



Studying Together Apart: Study-with-me Streams as Digital Emotional Infrastructure in an Isolation Crisis

Ivana Cimermanová

University of Prešov, Slovakia

Abstract

As student anxiety and loneliness have escalated in the smartphone era, Study-with-Me (SWM) streams have emerged as essential digital infrastructure providing emotional companionship and support. Whilst existing research documents the benefits for viewers, such as reduced isolation, improved self-regulation, and emotional safety, the experience of creators remains largely invisible. This paper shifts focus to the creators themselves, examining the human cost of providing digital emotional infrastructure. Drawing on an online questionnaire distributed to 66 active SWM creators across 18 countries, with responses received from 7 participants, the study identifies concerning patterns: 71.4% report experiencing burnout, 71.4% feel obligated to stream despite not wanting to, and 100% are aware of viewers developing emotional dependency on their streams. Yet none reported receiving training in mental health support, boundary-setting, or emotional labour management. The paper argues that whilst SWM mitigates students' isolation, it simultaneously creates an unsustainable burden on creators who have become de facto emotional support providers without professional qualifications or institutional recognition. These findings reveal a critical paradox: platforms designed to address a mental health crisis may inadvertently generate new forms of psychological vulnerability. The research suggests that future SWM sustainability requires structural supports, namely mental health resources, community moderation, and clearer role boundaries, rather than individual creator resilience.

Keywords: creator burnout, creator sustainability, digital mental health infrastructure, emotional labour, parasocial relationships, SWM

1 Introduction

The emergence of Study With Me (SWM) videos signifies a profound shift in the field of informal learning, operating as a vital digital bridge between solitary academic labour and communal support systems (Liu et al., 2026; Wang & Zhang, 2021; Ibtasar et al., 2022). Within the field of digital ethnography, these spaces are analysed not merely as passive media, but as strategically constructed, socially embedded environments that actively shape

contemporary student subjectivities. By transforming the historically private act of studying into a mediated performance, SWM videos provide a platform for students to navigate the rigorous demands of higher education through collective discipline.

As established by Liu et al. (2026), SWM videos are characterised by creators engaging in study-related tasks, such as intensive note-taking or working on digital devices, while purposefully obscuring the specific details of their materials. This content-agnostic approach allows the videos to function as a universal study atmosphere, attracting a diverse global audience ranging from secondary students to doctoral researchers. In 2023 alone, this genre garnered over 520 million views on YouTube (YouTube, 2024, as cited in Liu et al., 2026), highlighting its scale as a socio-cognitive phenomenon.

These streams have become, for many students, essential digital infrastructure: they provide virtual companionship, model discipline, structure study time, and offer emotional support during periods of intense academic stress. In this capacity, SWM content responds to a genuine and escalating crisis, the epidemic of anxiety and loneliness affecting Generation Z, exacerbated by smartphone-mediated isolation and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet whilst existing research extensively documents the benefits for viewers, the experience of creators remains largely invisible. Creators are individuals who stream for six or more hours weekly, who absorb viewers' emotional vulnerabilities, and who feel obligated to maintain consistency despite their own burnout. They have become the hidden infrastructure of digital mental health support. They function, de facto, as emotional support providers without training, professional boundaries, or institutional recognition. This research gap is the focus of the present paper.

2 Anxiety, Loneliness, and Digital Isolation: the Context for Virtual Study Communities

The contemporary student experience is marked by an “isolation crisis,” exacerbated by the mental health disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mastery of complex subjects is no longer viewed as a purely cognitive endeavour; it requires sophisticated emotional regulation. In solitary study environments, the absence of social cues can intensify feelings of being overwhelmed, leading to a reliance on “virtual companionship” to maintain focus.

Haidt (2024) argues that contemporary students belonging to Generation Z are experiencing an epidemic of isolation. He contends that the “Great Rewiring of Childhood” and the shift to a “phone-based” existence around 2012 eroded real-world, face-to-face community building. Drawing on Turkle's *Reclaiming Conversation* (2016), Haidt observes that life with smartphones means “we are forever elsewhere” (p. 4). Turkle further notes that constant task-switching produces a neurochemical illusion of productivity whilst degrading actual performance, and that sustained multitasking gradually erodes the capacity to read human emotions (p. 213).

Twenge (2026) demonstrates that in most countries school loneliness has increased and performance on standardised tests of mathematics, reading, and science has declined, particularly between 2012 and 2022. The decline in adolescent well-being and academic performance is not confined to individual countries but constitutes an international pattern, with the most pronounced deterioration observed in settings where teenagers had greater access to personal devices and reported spending more time on electronic devices during school hours for leisure purposes.

These findings suggest that heavy device use is not merely changing how young people behave socially, but may also be affecting how their brains and emotions develop. As Turkle's observations on multitasking imply, the constant fragmentation of attention reduces a young person's capacity to read others' emotions and manage their own, a concern echoed in research on the distracted student mind, which links pervasive device use to the erosion of focus and attention (Rosen, 2017). Understanding the nature of anxiety is therefore a necessary foundation for this study.

The literature distinguishes between several types of anxiety. Ordinary anxiety is a healthy response to perceived future threat, constituting an adaptive state of alertness when genuine dangers are present. An anxiety disorder, by contrast, develops when the brain's alarm system is chronically over-sensitised, causing a person to remain in a state of distress even in response to routine, non-threatening situations. Of particular relevance here is social anxiety and the associated concept of "social death": humans possess an evolved sensitivity to social threats such as ostracism or shaming, and for adolescents the prospect of social exclusion is often a more potent source of anxiety than physical threat. Related to this is collective anxiety, which refers to anxiety shared across a generation facing a common challenge. Haidt (2024) notes that whilst collective anxiety has historically served to bind communities together and motivate action, contemporary virtual-world activism frequently correlates with worse rather than better mental health outcomes.

