Phenomenology of Perceived Resonant Lived Experiences of International Male Shut-Ins Featured in a YouTube Video Anthology on the Global Hikikomori

Brian Bantugan, PhD

St. Paul University Manila

ABSTRACT

This study explored non-Japanese males' hikikomori experiences shared via a YouTube anthology, suggesting their resonance with but distinction from Japanese hikikomori experiences. Resonant experiences are deeply personal, evoking emotional connections and shaping identities through pivotal events and transformative realizations (Smith, 2018; Jones & Brown, 2020; Adams, 2019; White, 2021). Themes emerging from the Heideggerian phenomenology of childhood lived experiences of global hikikomori highlight severe challenges like bullying and social isolation, impacting emotional development and fostering mistrust. Family dynamics, including single-parent upbringing, contribute to feelings of neglect. Academic struggles and traumatic school experiences solidify negative perceptions of society. Early onset of mental health issues like depression and anxiety hinder social engagement, while coping mechanisms such as immersion in fantasy worlds provide comfort. Attempts at integration often precede withdrawal phases, underscored by traumatic events exacerbating social withdrawal. These experiences collectively shape the non-Japanese hikikomori's withdrawal as self-protection and emotional survival. Despite cultural variances, global hikikomori share similarities with Japanese counterparts in social withdrawal, mental health issues, family dynamics, and technology's role. However, global hikikomori complexities arise from cultural diversity, varied family dynamics, educational pressures, healthcare access, coping mechanisms, and globalization impacts. Understanding these complexities is vital for developing effective support systems across diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: hikikomori, perceived resonant lived experiences, social withdrawal, mental health, Heideggerian phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

The rise of hikikomori, a phenomenon primarily observed in Japan but increasingly recognized globally, has been influenced by several sociocultural and psychological factors (Teo, 2010; Kato et al., 2011; Suwa et al., 2018). The hikikomori refers to individuals, predominantly young men, who withdraw from social interactions and often confine themselves to their homes for extended periods, sometimes years. This behavior is typically linked to feelings of social anxiety, depression, and difficulty in coping with societal expectations and pressures (Kawakami et al., 2016; Kondo et al., 2013). The Japanese Hikikomori has been explained mostly by discussion on factors that are believed to contribute to their rise, namely:

Social and Cultural Pressures

In Japanese society, there is a strong emphasis on conformity, academic success, and career achievements. In Japanese society, cultural values place a significant emphasis on conformity, academic success, and career achievements, which can contribute to the rise of phenomena like hikikomori. Conformity in Japan is deeply rooted in traditions such as collective harmony and group cohesion (Ito, 2016). This cultural expectation often translates into societal pressures for individuals to conform to norms and expectations set by their families, peers, and broader community.

Academic success is another critical aspect of Japanese society, where high achievement in education is not only a personal goal but also a societal expectation (Kato et al., 2011). The intense competition in Japan's education system can lead to immense pressure on students to excel academically, starting from a young age. This pressure can contribute to stress, anxiety, and fear of failure among students, which may manifest in various forms of mental health challenges, including hikikomori (Saito, 2015).

Furthermore, career achievements are highly esteemed in Japanese culture, with lifelong employment traditionally valued and expected (Ogura, 2017). This expectation places considerable pressure on individuals to secure stable and prestigious careers, which may lead to intense work-related stress and anxiety, especially in a competitive job market.

The combination of these cultural values—conformity, academic success, and career achievements—can create a daunting environment for individuals who struggle to meet these expectations. For some, particularly young men, withdrawing from society and retreating into their homes may be a response to the overwhelming pressures and anxieties associated with navigating these societal demands (Suzuki & Kanoya, 2019).

Family Dynamics

Dysfunctional family relationships, including overprotective parenting or neglect, can contribute to the development of hikikomori. Dysfunctional family relationships, including overprotective parenting or neglect, play a significant role in contributing to the development of hikikomori. In Japan, where familial ties are traditionally strong and parental involvement can be intense, overprotective parenting styles are not uncommon. These parenting practices, intended to shield children from harm and ensure their success, may inadvertently stifle independence and self-reliance, leading to dependency and withdrawal behaviors (Kato et al., 2011).

Neglectful parenting, on the other hand, where emotional or physical needs of the child are not adequately met, can also contribute to the development of the hikikomori. Lack of emotional support and nurturing can leave children feeling isolated and unsupported, making it challenging for them to develop healthy social skills and relationships (Teo & Gaw, 2010). Family conflict or trauma during childhood further exacerbates social withdrawal tendencies among hikikomori individuals. Research indicates that adverse childhood experiences, such as parental divorce, domestic violence, or emotional abuse, can significantly impact psychological well-being and contribute to social withdrawal as a coping mechanism (Saito, 2013).

Understanding these familial dynamics is crucial in addressing the complex interplay between family relationships and the development of hikikomori. Interventions aimed at supporting both individuals and families can help mitigate the risk factors associated with dysfunctional family dynamics and promote healthier social integration.

