feel invincible." Every time I think of his advice, I feel much calmer and think it's time to do something. (Blog 2)*

*I have supportive parents who send me to study abroad and use money to fill the gap between me and normal people. I often think about what I would be like now and whether I could return to normal life on my own without the opportunity given by my parents. The answer is no. (Blog 3)*

However, there are also people who express that close people will be negatively affected.

*I live with my boyfriend, to be precise, he takes care of me. He always encourages me and wants me to be better, but sometimes my negative emotions can affect him, and I am dragging him down. (Blog 60)*

*Negative state.* In addition to positive social support, there are also people around them who cannot understand, feel helpless, anxious, disappointed, and even discriminate against them.

*I don't have a job, and everyone looks down on me. My dad has a relative who says I am useless, and my friends also say that I haven't made any progress in these years. (Blog 54)*

Some parents feel embarrassed and ashamed, and they cannot accept their children's SW.

*This (SW) is very embarrassing. Relatives will pry into it, "Their child is staying at home and not going out." My parents are very embarrassed in their social circle. (Blog 68)*

Even some parents attempt to use verbal and behavioral violence to force them to get back to social life.

*My mom said that people who can't make money are not even as good as dogs. (Blog 58)*

*My mother said that people who can't go out to work are useless people and garbage of society. In the past four months, she asked my dad to break the door lock of my room four times, and he kicked and broke it every time I changed the door lock; My parents belittle me to the mud, they scold me very harshly. She says I'm just a lowly person, and if I don't go out and do things, there's no need for me to live in this world anymore. She says she gave birth to a monster (me). (Blog 59)*

And the negative attitude and treatment of those around them may increase their mental burden, making them feel even more isolated and helpless.

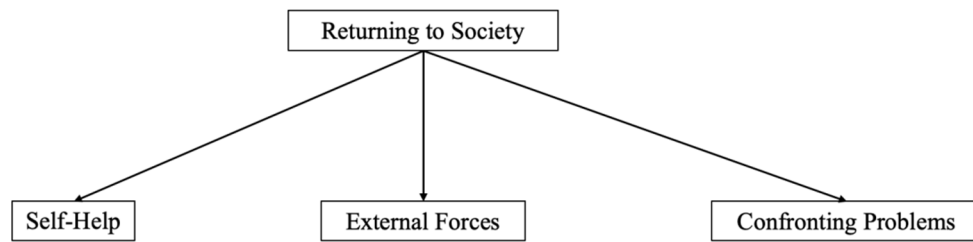
*I feel like my parents are driving me crazy. (Blog 59)*

*My family still believes in those self-help quotes, and all you can feel is strong loneliness and helplessness. (Blog 24)*

## 5.2. Theme 2: Returning to Society

The second theme we extracted pertained to "Returning to Society". The contents were sorted into subcategories of "Self-Help", "External Forces", and "Confronting Problems". This theme was derived from self-narrative blogs of people who have already returned to society or who are struggling to take action. From their descriptions, we glimpsed the difficulties and challenges they face in their return and some helpful suggestions for their doing so. Figure 2 depicts our analysis.





**Figure 2.** Theme 2 and the Sub-themes.

### 5.2.1. Self-Help

Some young people describe that at some point, they recalled the past when they didn't retreat and worked hard, and they realized how different their situation was, and then made up their mind to change their SW state.

*I started wanting to change by realizing that I seemed to have lost the courage to face difficulties, couldn't withstand any setbacks, and whenever faced with challenges, I felt like I couldn't do it or even didn't try. I really look down on myself like this. When I read the notes, I had taken while preparing for the graduate entrance exam, I even feel sorry for the hard work I put in at that time. (Blog 41)*

Many are neither proud nor appreciative of their SW status and feel stressed and think they should not spend the rest of their lives at home being SWers, and they have anxiety and expectations for themselves and the future inside their heart.