According to Haidt (2024), the primary driver of the recent surge in adolescent anxiety is a radical transformation of childhood that occurred between 2010 and 2015, characterised by two converging trends: overprotection in the real world and underprotection in the virtual world. The transition of social life onto smartphones and social media platforms constitutes the single largest contributor to the rise in mental illness. This "Great Rewiring" introduced four interrelated harms: social deprivation (the displacement of in-person socialising and physical play by disembodied, asynchronous digital interaction); sleep deprivation; attention fragmentation; and behavioural addiction, driven by apps designed to exploit variable-ratio reinforcement schedules to maximise engagement.

Writing over a decade ago, Turkle (2011) observed that we increasingly expect more from technology and less from each other. Driven by human vulnerability, specifically the tension between loneliness and the fear of genuine intimacy, technology is used to engineer relationships that are controllable and low-risk. The outcome is a paradox: persistent connectivity coexisting with profound isolation.

3 Study with Me

The history of Study With Me (SWM) portals is characterised by a rapid evolution from a niche South Korean trend into a global digital phenomenon, primarily driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and the social needs of Generation Z (Hou et al., 2025; Ibtasar et al., 2022; Kim & Ryoo, 2024).

The genre originated in South Korea, where it is known as "Gongbang," developed as a means for students to adapt to an environment emphasising autonomous learning (Moore, 2024; Kim & Ryoo, 2024). From these Korean roots, the format gradually attracted an international audience, spreading across major digital platforms. SWM videos first appeared on YouTube in 2018 (Liu et al., 2024). A prominent figure in this early history was a South Korean creator nicknamed Bot-No-Jam, who in 2018 attracted over 321,000 subscribers by livestreaming study sessions averaging six hours in duration (Wang & Zhang, 2021). By 2019, SWM videos had accumulated 10 million views on YouTube (Ren et al., 2025), and

Laura Medley's *11 Hour Study with Me – Half Term Edition*, posted around the same year, has since garnered over 2.3 million views (Hodalska & Urbańczyk, 2025).

The pandemic accelerated this trajectory substantially. Forced into isolation, learners worldwide rapidly adapted to online study environments (Ibtasar et al., 2022), using SWM content as a substitute for the physical companions available in libraries and classrooms that had become suddenly inaccessible (Liu et al., 2024; Ren et al., 2025). Google Trends data indicate that interest in SWM content tripled between 2019 and 2024 (Ren et al., 2025). In China, the platform Bilibili emerged as a major hub: by 2018, 18.27 million people had studied on the platform, and by 2019, SWM had become the category with the longest total livestream duration on the site (Wang & Zhang, 2021).

What began as a pandemic-driven adaptation has since proved to have lasting appeal. By 2023, SWM videos had accumulated over 520 million cumulative views on YouTube, representing growth of more than 160% year-on-year (Kim & Ryoo, 2024; Liu et al., 2026). A 2023 report from Bilibili recorded 243 million people participating in shared online learning experiences on the platform (Hodalska & Urbańczyk, 2025). The channel Lofi Girl has become a landmark of the genre, reaching more than 14.7 million subscribers by 2024, with its most popular video exceeding 700 million views (Hou et al., 2025).

Table 1 presents a SWOT analysis of SWM portals based on the extant literature, illustrating how these virtual environments support independent learning whilst presenting particular challenges. It is based on selected sources (Hou et al., 2025; Ren et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2024; Kim & Ryoo, 2024; Kim & Ryoo, 2023; Wang & Zhang, 2021; Liu et al., 2026; Ibtasar et al., 2022; Haidt, 2024).

Table 1. Study With Me Portals SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
Enhanced intrinsic motivation and competence. SWM videos act as a modelling tool; observing a focused creator encourages viewers to internalise dedicated learning values and increases their own sense of confidence in finishing tasks. Increased learner autonomy. Users have the freedom to choose their preferred study ambiance, duration, and learning style, which is significantly associated with higher intrinsic motivation and lower perceived pressure. Lower perceived pressure. Experimental data show that participants feel significantly less pressure when studying with an SWM video compared to a physical companion, largely because the virtual presence is manageable and less intrusive. Virtual companionship and reduced loneliness. SWM provides a sense of “embodied” presence that alleviates the isolation of solitary study, making it a “safe haven” for students facing high academic stress. Improved environment structuring. Habitual users demonstrate a greater ability to organise their study space and adhere to strict schedules (such as the Pomodoro technique) compared to non-users.	Deficient social relatedness. Compared to physical companionship, SWM videos offer lower levels of relatedness and emotional connection because the interaction is asynchronous and often silent. Lack of pedagogical content. SWM videos contain no instructional material or knowledge transfer; they focus entirely on the process of studying rather than teaching specific subjects. Potential for performance anxiety. Some users may feel stressed by trying to match the intense, uninterrupted pace of the streamer, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy if they need more breaks. Risk of ritualistic learning. Long-term use can sometimes fall into a trap of “ritual performance,” where the student enjoys the aesthetic of studying without actually acquiring knowledge. Internal distractions. Features like background music, the presence of a creator’s pet, or chat notifications can add extraneous cognitive load and compete with study material for limited working memory.