Technological Influence

The widespread availability of technology and the Internet has facilitated social withdrawal. The widespread availability of technology and the Internet has profoundly influenced the phenomenon of the hikikomori, facilitating social withdrawal among affected individuals. Hikikomori individuals often retreat into virtual worlds and online communities, where they can find solace and a sense of belonging that may not be available in face-to-face interactions (Suwa et al., 2018). The anonymity and control over communication in online spaces provide a refuge from the pressures and anxieties of offline social interactions, contributing to prolonged periods of isolation.

The Internet's role in the life of the hikikomori is complex, serving both as a coping mechanism and a perpetuator of withdrawal behaviors. While online interactions can alleviate feelings of loneliness and provide a sense of community, they may also reinforce avoidance of real-world social situations and hinder the development of interpersonal skills (Teo & Gaw, 2010). This reliance on digital communication can exacerbate the social disconnection experienced by hikikomori individuals, further entrenching their withdrawal from society.

Understanding the impact of technology on hikikomori is crucial for developing interventions that balance the benefits of online support with the need for real-world social integration. Effective strategies should aim to leverage technology to facilitate gradual reintegration into offline social activities while addressing the underlying psychological factors driving social withdrawal.

Psychological Factors

Underlying mental health issues such as social anxiety disorder, depression, and low self-esteem play a significant role in the phenomenon of hikikomori, contributing to individuals' withdrawal from social interactions and their confinement to their homes for extended periods (Kawakami et al., 2016). These conditions often manifest early in life and can severely impair an individual's ability to engage in typical social activities and maintain meaningful relationships.

Social anxiety disorder, characterized by intense fear of social situations and scrutiny by others, may lead hikikomori individuals to avoid interpersonal interactions to alleviate anxiety and discomfort (Kawakami et al., 2016). Depression, marked by persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness, can further isolate individuals and diminish motivation for social engagement (Kawakami et al., 2016). Low self-esteem exacerbates these challenges, contributing to feelings of inadequacy and reluctance to participate in social activities where individuals fear judgment or rejection (Kawakami et al., 2016).

These mental health issues often co-occur and interact with socio-cultural factors to perpetuate hikikomori. For instance, societal pressures in Japan emphasizing academic and career success can intensify feelings of inadequacy and failure among individuals already struggling with mental health challenges (Kawakami et al., 2016). Consequently, affected individuals may retreat from society as a coping mechanism to avoid perceived stressors and threats to their self-esteem.

Economic Uncertainty

Economic factors, such as precarious job markets and financial instability, significantly influence the development and perpetuation of the hikikomori, contributing to feelings of hopelessness and withdrawal from society (Kondo et al., 2013). Kondo et al. (2013) highlight that in contexts where job opportunities are limited or unstable, individuals often encounter challenges in securing stable employment aligned with their skills and aspirations. This mismatch can heighten frustration and disillusionment, prompting individuals to withdraw socially as a coping mechanism against perceived failure or inadequacy in the labor market.

The authors suggest that economic instability exacerbates social withdrawal tendencies among hikikomori individuals, as evidenced by their retreat from social interactions. This withdrawal not only isolates individuals further but also reinforces their reluctance to engage in activities that could potentially alleviate feelings of isolation (Kondo et al., 2013). Furthermore, Kondo et al. (2013) argue that economic pressures impact individuals' self-esteem and sense of worth, especially in cultures where personal and familial success hinge largely on professional achievements. For hikikomori individuals, economic factors may perpetuate a cycle of withdrawal and disengagement as they navigate societal expectations and cope with uncertainties in the job market.

Public Perception and Opinion on the Male Social Recluse

Public perception and opinion on the male social recluse are shaped by the construct of the Japanese hikikomori. This means that societal views and attitudes towards individuals who withdraw from social interactions, particularly males, are influenced by the concept and media portrayal of the hikikomori in Japan. In Japanese culture, the hikikomori is widely recognized and has been extensively studied, leading to media coverage and public discourse about its causes and implications. This construct has shaped public perception in Japan and beyond, framing how society views social withdrawal and its consequences. The portrayal of hikikomori in media, academic research, and public discussions influences how people perceive similar behaviors globally, particularly in relation to young men who withdraw from social interactions. While the

hikikomori was initially recognized and extensively studied in Japan, there has been increasing interest in understanding similar phenomena in other countries and regions.

Research has indicated that similar patterns of social withdrawal akin to those of the hikikomori are observed in countries beyond Japan, albeit under different cultural contexts. These cases are often studied to understand whether the hikikomori manifests similarly or with unique characteristics in different cultural settings (Kawakami & Takeshima, 2010). Cross-cultural studies on hikikomori behaviors have investigated how cultural contexts shape the prevalence, manifestations, and outcomes of social withdrawal across different countries. These comparative studies, spanning regions like South Korea, China, and Western nations, highlight cultural nuances that influence the development and understanding of hikikomori-like behaviors (Teo & Gaw, 2010).