*I am proud to be a so-called prestigious school student. I consider myself a talented person, although there are many shortcomings compared to others, there are also many advantages; Therefore, I still have requirements for myself and expectations for my future. (Blog 4)*

*After a lot of things, I don't want to continue like this (SW) anymore. I want to change this situation as soon as possible. (Blog 17)*

Many members of the online Douban group have documented their arduous struggles and emotional journeys in detail. They constantly encouraged themselves and persevered to complete their transformation.

*I want to record my life and some thoughts every day. I don't want to be sleep-walking anymore. I want to record both good and bad things and change myself step by step. (Blog 26)*

In this transformative process, it is not just about making a firm decision to go out and complete it smoothly, but there are also some days when SWers are discouraged and then return to SW. Transforming is not always filled with enthusiasm and positive emotions and they do not accomplish the change at once, but sometimes they can also become lazy and negative, and even have the idea of giving up efforts to continue SW.

*I came back (to record my blog) and after avoiding for a while, I finally decided to face myself. (Blog 34)*

The process of returning to society is full of repetition and fluctuations (Coles, 1995; Walther et al., 2002; Wong, 2009).

### 5.2.2. External Forces

Sometimes external uncontrollable factors are also important reasons for some people to come out of the house, with the most common being economic factors. No matter how low their desires may be, they always have to maintain their daily expenses, and when the money they have cannot support their SW life, they have no choice but to come out to make money.

*I only came out to work when I ran out of money. When I had some money, I stayed at home for nine years. (Blog 11)*

*During my two years at home, I owe 160,000 yuan (Approximately equivalent to \$22,500), and in the end, I had to grit my teeth and look for a job. (Comment 12)*

Some people re-entered society after being given the opportunity to change.

*I finally found a job, although I don't earn much, I can leave home after all. (Blog 7)*

### 5.2.3. Confronting Problems

Some people are not completely detached from SW psychologically, and they are likely to return home again after encountering difficulties and setbacks.

*I resigned from that job after only three months because I had to spend three hours commuting, taking frequent business trips, and handling customer issues. I was exhausted and had no choice but to resign. I continued to live my carefree and joyful days without seeing the sunshine (day and night reversed) days. (Blog 52)*

Some people admit that even after returning to social life, they still want to quit their job or just go back home.

*I can't adapt to work and want to go home again. (Blog 28)*

*I think if I don't resign, I will work here for a lifetime. When I think of this, I even want to die. (Blog 56)*

Some people have experienced repeated SW, such as an author who retreated to their dormitory due to campus (verbal) bullying before, who still cannot overcome the impact now.

*In recent years, I have changed jobs repeatedly, and I have changed many jobs, some of which lasted for over two years, while others lasted for several months or even days before resigning. (Blog 65)*

*We believe that psychological SW is the root cause of the risk of repeated SW. That period was really no different from SW, it was just a change of place, I just went from retreating at home to retreating at the company (almost doing nothing). I feel like if this continues, I will be useless, like boiling a toad in warm water. (Blog 66)*

Only by getting rid of SW psychologically, and giving them the motivation to take action, can SWers truly return to society and maintain social activities and maybe live a positive and satisfying life.

In addition to the difficulties they themselves face when returning to society, such as negative emotions and repetition of SW, there are also some environmental factors that are not conducive to their return. Some young people stay at home after graduation, without work experience and losing their status as fresh graduates (fresh graduates have the advantage of campus recruitment in China), so they may have a hard time finding a position in society. The frequent job resignations of some freeters or SWers can significantly hinder their future career prospects, not to mention the additional challenges posed by a gap period in their employment history. The pace of education in China is tense, with low tolerance for gaps and age restrictions on job hunting. Therefore, it may also result in individuals who have been absent for some time losing their eligibility for further education or job search.

*I wanted to do a part-time job making milk tea during the pandemic last year, and they only recruit those under 28 years old. (Blog 43)*

*HR contacted me. Some say my work experience is too complicated, some ask me why I resigned frequently, and some simply say that I can only be recommended as a fresh graduate because I don't have much longtime work experience. (Blog 65)*

At the same time, many job recruitments in China clearly state the age limit for application. Some people who have been staying at home for many years do not have an age advantage and face great difficulties in returning to social activities,

*(Freeters) can only be employed until around the age of 35, as most part-time jobs do not hire people over 35. Frequent resignations are no good to career development and salary will not increase either, so there will be no savings. (Blog 28)*

They find it hard to be accepted by society and companies.