Opportunities	Threats
Institutional Integration. Academic Libraries Can Leverage Studytubers' Videos To Create Virtual Tours, Promote Cosy Study Spaces, And Provide "Self-Service" Guides For Library Procedures To Reduce Librarians' Workloads. Support For Isolated Or Neurodiverse Learners. Swm Communities Offer Vital Social Reinforcement For Remote Students And Those With Conditions Like Adhd Who Require External "Body Doubling" To Maintain Focus. Developing Self-Monitoring Tools. The Time-Management Strategies In Swm (E.G., Screen Notifications And Timetables) Can Be Used To Design Formal Learning Dashboards And Support Systems. Strengthening Community Ties. Platforms Like Discord And Wechat Allow Swm Users To Transition From Passive Viewers To Active Members Of Private Study Groups That Provide Peer Supervision And Help-Seeking Opportunities.	Social "Involution" And Competition. The Popularity Of Swm Is Partly Driven By An "Introverted" Society Where Students Feel Constant Anxiety About Being Left Behind, Potentially Leading To Unhealthy Levels Of Competition. Cyberbullying And Malicious Comments. Creators, Especially Those Who Show Their Faces, Are Vulnerable To Harassment, Appearance-Shaming, And Doubts Regarding Their Actual Academic Motivations. Privacy And Security Risks. Expanding Interactions Beyond Public Platforms Into Private Social Media Groups (E.G., Wechat Ids) Poses Risks For Privacy Leaks. Digital Addiction. Although Intended For Study, The Use Of Smartphones And Social Media Platforms For Swm Can Lead To Fragmented Attention If Users Are Lured Into Non-Educational "Off-Ramps" By Platform Algorithms.

People stream and produce SWM content primarily to seek external supervision, which helps them regulate their own study behaviour through the perceived presence of an audience (Hodalska & Urbańczyk, 2025). Creating this content allows them to find like-minded study partners in a broader network, providing the emotional support and sense of belonging often absent during long periods of solitary study. Some creators are motivated by the desire to help and provide companionship to others, viewing the practice as a form of community contribution. Streaming also functions as an alternative form of self-monitoring: creators report a heightened sense of responsibility towards their study plans because they are observed in a public virtual space. Additionally, the practice enables creators to reflect on their study behaviours and benchmark their progress more objectively (Hodalska & Urbańczyk, 2025).

Viewers, in turn, use SWM portals to substitute for physical companions, accessing a sense of embodied presence that reduces the isolation of independent study (Ren et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2026; Ibtasar et al., 2022). These portals allow users to personalise their study environment at low cost, selecting specific settings, sounds, and aesthetics suited to individual preferences (Ren et al., 2025; Wang & Zhang, 2021; Lee et al., 2021). Many users engage with SWM content to sustain learning motivation and create a virtual classroom atmosphere that encourages sustained attention (Liu et al., 2024; Kim & Ryoo, 2024). SWM content provides a socio-emotional refuge for students under high academic pressure, offering comfort through the shared experience of others. Viewers frequently also seek relatable role models in creators, emulating disciplined study behaviours and drawing on structured time-management tools, such as Pomodoro timers, modelled in the videos (Ren et al., 2025; Ibtasar et al., 2022).

Yet this extensive literature on viewer benefits leaves a critical question unaddressed: what happens to the creators who provide this emotional infrastructure? As SWM has evolved from a productivity tool to an apparatus of emotional support, creators have accumulated responsibilities they did not anticipate. This gap is the focus of the present study.

4 Emotional Labour, Parasocial Relationships, and Creator Sustainability

The account of SWM creators developed here draws on three connected bodies of work: the sociology of emotional labour, research on parasocial interaction and relationships, and recent scholarship on labour and sustainability in the creator economy. The concept of emotional labour originates with Hochschild (1979), who argued that feelings are not simply private and involuntary but are managed according to social “feeling rules” that specify what a person is expected to feel in a given situation. Hochschild distinguished surface acting, in which outward expression is adjusted without any change in inner feeling, from deep acting, in which the person works to induce the feeling itself, and she showed that when this management of feeling is sold as part of a job it takes on the character of a commodity, as with the flight attendant trained to produce warmth on demand. Reviewing four decades of subsequent research, Gabriel et al. (2023) define emotional labour as the regulation of feelings and expressions performed to meet the interpersonal expectations of a work role, and they trace how the construct has expanded from face-to-face service work to a broad range of occupations. SWM creators fit this description closely. Streaming for long hours, sustaining an encouraging and disciplined on-screen presence, and absorbing viewers’ disclosures of stress and loneliness all require the regulation of feeling to meet an audience’s expectations, yet this work carries none of the training, recognition, or compensation attached to established emotional-labour occupations.

If emotional labour describes what creators do, the idea of the parasocial relationship describes the bond that this labour helps to produce. Horton and Wohl (1956) coined the term parasocial interaction for the one-sided sense of a face-to-face relationship that a viewer forms with a media figure who cannot reciprocate. In a systematic review spanning 1956 to 2023, Sheng et al. (2025) separate parasocial interaction, the in-the-moment impression of a two-way exchange, from the parasocial relationship, the enduring psychological connection that can build up across repeated encounters, and they argue that online platforms intensify both by offering frequent, informal, and seemingly personal contact. SWM is an unusually strong case of this process. Viewers spend hours in near-silent co-presence with the same creator, often daily and over long periods, and although little is said, the repetition and duration foster exactly the kind of durable connection that Sheng et al. describe. This helps explain why every respondent in the present study reported awareness of viewers who appeared emotionally dependent on their streams, and why viewers were seen to experience discomfort when a creator did not appear.

