Hikikomori: Significant Impacts on Modern Japanese Society

Introduction and Cultural Context of Hikikomori

Originating in Japan in the late twentieth century, Hikikomori are those who withdraw themselves from society. Many of them seek to isolate themselves; others do not have the capacity to interact with the rest of the world. Usually younger in age, Hikikomori are classified as someone who has not left their residence for six months or longer. They do not have jobs and typically rely on their parent’s money through allowances. While there are examples of hikikomori being in several countries around the world, they have the greatest affect on society in their country of origin, being Japan. It is important to recognize the psychology and science behind those classified as hikikomori, as life is a struggle for them. Hikikomori only seem to have a negative impact; they contribute to the growing number of problems in Japan, such as the declining birth rate, number of people in the workforce, as well as an overall impact on the Japanese economy.

Michael Zielenziger describes hikikomori as social isolation, a person that suffers from social isolation, never leaving their bedroom or home (Zielenziger 2006: 320). Although there is not a single and specific definition of what hikikomori are, there are many common characteristics and themes. As mentioned previously, hikikomori have the most influence on society within Japan. A survey done by the Japanese Cabinet Office revealed that as recent as 2016, 541,000 people aged 15-39 were found to be what is considered hikikomori. Although this number is less than the 696,000 projected from a 2010 survey, also done by the cabinet office, it does not include the potential hikikomori over the age of 40. As of these estimates done in 2016, 0.42% of Japan’s total population are hikikomori aged 15 to 39. In Japanese society, there are notable expectations for men and women on the verge of adulthood. Whether it be to lead a life of hustle and bustle in the bigger metro areas as a salaryman, or the pressure put on those to continue a specific family business or trade, so much is wanted out of the
younger generation in modern Japan. This puts an incredible burden and mental strain on these mainly younger people, causing them to change drastically, and essentially remove themselves from society, beginning their lives as hikikomori.

Although both men and woman are affected by this state of mind and lifestyle, it unequally affects men, who more often than not are the first son of middle to upper-class family. Again, this oddly specific demographic can be traced back to the typical gender roles and expectations of people in Japan. Men, as seen by many, are expected to become the breadwinners for themselves or their family, and take on many of the responsibilities associated with being an efficient member of society. With many of these eventual hikikomori, they typically come from a comfortable living. To explain this further, think of their adolescent lives being associated with a comfortable income of their parents, basically being supported financially by them most of their lives. This can not only create a mental state of stability, albeit temporary. Also, as being part of the status quo, and of those who “add fuel to the fire”; they are eventually expected to assume the roles within society of their parents, and their generation. It is worth mentioning that the advancing otaku culture in Japan beginning in the late twentieth century certainly has had an impact on the hikikomori lifestyle.

The term otaku can be used to describe one with obsessive interests. Originally, it was used as an insult, and still is today, however, the community it is based around has embraced the term as if it was almost recognition of their own character and personality. With application to the topic of hikikomori, otaku that fit into this category typically have obsessive interests when it comes to anime or manga. Anime and manga are animations and comics with a unique style that are created in Japan. As many of these hikikomori live in Tokyo, it is very convenient for them to continue to fuel their interests. This can be done by watching or reading extensive amounts of anime or manga, being a hardcore gamer, or by collecting dozens of figures and other merchandise. These interests and hobbies can, in
turn, instead to an obsession and potential addiction, mainly to specific anime or video games. All of this takes place in their refuge, mainly being apartments that their parents pay for. There may be some historical context as to why the home plays an important role in shaping the mindset of hikikomori.

**Historical Perspectives and Cultural Foundations of Japanese Identity**

Historically, the Japanese family system is based on that of the ie and filial piety. Joy Hendry wrote in *Understanding Japanese Society* that the ie was important for “continuing a line, requiring a definite heir in each generation.” Ie may also signify a building, an example being “as in the expression, “House of Windsor” (Hendry 2013: 24). The ie was a traditional system that stressed the importance of the family structure, and the continuity of the name. It was even part of the Meiji Civil Code, as it related to a single individual claiming the household, a pater familias in a sense. The ie took aspects of Confucianism into the concepts of loyalty to the father (then the following men), and means for succession. It is evident that the ie has impacted Japanese society and gender roles; it has lasted for hundreds of years and continues to have an impact today. Alongside Confucianism, other religions and philosophies imported from China, as well as those originally from Japan have profoundly impacted Japanese society.