### 5.3. Purpose of Joining the Group

Finally, we summarized the motivations why SWers joined their SW online support group.

- (1) Some people registered on the group because they want to seek a sense of belonging.

*Looking at your posts (blogs), I feel like I'm not alone anymore. I've been struggling for a long time before. (Blog 24)*

*(I) also hope to be accepted by others. Everyone needs a sense of belonging, but somehow, it's awkward to get along with others (in real life). (Blog 55)*

- (2) Some people use this group's blogs as a way to document their lives and the process of self-help and vent their emotions.

*I am writing this thing (blog) because I have something on my mind that I need to find a tree hole (way) to spill out. (Blog 65)*

*I keep a record of what I do every day, hoping not to regret wasting this time. The focus of my record is to take care of myself every day, ensure progress every day, and aim to feed myself. (Blog 5)*

- (3) Some people encounter problems with SW and come to the group to consult with people who have the same situation.

*How to maintain a good mentality during SW? I feel anxious every day. (Comment 6)*

*I would like to ask, how do you pay for your social security. (Comment 11)*

- (4) Some are former SWers and shared their SW experiences and provided others with some advice and methods.

*Although you are in the SW state, you should have some learning goals or hobbies, and secondly, try to maintain some social interaction with people as much as possible. (Blog 50)*

*If you are already stuck in SW, I suggest letting go of your psychological burden first. You should exercise your body, go for a run, and run every day until you feel empowered and not so useless. When you feel like you can persist in doing something well, the change in your mindset is extremely powerful and has a profound impact. (Blog 67)*

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. General Discussion

As noted earlier, SW is a phenomenon that has been reported in many different countries (Watts, 2002; Wong, 2012; Hayward et al., 2008; Hareven et al., 2022) and it has emerged in Mainland China as well (Wong et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2021). However, to the best of our knowledge, there are few studies on SW in Mainland China, and it is absolutely necessary to fill in the missing parts for the big picture of SW. Therefore, we have proposed three research questions, focusing on investigating their living conditions and mental states, the challenges they encounter, as well as possible suggestions. Through our research, we have pieced together an understanding of their lives and circumstances, and have mapped out their life and states.

First, we found that their mental states operate along a continuum, as elaborated in 6.2. As for their living condition, our results indicate that SW constitutes an addictive state, with many individuals struggling to break free from it or frequently relapsing back into SW life. Some researchers also believe that the earlier the recognition and intervention, the better, and the longer the SW period remains, the more difficult it is to go out (Saito, 1998; Dziesinski, 2003; Hattori, 2006). Therefore, we assume that once avoidance behaviors, such as returning to SW life, are well-learned, they become habitual and difficult to abandon, thereby increasing the risk of repetition. Furthermore, many participants described feelings of powerlessness in altering their circumstances, while those who had successfully reintegrated into society and maintained active social participation provided retrospective accounts of their experiences. These narratives offer critical insights for developing effective strategies to better support them, which will be discussed in detail when addressing suggestions.

Additionally, most of the SW individuals are experiencing constrained financial circumstances, and the financial side effects of advanced internet has caught our attention. Nowadays, many things can be done through the internet without going out, such as food delivery and online shopping (Wong et al., 2019), which increases the likelihood of SWers not going out. Although SWers have low material desires, they still have to maintain a basic living after all. Especially, some young people do not want their parents to know about their SW states, or they do not want to be nagged or interrupted by their parents, thus they choose to live in seclusion in a rental house, which further burdens their financial situation. Due to the rapid development of internet financial services, internet applications and online payment platforms have become a convenient source of their living expenses by providing services of borrowing money without going out or collateral requirements. However, they have no ability to repay the accumulating debt, which becomes a huge mental burden, and even increases their suicide risk (Meltzer et al., 2011). Nowadays, different online lending channels are being launched on various e-payment platforms and applications, claiming to be interest free and unsecured, but actually, some of them are a form of online usury. They exploit regulatory loopholes, causing many people to fall into economic crises, and their convenience and accessibility may also become traps that lead SWers into even worse situations.