Once formed, the relationship has to be maintained, and here the notion of relational labour is useful. Extending Hochschild, Baym (2018) describes relational labour as the ongoing work of communicating with an audience over time in order to build and sustain the connections on which a creator’s activity depends. Glatt (2024) applies this idea to the influencer industry and shows that the costs of relational labour are not evenly shared: creators who disclose personal or stigmatised aspects of their lives, and those from marginalised groups, are drawn into what she calls an intimacy triple bind, in which the same self-disclosure that sustains an audience also exposes them to harassment and to what she terms weaponised intimacy. SWM creators typically trade in study routines rather than identity disclosure, so the most severe of these harms are less central to their case, but they too are expected to remain consistently available and personally present, and the present findings suggest that this expectation is felt as an obligation to stream even when they would rather not.

Finally, this study sits within a growing literature on the working conditions of the creator economy. Duffy and Wissinger (2017) show how popular accounts of social-media careers as fun, free, and authentic conceal the emotional labour, continuous self-branding, and always-

available entrepreneurial effort that such careers in fact demand, so that overwork is recast as a “labour of love” rather than recognised as labour. Thorne (2022) develops this critique in relation to creator burnout, arguing that burnout on platforms such as YouTube is not an individual failure to balance effort against reward but a structural feature of an economy that ties visibility, income, and self-worth to a relentless posting schedule. These accounts reframe the burnout and felt obligation reported by the creators in this study as the predictable result of providing an audience-facing, relationship-dependent service without the protections that recognised forms of care work carry, rather than as personal shortcomings. The same literature also notes that creators often find real satisfaction and identity in the work, which is consistent with the mixed picture reported below, in which burnout and obligation coexist with positive self-assessments.

Taken together, these three literatures reframe the research problem. Existing SWM research treats the creator largely as a stimulus that benefits viewers, whereas emotional-labour, parasocial, and creator-economy perspectives direct attention to the creator as a worker who performs unrecognised care, sustains parasocial bonds, and carries the resulting costs. It is this reframing that motivates the two research questions set out below.

5 Methodology

5.1 Research Objectives

Whilst existing research extensively documents how SWM benefits viewers, by reducing isolation, structuring study, and providing emotional support, a critical gap remains: the lived experience of creators. As SWM has evolved from a productivity tool to emotional infrastructure, creators have accumulated responsibilities they did not anticipate. They manage viewer emotional needs, maintain consistent presence, model discipline, and provide companionship, functions that constitute emotional labour yet remain uncompensated and largely unrecognised.

This raises two interrelated research questions:

- (1) Do SWM creators experience unsustainable burdens as a result of providing emotional infrastructure for anxious students?
- (2) How aware are creators of viewer dependency, and how does this awareness affect their own well-being and sustainability?

These questions matter because if SWM sustainability depends on individual creators’ emotional resilience, without training, support, or professional boundaries, then the very platform designed to address student mental health may be inadvertently generating new mental health crises among creators themselves.

5.2 Methodology and Sample

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design utilising an online questionnaire to gather data from active SWM creators. The questionnaire was developed to investigate creators’ experiences, motivations, perceived audience needs, sustainability concerns, and awareness of viewer dependency.

The instrument was administered using Google Forms, a web-based platform enabling secure data collection and automated response compilation. Potential participants were identified through a systematic review of active SWM creators across YouTube and Twitch. Creators were approached via direct email or private messages on Instagram, and in one case on

Facebook, with an initial communication providing a brief explanation of the research aims, assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, and a direct link to the questionnaire. Participants were given approximately four weeks to complete the survey, with a single reminder sent to non-respondents after two weeks. The questionnaire was estimated to take 10–15 minutes to complete.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed. Inclusion criteria required that participants: (1) were actively producing SWM content at the time of data collection; (2) had a minimum of three months of streaming experience; and (3) were accessible via social media platforms. The questionnaire was distributed between 5 May 2026 and 20 June 2026. A total of 66 creators were invited to participate, drawn from eighteen countries: Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the USA, and Venezuela.

The sample was heterogeneous across key variables. Follower counts ranged from 6 to 1,160,000 subscribers, reflecting a mix of micro-influencers, emerging creators, and established content producers. Streaming experience spanned from 2018 to 2026, encompassing pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic SWM culture. This range enabled the sample to capture both long-standing creators who had witnessed the evolution of SWM communities and more recent entrants responding to contemporary audience expectations.

The questionnaire contained 33 items arranged in six sections: a profile section (time creating SWM content, weekly streaming hours, platforms used, and audience size); Motivation and Role; Audience Needs and Adaptation; Burnout and Sustainability; Parasocial Relationship and Viewer Dependency; and Future and Support. Twenty-seven items were closed-ended and six were open-ended free-text prompts. Closed items combined single-choice categorical scales, a multiple-response checklist for platforms, and five-point rating scales. The four motivation statements and the five support-need statements were rated from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important), and the obligation statement used a five-point agreement scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The open-ended prompts asked respondents to describe how their understanding of SWM had changed, to give examples of altered streaming practice, to identify contributors to burnout, to explain any felt obligation to stream, to say how they respond when viewers share emotional struggles, and to offer closing reflections.

Given the size of the achieved sample, the analysis was descriptive. Closed items were summarised as counts and percentages, and the rated statements were summarised using the mean of the five-point scale. No inferential tests were used, because the sample does not support them and the study makes no claim to statistical generalisation. Open-ended responses were examined through basic thematic coding carried out by the first author: each response was read, assigned short descriptive labels for recurring content, and grouped into the themes reported below, namely felt obligation, viewer dependency, and the personal meaning that creators attach to streaming. The coding was undertaken by a single researcher, which is a limitation; the open responses were brief and the coding descriptive rather than interpretive, however, so the scope for coder disagreement was limited. Quotations are reproduced verbatim, including original spelling.