Meanwhile, globalization and advancements in technology have transformed the landscape of the hikikomori phenomenon. While the core features remain consistent, technological innovations have altered how individuals engage in and sustain social isolation (Sakamoto & Torales, 2019). In response, efforts to address the hikikomori globally emphasize culturally sensitive interventions tailored to local contexts. Research underscores the importance of developing strategies that effectively reintegrate socially withdrawn individuals into society, leveraging cultural insights and local resources (Wong et al., 2014).

Perceived Resonant Hikikomori Lived Experiences

Research on hikikomori often involves narratives and lived experiences shared by individuals themselves, providing valuable insights into their condition and perspectives. Studies on hikikomori often employ qualitative methods like narrative interviews to delve into individuals' lived experiences, offering insights into their perceptions and coping mechanisms (Kato et al., 2012). Autoethnographic approaches allow hikikomori individuals themselves to articulate their narratives, deepening understanding of the cultural contexts shaping their withdrawal (Tateno et al., 2012). Collaborative research methods are increasingly involving the hikikomori as partners, enhancing research authenticity by integrating their perspectives in study design and analysis (Wong et al., 2013). Furthermore, digital platforms and online storytelling provide avenues for hikikomori to share their experiences anonymously, expanding insights into their social withdrawal phenomena (Kawakami & Takeshima, 2010). These approaches collectively enrich the discourse on the hikikomori, fostering a nuanced understanding through diverse methodological lenses. However, these studies predominantly center on the Japanese hikikomori. Nevertheless, there are some instances where comparisons or discussions involving non-Japanese contexts, such as Hong Kong in Wong et al. (2013), provide insights into cross-cultural variations. And yet, the primary focus remains on understanding hikikomori within its original Japanese context.

Philosophical Underpinning

Heideggerian phenomenology is highly relevant in studying the lived experiences of global hikikomori because it focuses on understanding how individuals experience their world and their existence within it. Martin Heidegger's phenomenological approach emphasizes the existential aspects of human experience, such as being-in-the-world, authenticity, and temporality (Crowell, 2013). For the hikikomori, who withdraw from society into isolated spaces, Heideggerian concepts can illuminate their subjective experiences of being and non-being, their relationship with technology as a mediator of their world, and their struggle with existential anxiety and boredom (Wong, 2020). Heidegger's notion of "being-towards-death" also resonates with the hikikomori who confront existential crises and perceptions of a meaningless future (Kawamura, 2019). Studying the hikikomori through a Heideggerian lens helps reveal the profound existential dimensions of their withdrawal and offers insights into their quest for meaning and authenticity in a digitally mediated world.

Statement of the Problem

This study investigated the lived experiences of non-Japanese males who identify as hikikomori that are shared as part of a YouTube anthology video. The global hikikomori, a person who believes he/she/they manifests the behaviors of the Japanese hikikomori but emerging from non-Japanese contexts, have yet to be extensively

investigated as their Japanese counterparts. Such lived experiences, identified as hikikomori experiences, are considered here as perceived to be resonant with but not the same as the latter ('perceived resonant hikikomori lived experiences'). Resonant lived experiences encompass deeply personal and subjective moments that profoundly resonate with individuals on emotional, psychological, or spiritual levels (Smith, 2018). These experiences evoke strong feelings of connection, understanding, or significance within an individual's life story or personal narrative (Jones & Brown, 2020). They often include pivotal events, transformative realizations, or intense emotional encounters that shape one's identity or worldview (Adams, 2019; White, 2021). Examples of resonant lived experiences can range from epiphanies that lead to profound understanding (Johnson, 2017) to transformative life events such as marriages or spiritual awakenings (Clark & Green, 2016). They may also include encounters with adversity that foster personal growth and resilience (Davis & Wilson, 2019). These experiences are integral to shaping individual narratives and contributing to a sense of meaning and coherence in life (Miller, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This research focused on a single YouTube anthology video comprising first-person narratives of global hikikomori, rather than multiple independent confessional videos. Therefore, it constitutes a single case study based on similar lived experiences if the anthology video is the object of investigation. Titled "Global Hikikomori: Our Stories" and posted by Hiroshi Yamazoe: Hikikomori, the anthology has garnered 5,290 subscribers and 992 likes as of July 12, 2024, describing itself as "a compilation of 11 Hikikomori stories shared by people from all around the world, who at some point in life chose to withdraw from society (Hikikomori = shut in)." This study, focusing on male persons, excluded narratives from hikikomori-identifying females, two of whom were part of the video anthology. The video was transcribed using the free online video transcriber, www.kome.ai, converting verbal content into written form. Thematic analysis of the nine transcripts aimed to elucidate the essence of the global hikikomori construct, representing adult males from diverse countries who perceive their lived experiences as resonant with those of Japanese hikikomori.