In terms of their relationships, in the past, some researchers argued that they did not have the ability to maintain relationships (Nagata et al., 2013; Teo, 2010; Teo & Gaw, 2010), while others argued that they could maintain basic necessary relationships but not intimate ones (Hattori, 2006; Suwa & Suzuki, 2013). Overall, they do not believe that they would have intimate relationships. However, in this study, we found that some people

have the ability to initiate or maintain intimate relationships, and even rely on their partners to provide for them. Some SW individuals' partners try to help them return to social life, while others are negatively influenced by their partners. A notable case involves co-practitioners who adopt a rotational system, with two individuals alternating six-month part-time engagements. This innovative arrangement simultaneously addresses economic needs, maintains SW, and provides mutual psychosocial support. We still have no idea if these cases are caused by cultural differences or if there are unknown mechanisms that future research should explore, but all of these prove that at least some of them are not incapable or completely unwilling to establish connections and maintain relationships with others. Future research to clarify the possible mechanisms may be able to effectively approach their inner world and find more effective ways to help them reintegrate into society.

Among the consequences brought by their SW lifestyle, we found that they not only suffer negative physical effects, but also experience a decline in abilities and skills such as verbal communication. Furthermore, they develop a fear of interaction and lose confidence. This may be due to the prolonged lack of diverse face-to-face interactions, which could lead to a gradual deterioration in young people's communication skills, thereby exacerbating negative self-perception and measurable social isolation (Wong, 2009). Notably, among these consequences, certain individuals exhibit suicidal ideation, with some developing actual suicidal behavior, which requires serious attention and urgent intervention.

In addition, our study pioneers the investigation into SW individuals' perspectives regarding how they perceive others' attitudes and reactions toward their SW, as well as the influence of these reactions on them. Notably, some participants who have successfully reintegrated into society reported that support and encouragement from their immediate social networks (including parents and friends) served as crucial motivators and facilitators in their return process. Conversely, those who encountered misunderstanding, negative attitudes, or even violent reactions from their social circles found these responses unhelpful at best, and at worst, an additional psychological burden to their already challenging circumstances. Mirroring other Asian nations, traditional Chinese culture places the onus of parental retirement hopes on their offspring, accompanied by heightened expectations for their children's achievements. This cultural expectation imposes immense pressure on young individuals, particularly those born under China's one-child policy (1979–2015). These individuals are often viewed as the only hope of their family to improve family's social status and take care of their parents in their twilight years through the attainment of success. Such cultural values are believed to contribute to severe SW (Furlong, 2008; Wong, 2009). The young people's SW conflicts with their parents' expectations and aspirations for them, leading to parental misunderstanding, lack of support, and even violent attempts to "correct" their SW. Such negative reactions from those around them may potentially exacerbate their psychological distress and worsen their mental health conditions.

In pursuit of our secondary research aim, we have also identified some of the difficulties and the challenges SWers face in reintegrating into society. For instance, SW has had negative impacts on their physical, psychological, and professional abilities, making them hesitant and unwilling to step out and re-engage in interpersonal relationships and social life. Furthermore, objective factors in the social environment also prevent them from getting a fresh start. For example, societal restrictions on employment age and the demand for work experience have turned their gap periods into reasons for being eliminated or dismissed. Many have shared the difficulties they encountered when trying to find new jobs and rebuild their lives, and some have even given up on moving forward, opting instead to return to SW life.

Therefore, in terms of our third aim, we propose several practical suggestions. In this study, some reintegrated young individuals suggested that SWers require understanding, tolerance, respect, attentive listening, and companionship. Prior studies have similarly documented that some social workers invested extended time and specialized efforts to effectively engage with SW populations (Liu et al., 2021). It may be essential to adopt a persistent and patient approach to build trust with them, laying the groundwork for future assistance, despite the considerable time and effort this entails. Consequently, the establishment of specialized institutions and the training of professional personnel are imperative.