All participants were adults who took part voluntarily and anonymously. The invitation explained the purpose of the study, stated that responses would be treated as confidential and used only for research, and gave a contact address for questions; submission of the questionnaire was taken as informed consent. The questionnaire collected no directly identifying information, no incentive was offered, and respondents could withdraw by not submitting. The recruitment list was anonymised before analysis.

5.3 Response Rate and Non-response

A total of 7 of the 66 invited creators returned a completed questionnaire, a response rate of 10.6%. Although modest in absolute terms, this rate is consistent with the difficulties documented for cold, unsolicited outreach to dispersed online creator populations, for whom no membership register, institutional gatekeeper, or sponsoring body exists to legitimise a research request. Prospective participants were public-facing individuals who typically receive high volumes of direct messages and email, so an unsolicited academic invitation competes with, and is easily filtered alongside, routine audience correspondence. Three features of the study further lowered the rate by design rather than by oversight. No incentive was offered, in order to protect the voluntariness of participation and avoid biasing disclosure. The instrument addressed disclosure-sensitive experiences, including burnout, obligation, emotional labour, and viewers' mental health, which raise the perceived cost of responding. The target population is also unusually time-constrained, since most respondents stream 15 or more hours a week alongside their own study or work. Low response rates are, in addition, common in online and hard-to-reach-population research, where the more important question is not the rate itself but the presence and likely direction of non-response bias.

The analytic dataset was fixed at the point of analysis on 22 June 2026. The seven complete responses available at that point form the sample, and two responses received afterwards, on 23 June and 5 July 2026, were excluded so that the dataset would remain fixed. Because the study is exploratory, the sample is treated as a purposive, non-probability sample from which no claim to statistical representativeness is made, and the findings are reported as preliminary and hypothesis-generating rather than as generalisable estimates. Non-response bias cannot be ruled out and may work in more than one direction. Creators experiencing the most severe burnout may have been the least able or willing to complete a reflective questionnaire, which would cause the data to understate the strain the study describes; equally, creators with strong feelings about their role, whether highly committed or badly strained, may have been more likely to respond, a form of self-selection that could sharpen the observed patterns. Points of agreement across respondents, such as the universal awareness of emotionally dependent viewers, are therefore better read as signals that warrant larger-scale confirmation than as population estimates.

Because the invited frame was built from public creator profiles, several of its recorded characteristics can be compared with the achieved sample to judge how closely the seven respondents resemble the group approached (Table 2). On audience size, the frame ranged widely, from 6 to about 1,160,000 followers, with a median near 4,685, and 6 of the 60 creators with a recorded follower count had audiences above 100,000. The respondents clustered in the smaller and middle bands of the same measure, and none reported an audience in the largest band, so the most visible creators are under-represented. Tenure showed a similar pattern. Among frame members whose start date was recorded, most had been active for three years or more, several since before 2019, whereas every respondent had been creating for three years or less. The two groups matched on platform, with creators located almost entirely on YouTube and Twitch and no respondent reporting Bilibili or TikTok. Respondents came from 5 of the 18 countries present in the frame.

These comparisons are indicative rather than exact. Follower figures for the frame were taken from public profiles at the point of contact, while audience size for respondents was self-reported in bands, so the two are not measured on the same basis. Country and start date were recorded for only part of the frame, 47 and 37 of the 66 creators respectively, which limits the precision of the comparison. Taken together, the available evidence points the same way: the

sample leans towards smaller and newer creators and away from the largest, longest-established channels, so the experiences of high-visibility, veteran creators may be less well captured here.

Table 2. Comparison of Respondents With the Invited Sampling Frame

Characteristic	Invited frame (N = 66)	Respondents (n = 7)
Audience size (followers)	Median 4,685; range 6 to 1,160,000 (n = 60)	Self-reported bands: under 1,000, 2; 1,000 to 10,000, 4; 10,000 to 100,000, 1
Creators with 100,000+ audience	6 of 60	0 of 7
Tenure	Three years or more for 25 of 37 creators with a recorded start date	Three years or less for all 7 (under 1 year, 3; 1 to 2 years, 2; 2 to 3 years, 2)
Platform	YouTube, 31; Twitch, 29; no Bilibili or TikTok recorded	YouTube, 6; Twitch, 4; no Bilibili or TikTok
Countries represented	18	5 (Australia, Germany, India, Turkey, United Kingdom)

6 Results

Of the 66 creators contacted, 7 completed the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 10.6%. Respondents represented five countries (Australia, Germany, India, Turkey, and the United Kingdom). Follower counts ranged from 346 to 390,000 ($M = 131,600$), indicating a sample comprising primarily micro- to mid-tier creators. Streaming experience was concentrated at the newer end of the spectrum: three respondents (42.9%) had been creating SWM content for less than one year, two (28.6%) for one to two years, and two (28.6%) for two to three years. Weekly streaming hours were substantial across the sample, with six of seven respondents (85.7%) streaming 15 or more hours per week.