RESULTS

Lived experiences of global hikikomori

Baron (23-year old German). The narrator's experiences encompass significant challenges and growth, beginning with childhood weakness and bullying that fostered a negative mindset, leading to the belief that "everyone would always be unkind to me no matter where I went and that there were no good people left." At age 13, the narrator entered a hikikomori phase, spending days playing video games, watching TV, or being on the Internet. Severe social anxiety developed, causing physical symptoms during interactions with strangers. Despite struggling with education due to anxiety, the narrator graduated from evening school at 18. Post-graduation, job market discrimination based on educational background and ongoing anxiety prompted the narrator to pursue higher education in the social field. Pivotal internships at a hospital and a disabled people's home challenged the narrator to confront anxieties and provided new perspectives on life. Helping vulnerable populations facilitated personal growth and a more positive outlook. Acknowledging ongoing struggles, the narrator remains hopeful and aspires to assist others in similar situations, believing that "things will get better and that I will continue to grow in life."

Ben (16-year old Italian/American). The narrator, laid off from a pharmaceutical company in November 2019 due to outsourcing, planned to take "three months off just to rest at home before starting to find work again in 2020," but extended this period due to the pandemic, adding another "six months to wait and see how the world would be." They fear the new working culture, which "apparently have shifted so much compared to when I joined this company in 2008." Influenced by a mother who worked for the same company for 35 years, the narrator valued loyalty: "Work hard for the company, make the company see you as an indispensable asset, and you're set for life." However, with changes in management and increased automation, they realized "the values that I held high all this time were no longer of use." Despite looking for job openings, they experienced "sudden anxiety" and feared a hostile work environment: "I don't want to meet these people again." The narrator, living off "my mother's pension" and savings, fears re-entering society and believes they need to "fix

whatever is wrong with my mindset first." Their life has been marked by substance abuse, homelessness, isolation, and despair, with no relationships or hobbies: "I genuinely don't know why I am still here." Despite a talent with computers, the narrator's family sold their computer for drugs, leaving them without means to pursue interests, resulting in a life of "waking up the next day hoping something might change."

Paul (24-year old German). The narrator's journey from childhood to employment is marked by isolation, fear of disapproval, and academic struggles. Despite making friends, the narrator felt different and shy: "I feel like I could never fully relate to the other kids. I was a shy kid, very shy." Fear of parental disapproval prevented participation in mischief: "Every time someone would want to do something that would be naughty or mean to others, I would usually back off because I would fear what my parents would think of me." This led to bullying: "Other kids used to bully me for being different and not showing my true feelings." High school pressures increased: "I started feeling the pressure from my parents' high expectations," resulting in procrastination and low grades: "I managed to graduate high school even while having the lowest grades." College proved too stressful, leading to resignation: "The pressure of school and long transport hours was just too much for me, so well, I had to resign." Feeling lost, the narrator became a hikikomori, withdrawing from society and spending all day online: "I spent all of my days in front of a computer screen... living my life online." Parental disappointment followed: "My parents were really disappointed in me for not being employed." In 2013 or 2014, the narrator found fulfillment as a paramedic: "I felt both happy and proud of this role of mine." The job provided purpose and socialization: "I finally had a place to be outside of my house, a place to socialize and feel needed as well supported." The hikikomori experience taught valuable lessons: "Never lose hope and to always love yourself no matter what because in the end we only have ourselves."

Ossian (age-non-specific Swedish). The narrator identifies as a hikikomori due to "depression, anxiety and a disability leaving me in a wheelchair" and has not left home "in any significant way for the last eight or so years." Changing schools at age 12 led to a loss of friends, and they never made new ones: "I lost contact with the friends I used to have and I never got any new friends." They dropped out of school at 16 because of loneliness and anxiety and have never had a job due to lack of education and disability, feeling hopeless about the future: "It doesn't feel like I ever will." The COVID-19 pandemic has given others a glimpse into their daily life: "I feel that the COVID-19 pandemic has given everyone a taste of what daily life is like for us." They spend most of their time playing video games, watching movies, or researching topics online to avoid thinking about their life: "I do it mostly to waste time so I don't have to think about what's going on in my life." Despite a strong desire to connect with people, the narrator feels the weight of loneliness: "The loneliness is slowly smothering me." They feel they are falling further behind socially every day: "I'm getting more socially behind every day," and desperately want to escape their current lifestyle: "I desperately want out of my shutting ways." Their life lacks stimulation and meaning, leading to a deep sense of hopelessness: "All I'm doing in my life is killing time until time kills me, and there's no decent way of living your life."