Going hand-in-hand with the ie, Buddhism seems to have the most influence over the shaping of Japanese character and identity. Within the ie, the ancestors of a family are worshiped at the butsudan altar, being integral to Buddhist practices. In alliance with Buddhist values is that of respecting ancestors as well as the current family. Outside of the rituals that pertain to Buddhism, there are interpretations of morality that focus on the spiritual oneness with the universe, and that of harmony. The concept of harmony is very important in Shinto, the ethnic folk religion of Japan, as well. According to the BBC’s insight into world religions, “The overall aims of Shinto ethics are to promote harmony and purity in all spheres of life.” Both Buddhism and Shinto advocate for this harmony within society, and the two have
coexisted peacefully within Japan for centuries. This desire for harmony can be compared to that of the status quo within modern civilization. Although most Japanese people are not religious, they embrace the concepts and morals of Shinto and Buddhism, as a way of life that is inherent to Japan. Whether they are aware of it or not, most people support this “harmonious” society, being the status quo. This is what many hikikomori fear and try to avoid.

**Psychology and Scientific Research Associated with Hikikomori**

Escapism is definitely an aspect of hikikomori. While not all hikikomori are otaku, many are and see their obsessions as a vice to avoid the real world. An example of this would be an individual obsessed with a fantasy MMORPG. In this setting, you can become an entirely different person, who can lead a completely different life. Wanting life to be different is fairly common, but some take it incredibly too far. In the case of hikikomori, this can lead to staying in one’s apartment, or even just their bedroom, for months on end. Of course, this can lead to detrimental physical health complications. Basic forms of exercise are necessary. However, the main issue affecting those considered to be hikikomori is a mental one, concerning the psyche and mental health.

It is safe to say that, in the time period of becoming hikikomori, these individuals experience some sense of dissatisfaction. This seems to be associated with the status quo, the norm that they do not want to be a part of. Beyond these generalizations, there are more complex and serious reasons as to why hikikomori are the way they are. Several professional psychologists have looked into this condition, speculating and debating their findings. As mentioned before, in 2016, a survey found that roughly 541,000 people in Japan aged 15 to 39 were found to be Hikikomori. This survey was done by the Japanese Cabinet Office. Nicolas Tajan, Hamasaki Yukiko, and Nancy Pionnié-Dax are psychologists that published an analysis of this survey in The Asia-Pacific Journal in 2017. In their analysis, they essentially explained the context of the survey, the questions that were asked, and gave their opinions.
on the overall value of it. Of the age group that was surveyed, they focused on people living in 198 municipalities nationwide. The first portion of the investigation revolved around identifying oneself broadly as a hikikomori. Some examples of these questions are “In what circumstances do you go out?” and “How long have you experienced this condition?”

The Cabinet Office asked a wide variety of questions in this survey, which led to many different types of responses. Many strongly aligned with the descriptions of hikikomori, while some were more mildly associated. It was also found that many sympathized with hikikomori and the difficult lives that they lead. Within the survey, it was found that of those who fit the hikikomori description, 63.3% were men and 36.7% were women. Also, the hikikomori only accounted for 10.2% of the total group currently pursuing or have completed post-secondary education. Also, only 8.2% of the hikikomori group were working part-time. The most important findings seemed to be the “trigger of hikikomori”. Some responses from this group were “I did not adapt to the workplace”, “my human relationships were bad”, “my job seeking activities failed”, and “illness”. After assessing the data, the researchers gave a brief summary of their opinions on the findings. They believed that the survey was highly informative, and helped to define a specific set of characteristics for hikikomori, by actual first-hand sources. It also helps the government recognize the problems and aspects associated with social withdrawal, with more contexts on how to counter it.