Table 3 summarises the closed-ended items for the seven respondents; the paragraphs that follow draw out the patterns most relevant to the research questions.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Closed-ended Questionnaire Items (N = 7)

Questionnaire item	Response distribution
Time creating SWM content	Less than 1 year, 3 (42.9%); 1-2 years, 2 (28.6%); 2-3 years, 2 (28.6%); 3+ years, 0
Weekly streaming hours	15+ hours, 6 (85.7%); around 45 hours, 1 (14.3%)
Audience size (self-reported)	Under 1,000, 2 (28.6%); 1,000-10,000, 4 (57.1%); 10,000-100,000, 1 (14.3%); 100,000+, 0
Motivation: external accountability	$M = 4.67$ (n = 6)
Motivation: build a community	$M = 4.33$ (n = 6)
Motivation: help others study	$M = 3.71$ (n = 7)
Motivation: make money / grow audience	$M = 3.50$ (n = 6)
Primary self-perceived role	Emotional support/companion, 3 (42.9%); community builder, 2 (28.6%); role model, 1 (14.3%); study facilitator, 1 (14.3%)
Responsibility for viewer well-being	A little, 1 (14.3%); moderate, 1 (14.3%); significant, 5 (71.4%)
Change in understanding of SWM	A little, 1 (14.3%); significant change, 4 (57.1%); completely transformed, 2 (28.6%)

Questionnaire item	Response distribution
Viewers share emotional struggles	Frequently, 4 (57.1%); very frequently, 3 (42.9%)
Noticed change in viewer needs	Slight shift, 5 (71.4%); significant shift, 2 (28.6%)
Changed streaming approach	Minor changes, 4 (57.1%); moderate changes, 3 (42.9%)
Schedule sustainability	Very sustainable, 1 (14.3%); mostly sustainable, 2 (28.6%); neutral, 2 (28.6%); somewhat unsustainable, 2 (28.6%); very unsustainable, 0
Burnout experienced	None, 1 (14.3%); maybe, 1 (14.3%); mild, 2 (28.6%); moderate, 2 (28.6%); severe, 1 (14.3%)
Feels obligated to stream	Neutral, 2 (28.6%); agree, 5 (71.4%); disagree, 0
Effect of streaming on own mental health	Positively, 7 (100%)
Effect on academic/professional performance	Improved it, 7 (100%)
Aware of emotionally dependent viewers	Sometimes, 4 (57.1%); frequently, 3 (42.9%)
Audience distress when creator does not stream	No discomfort, 1 (14.3%); somewhat uncomfortable, 6 (85.7%)
Planned continuation	6 months to 1 year, 1 (14.3%); 1-2 years, 1 (14.3%); 2-5 years, 1 (14.3%); indefinitely, 3 (42.9%); unsure, 1 (14.3%)
Support need: better monetisation	M = 4.33 (n = 6)
Support need: peer community of creators	M = 3.83 (n = 6)
Support need: clearer boundaries	M = 3.50 (n = 6)
Support need: community moderators	M = 3.17 (n = 6)
Support need: mental health resources	M = 3.17 (n = 6)

Respondents reported mixed motivations for initiating SWM content creation. Across the six respondents who completed this item, the most strongly endorsed motivation was “*I needed external accountability for my own studying*” (M = 4.67/5; 83.3%, n = 5, rating it 4 or 5), followed by “*I wanted to build a community*” (M = 4.33/5) and “*I wanted to help others study,*” which was rated 4 or 5 by 57.1% (n = 4) of all respondents. Notably, monetisation was not a negligible motivation: half of respondents who answered this item (50%, n = 3/6) rated “*I wanted to make money/grow an audience*” as important or very important (M = 3.5/5), indicating that commercial considerations coexist with prosocial motivations for a meaningful share of creators rather than being absent, as might be assumed. When asked to identify their primary role, “*emotional support/companion*” remained the single most common response (42.9%, n = 3), but it was no longer an overwhelming majority: “*community builder*” was selected by 28.6% (n = 2), and “*role model/source of inspiration*” and “*study facilitator/accountability buddy*” by one respondent each (14.3%). This more even distribution suggests that SWM creators occupy a range of self-perceived roles rather than converging uniformly on an emotional-support identity.

The findings revealed concerning patterns regarding creator sustainability and mental health, although the picture was more mixed than uniformly negative. When asked to rate the sustainability of their current streaming schedule, responses spanned the full range: 14.3% (n = 1) reported it as “very sustainable,” 28.6% (n = 2) as “mostly sustainable,” 28.6% (n = 2) as “neutral,” and 28.6% (n = 2) as “somewhat unsustainable.” None selected “very unsustainable.” Burnout, however, emerged as a more pervasive concern than perceived

schedule sustainability alone would suggest: 71.4% ($n = 5$) reported experiencing burnout ranging from mild to severe, including one case of severe burnout explicitly linked to *“working too hard for too long with no rest”* and *“constantly dealing with problems from all directions.”* A further respondent selected “maybe,” leaving only one of seven creators reporting no burnout at all. This divergence, moderate ratings of schedule sustainability alongside high rates of burnout, suggests that creators may normalise demanding routines even as those routines take a measurable psychological toll.

Two further items complicate a purely negative reading. When asked how streaming had affected them, all seven respondents reported that it had affected their own mental health positively, and all seven reported that it had improved their academic or professional performance. These self-assessments sit alongside the burnout and obligation data rather than cancelling them, and the tension between the two is considered further in the discussion.

A particularly notable finding concerned the sense of obligation to stream: 71.4% of respondents ($n = 5$) agreed that they felt obligated to stream even when they did not want to, with the remaining two respondents neutral on this item; none disagreed. Several respondents linked this obligation directly to viewers’ reliance on them. One respondent explained simply: *“Viewers rely on me.”* Another, who streams alongside a demanding study schedule, described the obligation as double-edged: streaming arises *“out of discipline and commitment to our Twitch community, to whom we’ve promised to log on and support their studies,”* yet that same sense of commitment *“motivates me to study”* and helps avoid procrastination. This suggests that viewers’ emotional dependency may directly contribute to creator burnout through internalised obligation, even as some creators experience that obligation as personally beneficial.