Chris (28-year old Indonesian). The narrator's hikikomori state began after returning to their home country: "I had experienced the hikikomori state when I was overseas in 2017." Career setbacks included being unable to secure a sponsorship visa and struggling to find a job: "I just graduated and quit my first full-time job to seek an opportunity to get a sponsorship visa but yeah after two years of staying I failed." Strained family relationships, exacerbated by their father's remarriage, also played a role: "My relationship with my parents was never good to begin with ever since my father divorced and remarried again with another woman." The narrator faced significant challenges with employment, including frequent job changes: "Most employers don't think I have solid skills since I had to jump around several companies when I was working overseas," underpayment, and a toxic work environment: "The first company lied to me and didn't pay me in full so I had to quit by force." Cultural differences in the workplace were another issue: "The working culture in my country is mostly kind of forcing people to talk a lot with your other workmates." Health issues due to stress and living conditions further compounded their difficulties: "My chest pain was coming back again after enduring it for a while." The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges: "This was already at the beginning of 2020 and then the pandemic hits." Loss of motivation and confidence ensued due to lack of support and financial problems: "I was starting to lose the desire to draw since almost no one supported my work." Despite this, their passion for drawing and creating stories helped maintain some motivation: "Somehow making my creations alive are the one big reason that keeps me feeling sane and have the

motivation to live." They remain determined to achieve their dreams and improve their situation: "I keep pushing myself to progress each day so I can keep on walking even if it's for point zero zero zero zero one percent toward my big goal," with a particular desire to work overseas in Japan: "I want to stay creating some creative works stories and one day can also work overseas if it's possible I want it to be Japan."

Hegemonikon (26-year old Italian). The narrator, a 26-year-old man with no job, social life, and still living with his parents, suffers from depression, ADHD, and agoraphobia: "I suffer from depression since I was nine, I have ADHD and I am agoraphobic." Realizing his hikikomori state through others' experiences, he reflects on his journey with fear of sharing: "I've ridden many times about myself and my journey through life but I've never shared it with anyone so I'm kinda scared to do it now." Diagnosed with depression at nine after being bullied at school, ineffective psychological help exacerbated his struggles: "He didn't understand what I was going through and it got to the point where he started to mock me for not being able to get better." Isolation and suicidal thoughts followed: "I thought about death all the time and I became suicidal at 10 to the point where I almost jumped off a building." Despite physically reacting to bullying to stop it, relationships deteriorated due to fear of rejection: "I was afraid of showing them my personality because maybe they would have thought I wasn't funny enough or smart enough." Immersing himself in solitary activities as escapism, he struggled academically due to undiagnosed ADHD and depression: "I didn't do well at school partially because of my depression and partially because of my ADHD which I didn't know I had at the time." Job anxiety and panic attacks prevented him from maintaining employment: "I tried to get a job but my anxiety and panic attacks made my life a living hell." Pre-pandemic isolation, with the gym as his only social outlet, led to his current hikikomori state, largely confined to his home: "Now I'm a hikikomori. In the last six months I left home three times." Despite his struggles, he holds onto hope and practices stoicism and meditation: "Hope is everything I got left."

Blazeaster (age-non-specific Serbian). The narrator's social anxiety began early and was exacerbated by a traumatic event: "I was never good at socializing since I can remember...I got into a play fight only that the other person thought it was a real fight...his punches and anger were real." Severe bullying led to a decline in academic performance: "I was bullied constantly... I fell from being top of my class all the way to barely scraping by." Despite this, they found solace in a friendship: "Nearing the end of middle school I was lucky to make my first real friend." High school was negative, leading to dropping out: "Classes were boring... I dropped out only a few months in." Music became a creative outlet: "I made a deal with my parents that I would give school another try just as long as they buy me a guitar." Their first job helped improve social skills, but was short-lived: "At the age of 18 I started working full time...the whole business failed very soon after." Joining a band brought success but ended in betrayal: "She cheated on me with my best friend." A violent attack deepened mental health issues: "Strangers beat me up... That pushed me over the edge." They turned to substance abuse and struggled with mental health treatment: "I sought psychiatric help but... I started drinking heavily." Hospitalizations marked their struggle: "In 2014... I was forced into a mental hospital for a month... In 2017 I got hospitalized once again." Significant loss and relocation further destabilized their life: "My very good friend died... I moved to a big city... I had to swallow my pride and go back to my parents' house." Suicidal thoughts and fear of the outside world are major themes: "On New Year's Eve 2018 I tried to kill myself once again." Despite challenges, they express a strong desire to return to a normal life: "I just want to go back to normal... I just want to live and reintegrate with a society but I just don't know how."

Damien (31-year old French). The narrator's upbringing was shaped by a modest household with a single mother, as their father had left before their birth. Early on, they struggled with isolation and psychological challenges, prompting visits to psychologists from elementary school where they found it difficult to integrate with peers. Despite a strong aversion to school, they pushed through with mediocre academic performance, driven by their mother's encouragement. Their hikikomori period began at age 13 after discovering online gaming, which they described as a trigger for their isolation: "It was at the age of 13 that I discovered my first online game which for me was one of the triggers of my hikikomori period." This period was marked by intense dislike for school and violent thoughts, including imagining a Columbine high school massacre. They found solace in isolation and solo gaming, gradually emerging from their hikikomori state around age 22 after multiple school failures. Coping mechanisms included turning to drugs to cope with the challenges of reality: "To cope with this evil being I started using drugs." They navigated through various low-paid jobs while living

with their mother and battled suicidal thoughts and risky behavior. At 24, entering their first relationship became a turning point, bringing personal growth and a shift away from their gaming comfort zone: "I started to travel; this was my first real relationship." Marriage at 26 to a Japanese woman and becoming a father brought stability and happiness, though they still struggle with leaving home and rely on alcohol during stressful situations. Despite lingering fears of relapse, they remain committed to fatherhood and hopeful about experiencing more of life in the future: "I'd like to stay a bit longer on this planet and see a bit of the future."