Hikikomori are also prevalent in other countries around the world. Another valuable investigation into hikikomori was done by Tim MH Li and Paul WC Wong. Their research focused on youth social withdrawal internationally and was published in the Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry in 2015. They based their findings on currently available scientific information on youth social withdrawal in the academic databases, with the data being based on multiple ethnicities of people. After assessing the data, Li and Wong took a more psychological approach, comparing hikikomori symptoms
to terms within their fields such as Attachment Theory, and Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development. They also discuss potential treatments for hikikomori, mentioning attempts made by antidepressants, and traditional Chinese medicine in specific instances. Ultimately, they believed that hikikomori is caused by the interplay between psychological, social and behavioral factors, and occur in similar ways for people in different countries and cultures.

Those considered to be hikikomori are without a doubt living troubled lives, based on their mental states. This is not their fault exactly, as the pressures of fitting into the status quo are extremely stressful and are a major cause for anxiety. So much is expected out of the youth in Japan. Whether it is to become a member of the workforce, receive a university education, or continue their family’s line of work, there is so much out there that can impact the well being of a younger Japanese person. There have been attempts to prevent or cease hikikomori tendencies, but so far, nothing has really been affective in countering the large-scale hikikomori issue in Japan, and elsewhere. Keep in mind that hikikomori impact Japan the most, immensely affecting Japan as a whole.

Direct Impacts on Modern Japanese Society

The hikikomori lifestyle only seems to have negative impacts, most notably on the economy, and the declining birth rate in Japan. Most younger hikikomori, below the age of 20, will either live with their parents or rely on their parent’s allowances to support themselves. While it is not impossible for hikikomori to be unemployed (as seen in the Japanese Cabinet Office survey), the vast majority are not working. This adds to the growing number of overall youth unemployment, while the graying of Japan only continues to grow. More older people in Japan are choosing to work, removing possibilities for younger people to finally enter the workforce. This said “graying” leads to the eventual increase of pensions and medical costs, as people continue to live longer and work more regularly. The lack of
enthusiasm from Japan’s youth, especially from that of hikikomori, ultimately have a negative impact on the Japanese economy. The rapidly declining birthrate also influenced the graying of Japan.

The year 2016 marked the first year in Japan that the total number of births was less than one million, ever since the birth rate was recorded more than a hundred years ago. This is troubling, to say the least. Demographers have predicted that the total population of Japan will be only just 80 million, compared to the approximately 128 million counted at the beginning of the 2010s. With less young people, there will be fewer workers to replace the large number of retirees, which in turn creates complications to the health care and pension systems within Japan. Current Prime Minister of Japan Abe Shinzo has called to address this issue, but not much has changed. As the overall population declines, so will economic growth, as many economic experts have suggested. Hikikomori, being social recluses, obviously have no interest in social interactions, let alone a serious loving relationship. Although they are a minority within Japan, hikikomori are a part of the problem being a sharply declining birth rate.

Conclusion and Recap of the Hikikomori Issue

Hikikomori are social recluses, who intentionally isolate themselves from the rest of the world. It is said that hikikomori are those who have not left their residences for more than six months. They are mostly younger in age, and more often than not unemployed, and mainly rely on their parent’s money to get by. While there are women that are hikikomori, the vast majority of them are men from middle to upper-class families. They face many pressures from the modern society, being the status quo. Finding work, interacting with other people, and finding long-term meaningful relationships are some examples of the struggles that hikikomori face on a daily basis. Most hikikomori are otaku, having obsessive interests, usually some aspect of Japanese media (anime, manga, video games, and collectibles).
Japanese society, being influenced by the ie family structure, Buddhism, and Shinto, have created a seemingly unbeatable status quo of harmony and expectations that are intimidating for much of the Japanese youth. Surveys have shown us that those considered to be hikikomori account for hundreds of thousands of younger people in Japan, and are a result of psychological, social and behavioral factors. These symptoms not only affect those in Japan, as the term hikikomori applies to many people all around the world. The hikikomori issue is comparable to that of an epidemic in Japan. It directly affects current issues of the declining birth rate and economy. With fewer people being born and entering the workforce, the graying of Japanese society will continue to negatively impact the health care and pension systems within Japan. Although many are trying to combat this issue, such as the Japanese government, psychologists, as well as smaller advocacy groups, there does not seem to be much change in trying to tackle this complicated issue. As a whole, hikikomori within Japan only have a serious and unfavorable impact upon modern Japanese society.
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