Creators also demonstrated considerable, indeed universal, awareness of viewer dependency. All seven respondents (100%) reported being aware of viewers who appeared emotionally dependent on their streams, either “sometimes” ($n = 4$) or “frequently” ($n = 3$). When asked whether their audience experiences distress when they do not stream, 85.7% ($n = 6$) described this as at least “somewhat uncomfortable” for viewers, with only one respondent reporting no discomfort. One creator, reflecting on how their understanding of SWM had changed, observed that *“some people really depend on these streams”* to feel like they belong and are doing a good job, and that seeing someone else study makes a viewer far more likely to start studying too. Another, who had themselves been part of an SWM community before becoming a creator, noted how far this dependency can go: *“some people just can’t even study without the streams,”* and described how many hours spent together daily mean creators *“really connect”* with viewers.

7 Discussion

These findings paint a concerning picture of SWM creator experience, revealing significant tensions between initial prosocial motivations and the unsustainable emotional labour burdens that accumulate over time. The data suggest that SWM communities have undergone a fundamental transformation, particularly in the post-pandemic period, from productivity-enhancement tools to emotional infrastructure. This is a shift that creators did not anticipate and for which they lack adequate support structures.

A critical finding is the apparent bidirectional relationship between creator burnout and viewer dependency. Creators feel obligated to maintain regular streaming schedules in order to meet viewer emotional needs, but this sense of obligation directly contributes to their own anxiety and burnout. As creators experience burnout, their capacity to provide genuine

emotional support may diminish, potentially intensifying viewer anxiety and dependency. This dynamic mirrors the broader digital well-being paradox documented in the SWM literature: platforms designed to mitigate isolation and anxiety may inadvertently generate new forms of psychological vulnerability for both creators and viewers.

At the same time, the respondents' own appraisals were not uniformly negative. Every respondent reported that streaming had affected their mental health positively and had improved their academic or professional performance, and several framed the felt obligation to stream as partly a source of discipline that benefited their own studying. Burnout and obligation therefore coexist with real personal gain rather than describing an activity these creators experience as simply harmful. Read cautiously, and within the limits of a small sample, this points away from the conclusion that SWM creation is intrinsically damaging and towards a narrower claim: the problem lies in the structural mismatch between the emotional support creators provide and the training, recognition, and compensation available to them.

The data also reveal a gap between role expectations and creator preparation. "Emotional support/companion" remained the single most commonly selected self-identification, even though it no longer describes a clear majority of creators, and several other respondents who selected different primary roles (community builder, role model) nonetheless reported high responsibility for viewer well-being and frequent exposure to viewers' emotional struggles. None reported receiving any training in mental health support, boundary-setting, or emotional labour management. Creators have effectively become *de facto* mental health providers without professional qualifications, ethical frameworks, or institutional recognition. Notably, when asked what would make SWM creation more sustainable, "better monetisation" was the most highly rated support need ($M = 4.33/5$), ahead of "peer community of creators" ($M = 3.83$), "clearer boundaries around responsibility for viewer well-being" ($M = 3.5$), and tied lowest were "community moderators" and "mental health support/resources" ($M = 3.17$ each). This ordering suggests that creators' most immediate concern is the precarity of SWM as a livelihood rather than emotional-labour support *per se*, even though the same creators report high rates of burnout and obligation, which indicates that financial sustainability and psychological sustainability may be experienced as intertwined rather than separate needs.

These findings suggest that the SWM ecosystem is unsustainable in its current form; research on what drives users' continuance intention with SWM virtual learning commons underscores how contingent sustained engagement is on satisfaction and perceived value (Mo et al., 2024). If creators continue to experience high burnout rates whilst viewers develop dependency on their emotional support, the system risks collapse or transformation into something potentially more harmful. The data underscore the urgency of developing structural supports: financial sustainability mechanisms that reduce creators' precarity, community moderation systems that distribute emotional labour beyond individual creators, and clearer communication about the inherent limitations of parasocial relationships (Lin et al., 2021). That creators rated monetisation above dedicated mental health resources as a sustainability need does not diminish the latter's importance; rather, it suggests that any structural response to creator burnout must address material precarity alongside psychological support, since creators experiencing financial insecurity may be poorly positioned to prioritise their own mental health regardless of what resources are nominally available.

8 Conclusion

This paper has documented a quiet crisis: the creators who provide essential emotional infrastructure to anxious, isolated students are themselves experiencing burnout, obligation,

and a lack of support. Whilst SWM successfully responds to the mental health needs of viewers, the current model depends on individual creators' uncompensated emotional labour, a dependency that is structurally unsustainable.

The paradox is stark: a platform designed to mitigate a mental health crisis risks generating a new one among its creators. If creators continue to burn out and leave, the emotional infrastructure collapses, potentially intensifying student anxiety. This is not an argument against SWM. Rather, it is an argument for recognising that digital emotional infrastructure requires structural support, not merely individual resilience. Just as teaching requires training, supervision, and compensation, providing emotional support, even in mediated form, is skilled labour that warrants recognition and resources.

The small sample size ($n = 7$) and modest response rate (10.6%) limit generalisability. Findings should be treated as preliminary evidence warranting larger-scale investigation rather than conclusive claims. However, the qualitative consistency of certain responses, notably 100% of respondents reporting awareness of emotionally dependent viewers and 71.4% reporting both burnout and a sense of obligation to stream, suggests the patterns identified may be substantively meaningful even within this limited sample.