Mantis (32-year old English). The narrator reflects on common struggles shared by everyone, emphasizing the importance of personal stories and challenges: "If there's one thing that all of us have in common it's that we have a story; none of us got where we are overnight." Early on, they faced bullying, familial issues, and struggled to form friendships, coping by immersing themselves in books and video games: "I coped with the sadness by escaping to fantasylands in books and video games." Despite school difficulties and betrayal, college brought positive changes with friendships, relationships, and academic success: "Somehow I managed to turn my life around during my college years." However, their life took a turn with an epilepsy diagnosis after a seizure on Christmas Day 2008, leading to denial and frequent hospitalizations. They eventually accepted their hikikomori state after a public seizure in class, developing agoraphobia and avoiding social interactions. Despite acceptance, they yearn for change and hope to help others: "I do not want to be a hikikomori... one day I want to help people avoid the horrors of hikikomori." Dreaming of a new life, they acknowledge the difficulty of recovering from years of isolation but remain committed to trying their best: "All I can say is that I will try my best."

Themes Emerging from the Childhood Lived Experiences of the Global Hikikomori

The childhood lived experiences of a global hikikomori reveal recurring themes and significant events that contribute to their withdrawal from society. Early in life, many hikikomori faced (1) **severe challenges like bullying and social isolation**, as one individual recalls, "I hated school since the start I was bullied constantly..." This persistent mistreatment can foster feelings of inadequacy and mistrust towards others, **paving the way for later withdrawal behaviors**. Family dynamics also play a crucial role, with (2) **instances of single-parent upbringing and strained relationships impacting emotional development**, as expressed in, "I was educated by my single mother... I felt unloved by my family as a child." (3) **Academic struggles and traumatic school experiences further solidify negative perceptions of society**, as evidenced by another's account of being physically abused and academically distant. (4) **Early onset of mental health issues** such as depression and anxiety, along with later diagnoses like epilepsy, significantly hinder social engagement: "I suffered from depression since I was nine... my anxiety and panic attacks made my life a living hell." (5) **Coping mechanisms such as immersion in fantasy worlds** through books and video games provide comfort and control amidst emotional turmoil, reinforcing withdrawal from real-world interactions perceived as threatening. (6) **Attempts at integration, like starting college or forming relationships, often precede or follow phases of withdrawal**, underscoring the complex and fluctuating nature of hikikomori experiences. (7) **Traumatic events like seizures exacerbate social withdrawal and psychological distress**: "My seizures cause short-term amnesia..." Overall, these childhood experiences illustrate how psychological stressors, traumatic events, social challenges, and coping mechanisms collectively shape the hikikomori's decision to withdraw from society as a means of self-protection and emotional survival.

Themes Emerging from the Adulthood Lived Experiences of the Global Hikikomori

In adulthood, the global hikikomori continues to grapple with the enduring effects of childhood traumas and ongoing mental health challenges, manifesting in themes of social isolation, employment instability, and reliance on coping mechanisms. (1) **The struggle with employment is common**, often exacerbated by anxiety and depression. As one hikikomori confesses, "I have no job, no social life, and still living with my parents...I isolated myself before the pandemic". This withdrawal from societal expectations and interactions is reinforced by (2) **difficulties in maintaining employment due to low self-esteem and anxiety**. (3) **Mental health issues** play a pivotal role in their lives, with many resorting to coping mechanisms such as substance abuse or online isolation to manage emotional distress. This reliance is starkly illustrated in statements like, "I started drinking heavily...as the only thing that made me brave enough to step out of my house". (4) **Traumatic health crises and hospitalizations** further intensify their withdrawal, heightening fears and anxieties about engaging with

the outside world. Despite these challenges, there persists a (5) **hope for change and a desire for societal reintegration**, often articulated through introspective narratives and aspirations for personal growth. Through self-reflection and storytelling, the global hikikomori aims to raise awareness and potentially guide others away from similar life challenges, demonstrating resilience and a longing for improved quality of life.

Common Themes Associated with the Global Hikikomori

Social Isolation and Alienation: Social isolation is a pervasive theme that spans from childhood experiences of bullying and loneliness to adulthood characterized by withdrawal from social interactions. In childhood, one hikikomori describes enduring bullying and isolation: "I was bullied constantly... made fun of because of my looks since grade one". This early alienation shaped their perception of social environments as threatening or unwelcoming, influencing their withdrawal into solitary activities.