Moreover, this study reveals that the reintegration process is often fraught with challenges. Those assisting SWers should be psychologically prepared for potential setbacks and emotional fluctuations, as SWers may occasionally contemplate reverting to withdrawal or giving up. It is crucial not to be disheartened by these occurrences. At times, the lack of understanding and negative reactions from parents and family members can exacerbate the SWers' sense of isolation, potentially driving them further into the virtual world as an escape from real-life relationships. Some parents may resort to coercive or violent behaviors, which only intensify the psychological strain and harm without altering the SWers' circumstances. Therefore, implementing family therapy to mediate familial emotions and manage domestic conflicts could be a beneficial initial step in aiding SWers and gaining their trust.

The government should also enact relevant laws and regulations to enhance the oversight and standardization of online lending practices. Additionally, initiating simple freelance work opportunities could provide SWers with financial support, enabling them to participate in social activities without the pressure of venturing outdoors, thereby alleviating their financial burdens.

The concept of delayed employment, which has garnered public attention in recent years, refers to the phenomenon where some college graduates opt for activities such as study tours, volunteer teaching, staying at home with their parents, or starting a business, rather than immediately seeking employment or further education post-graduation. This period allows young individuals to take the time to explore and reflect on their life paths, a practice that has been encouraged by the government. Society should foster a tolerant environment for such gaps and offer opportunities for delayed employment. For instance, many cities have set the age limit for talent recruitment at 30 years old. Such rigid criteria can impede employment opportunities and hinder SWers' reintegration into society. These restrictions should be relaxed to provide an equitable environment, offering SWers a chance to restart their lives and accommodating young people's desire for a gap period without pressuring them to hasten through their young adulthood.

## 6.2. Theory of SW Continuum

In the past, although studies have mostly focused on the negative aspects brought about by SW (Hattori, 2006; Baggio et al., 2015; Chauliac et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2021), while some scholars have proposed a dual perspective on this issue (Li & Wong, 2015b). This study found that there is a continuum of positive and negative aspects rather than a binary opposition, based on the SWers' descriptions. We assume that this is related to the degree of endorsement they have towards their SW state. The more positive their evaluation of SW is, for example, when they consider it a lifestyle state they have chosen to enjoy, or when they view SW as a temporary rest and relaxation for the purpose of recharging and finding themselves, they usually do not regret their SW time and live a positive and happy life during their SW. On the contrary, when they see SW as a manifestation of their own failure and cowardice, believing that SW is a waste of time and youth, or a negative state that they have no choice or no way to change, they usually experience high levels of stress, anxiety, depression and relevant negative emotions, and they usually live a poor life during the SW. However, the state during SW is not fixed and unchanging. Some people start with ease and relief, but later become anxious and worried about their future; Some individuals experience a sense of happiness and relaxation during the day as they engage in leisure activities, but at night, they are overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and self-reproach for their lifestyle choices. These cases are a combination of negativity and positivity and are in the middle part of the continuum.

## 6.3. Theory of Psychological Social Withdrawal (PSW)

Most previous studies concentrated on the characteristics of physical seclusion, such as the duration and space the SWers confine themselves in, while little has been studied in psychological aspects. Some scholars suggest that the psychological dimension, is much more important than focusing on the physical seclusion aspect of the phenomenon (Goodman et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2015). As mentioned earlier, we found that although some people have resumed social activities, they still cannot escape the influence of SW in their hearts. Some people may even withdraw again or already have experienced repeated SW, while others are students who may not have dropped out but still withdraw in their dormitories.