For SWM platforms, three interventions are proposed. First, the development of creator-specific mental health resources is urgently needed, with a particular focus on burnout recognition and boundary-setting skills that are currently entirely absent from creators' experience. Second, community moderation systems should be implemented so that emotional labour is distributed across a broader support structure rather than concentrated on individual creators, who currently manage viewer well-being without assistance. Third, clearer role definitions are required to distinguish SWM creators from mental health providers; without such boundaries, creators risk occupying an ambiguous position in which viewer expectation far exceeds what any unqualified individual can sustainably deliver.

For educational institutions, three parallel recommendations follow. SWM should be formally integrated into study support infrastructure (library resources, orientation materials, and student well-being frameworks) so that it is acknowledged as a legitimate component of the support ecosystem rather than an informal workaround. Alongside this, appropriate compensation mechanisms for creators who serve identifiable student populations warrant serious consideration; the current model of entirely uncompensated emotional labour is neither equitable nor sustainable. Finally, institutions should invest in strengthening their own mental health services rather than allowing structural gaps in provision to be filled, by default, by untrained creators who lack the resources, mandate, or professional protection to do so responsibly.

For future research, longitudinal studies tracking creator burnout over two to five years are a priority, as are larger samples ($n \geq 100$) enabling demographic analysis and subgroup comparisons. Intervention studies testing the effectiveness of boundary-setting training and community moderation would move the field from description towards actionable solutions. Emerging questions also warrant investigation: whether ASMR-enhanced SWM intensifies or mitigates creator burden and viewer dependency, and whether burnout patterns differ across cultural and educational contexts. Without structural changes, the emotional infrastructure designed to address student mental health crises will remain precarious, sustained only by the goodwill and resilience of individual creators and vulnerable to the very burnout it inadvertently generates.

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Appendix A

Creator Questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms. It was preceded by a short message stating the purpose of the study, confirming that responses were confidential and anonymous, giving the researcher’s contact address, and thanking participants; submission was taken as informed consent. The items are reproduced below as administered. For the frequency and effect items marked with an asterisk, the full option set should be checked against the original form.

Profile

1. How long have you been creating SWM content?

Less than 1 year / 1–2 years / 2–3 years / 3+ years

2. How many hours per week do you currently stream?

1–5 hours / 5–10 hours / 10–15 hours / 15+ hours / Other

3. What platforms do you use? (Check all that apply)

YouTube / Bilibili / TikTok Live / Twitch / Other

4. Roughly how many regular viewers/subscribers do you have?

Under 1,000 / 1,000–10,000 / 10,000–100,000 / 100,000+

Motivation and Role

Why did you start creating SWM content? (rate each statement from 1 = not important to 5 = very important)

5. I wanted to help others study.

6. I needed external accountability for my own studying.

7. I wanted to build a community.

8. I wanted to make money / grow an audience.

9. What do you primarily see your role as? (choose one)

Study facilitator/accountability buddy / Emotional support/companion / Role model/source of inspiration / Community builder / Content creator/entertainer / Other

Audience Needs and Adaptation

10. How much responsibility do you feel for your viewers’ well-being?

Not at all / A little / Moderate amount / Significant amount / Very high, I feel very responsible

11. How much has your understanding of “what SWM is” changed since you started?

Not at all, it is the same / A little / Moderate change / Significant change / Completely transformed

12. If changed (previous question): In what way? (open response)

13. Have you noticed changes in what your viewers seem to need from your content? *

No change / Slight shift / Moderate shift / Significant shift

14. Viewers share their struggles with you (burnout, loneliness, anxiety): *

Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Frequently / Very frequently

15. How do you respond when viewers share emotional struggles? (open response)

16. Have you changed your streaming approach in response to viewer needs?

No / Yes, minor changes / Yes, moderate changes / Yes, significant changes

17. In case you have answered Yes, write the examples, please. (open response)

Burnout and Sustainability

18. How sustainable is your current streaming schedule?

Very sustainable, I could do this indefinitely / Mostly sustainable / Neutral / Somewhat unsustainable, I am noticing strain / Very unsustainable, I am burning out

19. Have you experienced burnout related to content creation?

No / Mild burnout / Maybe / Moderate burnout / Severe burnout / Currently experiencing it

20. If you responded YES in the previous question: What contributed to it? (open response)

21. I feel obligated to stream even when I don't want to:

Strongly disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly agree

22. Why? (open response)

Parasocial Relationship and Viewer Dependency

23. Streaming has affected my own mental health: *

Negatively / No effect / Mixed / Positively

24. Streaming has affected my academic/professional performance: *

Worsened it / No effect / Mixed / Improved it

25. I'm aware of viewers who seem emotionally dependent on my streams: *

Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Frequently / Very frequently

26. When I don't stream, do you think your audience experiences distress? *

No discomfort / Neutral / Somewhat uncomfortable / Very distressed

Future and Support

27. How long do you plan to continue creating SWM content?

6 months to 1 year / 1–2 years / 2–5 years / Indefinitely / Unsure

What would help make SWM creation more sustainable for you? (rate each statement from 1 = not important to 5 = very important)

- 28. Better monetisation.
- 29. Community moderators to help manage comments.
- 30. Clearer boundaries around responsibility for viewer well-being.
- 31. Mental health support/resources.
- 32. Peer community of creators.
- 33. Any final thoughts about being an SWM creator? (open response)