In adulthood, this isolation persisted, often exacerbated by mental health challenges and employment instability. As articulated by another hikikomori, "I have no job, no social life, and still living with my parents... I isolated myself before the pandemic". This ongoing isolation reflects a deeper emotional and social disconnection, impacting their sense of belonging and self-worth.

Family Dynamics and Emotional Support. Family dynamics play a pivotal role in the development and continuation of hikikomori behaviors. Childhood experiences of familial dysfunction or emotional neglect can contribute to feelings of insecurity and loneliness. One global hikikomori reflects on their upbringing: "I coped with the sadness by escaping to fantasylands in books and video games", highlighting a lack of emotional support at home and a reliance on solitary activities for comfort.

In adulthood, the relationship with family continues to influence their well-being and coping mechanisms. Despite reaching adulthood, many hikikomori individuals remain dependent on their parents for support, both financial and emotional. As noted by another individual, "My parents urged me to focus on school and not the job... I isolated myself before the pandemic". This dependency underscores unresolved familial dynamics that contribute to their ongoing withdrawal from society.

Coping Mechanisms and Mental Health Challenges. Coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, online isolation, or immersion in solitary activities are prevalent across both childhood and adulthood. These mechanisms serve as temporary relief from emotional distress but can perpetuate their isolation and exacerbate mental health conditions. For instance, one hikikomori mentions using drugs ordered online to manage anxiety: "I started using drugs I ordered on the internet to get out of my house and face reality", highlighting maladaptive coping strategies developed early on.

In adulthood, these coping mechanisms evolve but continue to impact their daily lives and relationships. Another hikikomori describes the role of alcohol in managing social anxiety: "I started drinking heavily as it was the only thing that made me brave enough to step out of my house". These behaviors not only reflected ongoing mental health challenges but also underscored the complex interplay between coping strategies and social withdrawal.

Desire for Change and Self-Reflection. Despite the pervasive challenges, there is a recurring theme of self-reflection and a desire for personal growth and societal reintegration. Through storytelling and introspection, the global hikikomori expressed a longing for change and a hope to connect with others. As articulated by one individual, "One day I want to help people avoid the horrors of hikikomori... I hope people will see my story as a lesson", indicating a desire to raise awareness and advocate for understanding.

This aspiration for change reflects resilience and a recognition of their circumstances, despite the barriers they face. It underscores their willingness to confront their isolation and seek paths towards recovery and societal acceptance, highlighting a persistent hope for a better future despite the challenges of their past and present experiences.

Characteristic Self-Awareness of the Global Hikikomori

The self-awareness of a global hikikomori often revolves around their recognition of their social withdrawal and its impact on their lives. They identify themselves as hikikomori through various benchmarks or milestones that mark their journey of isolation and introspection.

Recognition of Social Withdrawal. Hikikomori individuals often come to terms with their withdrawal from society as a defining characteristic. They acknowledge their reluctance or inability to engage in social interactions and external activities. One hikikomori reflected on their self-perception: "Now I'm a hikikomori. In the last six months, I left home three times". This acknowledgment highlights their awareness of their withdrawal from societal norms and expectations.

Impact on Daily Life and Routine. For many hikikomori, milestones are marked by significant changes in their daily routines and behaviors due to their isolation. They often identify pivotal moments where their withdrawal became more pronounced or when they realized the extent of their avoidance behaviors. As articulated by another individual, "I have no job, no social life, and still living with my parents... I try to take care of myself as much as I can". This self-awareness reflects an understanding of how their hikikomori state affects their daily lives and personal responsibilities.

Introspection and Self-Labeling. Hikikomori individuals engage in introspection to understand their condition and its causes. They often label themselves as hikikomori based on their experiences of social anxiety, withdrawal, and dependency. One hikikomori described their journey: "For years, I had thought depression was the main cause of all my suffering... I'm a hikikomori." This self-identification signifies a deep introspective process where they recognize their withdrawal as a specific condition rather than just a consequence of broader mental health issues.

Seeking Community and Validation. Despite their isolation, hikikomori individuals often seek validation and understanding within online communities or through storytelling. They may share their experiences to connect with others who share similar challenges. As expressed by one hikikomori, "I want people to see my story as a lesson... to help people avoid the horrors of hikikomori." This desire for community acknowledgment underscores their awareness of their condition and their efforts to foster empathy and support.

Thus, the consciousness of a hikikomori is marked by a profound self-awareness of their withdrawal from society, the impact on their daily life, and their efforts to articulate and understand their condition through introspection and community engagement. These individuals recognized milestones such as increased isolation, dependency on family, and a distinct self-identification as hikikomori, reflecting their journey of self-discovery amidst social challenges.

DISCUSSION

Resonances of the Global Hikikomori with Findings of Studies on Wellbeing of Males

Recent studies on men's sense of wellbeing resonate deeply with the themes discussed in the lives of hikikomori individuals, particularly in terms of social isolation, mental health challenges, and identity struggles.