*I gave up on myself, lying in my dormitory without going out or attending classes every day. (Blog 10)*

*I basically didn't attend any classes during my four years of undergraduate studies. I crammed for exams and sometimes I failed. I stayed in my dormitory all night playing games, watching American TV series, and I did not eat regularly. I didn't want to see people or think about things after graduation. After graduation, I didn't look for a job and rented a single room next to the school, waiting to die every day. (Blog 21)*

The commonalities among these people are that although they participate in social activities or have a legitimate social status, they have little interest in social activities, lack motivation and confidence in persisting in social activities, and even feel pain towards social activities. They have the same avoidant state as SW. At least according to the current criteria of SW, they do not meet the criterion of physical seclusion. Therefore, we believe that SW does not necessarily have to be based solely on objective isolation as a standard. Similarly, the criterion for their successful return to society cannot simply be based on their participation in social activities. Only when they truly get rid of PSW can they be motivated to participate in social activities and overcome their avoidance

mentality and seclusion tendency. Future research could also develop a scale to measure PSW to identify SW more accurately and test whether the support and help to them is truly effective.

#### 6.4. Limitations of the Study

This study analyzed blog archives over a given time period. This is the first limitation, as we only covered the years 2018 thru 2021. While the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic were covered, the most intense economic impact did not hit China until the post-pandemic era. The latest unemployment figures for youth between ages 16 to 24 have been reported to be 18.8%, as the downturn in China's economy has become acute (CNBC, 2024). From these figures, it stands to reason that the number of SW youth would be on the increase, and as a result, more entries on the blogs can be anticipated. Of course, our research on the matter is ongoing, and perhaps a comparison of pre- and post-pandemic SW trends are in order.

A second limitation is that we could only account for those who were willing to disclose their situations on the internet. Perhaps those who show severe degrees of SW would not even bother to open themselves up on blogs, and our sample was indicative of only those on the borderline.

Third, while we only analyzed Chinese blogs, a cross-cultural comparison of similar blogs would put to light patterns that would be considered unique to the Chinese, versus universal SW. Although we proposed theory of SW continuum and theory of PSW based on the findings of this study, generalization and examination in other cultures are necessary. In addition, as we mentioned earlier, some SWers are able to build and maintain intimate relationships; whether this new finding is related to undiscovered mechanisms also needs to be verified by future research. Once again, our research should not stop here, and should be extended to include other cultures, particularly outside of the Asian region if we are to identify culture-specific versus culturally universal phenomena.

Fourth, we were unable to identify the gender of the SW bloggers, hence, gender differences could not be determined via our methodology. A mixed method including interviews or a survey are recommended to examine other factors and generalizability of the findings and theories.

Finally, it is also necessary to explore the influence of risky behaviors arising from SW, in particular internet addiction. The inability of SWers to have a steady job may result in financial hardship. Additionally, they may expose themselves to victimization to online fraud, online loans, and online gambling.

### 7. Conclusions

This study focused on the personal states of SW people in China as reflected in entries on SW community blogs. By leveraging online platforms and thematic analysis, this study not only advances the understanding of SW but also highlights the potential of digital spaces as valuable sources of data for studying hard-to-reach populations. Our work aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on SW in China and to offer constructive recommendations for assisting this group. The two themes—states of SWers and challenges of returning to society—contribute to a deeper understanding of their psychological and emotional states from their own perspectives, thereby offering direction for formulating recommendations.

Based on our findings, we have proposed practical recommendations to support SW individuals, including the establishment of specialized institutions, the adoption of family therapy, and the creation of more inclusive social policies. These measures aim to address both the internal struggles and external barriers faced by SW individuals.

For future research, we recommend employing a ground theory approach (GTA) to further develop and validate theoretical frameworks related to SW. This method would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, enabling researchers to build robust theories grounded in empirical data. By doing so, future studies can contribute to the development of more effective strategies to support socially withdrawn individuals and facilitate their reintegration into society.

#### Author Contributions

X.Z.: conceptualization, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, resources, visualization, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing; S.C.: formal analysis, investigation; J.T.: conceptualization, methodology, project administration, supervision, writing—review & editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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### Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable. This is archival research, hence human subjects review was not required since we were analyzing blogs, and not directly surveying people.

### Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

### Data Availability Statement

In adherence to data protection statutes, combined with binding confidentiality agreements established during informed consent procedures, the research team maintains strict protocol compliance that precludes public data disclosure.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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