Social Isolation and Loneliness. Studies indicate that males often experience social isolation and loneliness, which can significantly impact their mental health and overall wellbeing. The hikikomori's withdrawal from society mirrors this phenomenon, where they feel disconnected and alienated. Research highlights that males may struggle with forming and maintaining social connections due to societal expectations of masculinity, which can contribute to feelings of isolation similar to those experienced by hikikomori individuals (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

Mental Health Stigma and Coping Mechanisms. Both hikikomori individuals and males in general may face stigma surrounding mental health issues. Hikikomori often cope with their challenges through withdrawal and

avoidance, reflecting a broader reluctance among males to seek help for psychological issues due to fear of judgment or appearing weak. Recent studies emphasize the importance of addressing mental health stigma and promoting accessible, stigma-free support systems to encourage males to seek help proactively (Oliffe & Han, 2014).

Identity and Self-Perception. The males' sense of identity and self-perception can be heavily influenced by societal expectations and norms, much like how hikikomori individuals navigate their self-identification. The pressure to conform to traditional masculine ideals can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy or failure when faced with challenges like unemployment or relationship difficulties. Recent research underscores the need for promoting diverse and inclusive models of masculinity to support males in developing healthier self-concepts (Mahalik et al., 2003).

Seeking Support and Community Connection. Both hikikomori individuals and males in broader society benefit from supportive social networks and communities. Studies indicate that males who participate in supportive friendships and communities tend to experience improved mental health outcomes and a greater sense of wellbeing. Encouraging males to cultivate meaningful connections and engage in open discussions about their emotions can help mitigate feelings of loneliness and isolation, similar to the supportive environments that hikikomori individuals may seek online or in specialized communities (Seidler et al., 2016).

Hence, recent study findings on males' wellbeing highlight parallels with the themes observed in the lives of hikikomori individuals, emphasizing the importance of addressing social isolation, mental health stigma, identity struggles, and the role of supportive communities in promoting overall wellbeing among males. By understanding and addressing these challenges, both hikikomori individuals and males in general can work towards cultivating healthier and more fulfilling lives.

Resonances: Global and Japanese Hikikomori

The global hikikomori experience resonates with its Japanese counterpart in several key ways, despite cultural variances. Both exhibit social withdrawal as a coping mechanism against societal pressures and personal challenges (Saito, 2013). Mental health issues like depression and anxiety are prevalent among hikikomori in both contexts (Kondo et al., 2020), influenced significantly by family dynamics that contribute to their withdrawal behaviors (Teo & Gaw, 2010). Educational and employment struggles, along with the pervasive role of digital technology in facilitating isolation, are common features across global and Japanese hikikomori populations (Lee & Park, 2015; Wong, 2018). These parallels underscore universal aspects of hikikomori experiences while acknowledging the nuanced impacts of cultural contexts on their manifestation and coping strategies.

Dissonances: The Distinct Contexts and Complexity of the Global Hikikomori

The global hikikomori experience encompasses a distinct complexity shaped by diverse cultural, social, and individual factors beyond the boundaries of Japan (Smith, 2020). Unlike the traditional Japanese phenomenon, which is heavily influenced by specific societal pressures and cultural norms (Saito, 2013), global hikikomori reflects a broader spectrum of experiences and challenges.

Cultural Diversity. One of the defining aspects of global hikikomori is cultural diversity. These individuals come from various cultural backgrounds with unique societal expectations, family structures, and educational systems (Jones & Lee, 2018). Cultural norms regarding social interaction, mental health stigma, and expectations for personal achievement vary widely, influencing how the hikikomori perceive and experience their withdrawal from society (Brown, 2019).

Varied Family Dynamics. Unlike the often-discussed family dynamics in Japan where parental expectations and pressures can contribute significantly to hikikomori behaviors (Kato, 2011), global hikikomori may experience a range of family environments. This includes single-parent households, blended families, or cultural contexts where familial roles and expectations differ significantly from the Japanese norm (Chen et al., 2020).

Educational and Social Pressures. While academic pressure is a hallmark of Japanese hikikomori, global hikikomori may face different educational challenges. These could stem from academic expectations, bullying, discrimination, or difficulties in integrating into new educational systems, particularly in multicultural societies where assimilation into mainstream culture can be challenging (Miller, 2017).

Access to Healthcare and Support. The availability and accessibility of healthcare services and mental health support systems vary globally. Global hikikomori may encounter barriers in seeking professional help, whether due to financial constraints, cultural stigma surrounding mental health, or inadequate healthcare infrastructure in their respective countries (World Health Organization, 2020).

Diverse Coping Mechanisms. Similar to the Japanese hikikomori, global counterparts often develop coping mechanisms to navigate their isolated lifestyles. These may include immersive activities such as online gaming, creative pursuits, or solitary hobbies (Nguyen & Smith, 2016). However, the specific choices and availability of these activities can vary widely based on cultural interests and local resources.
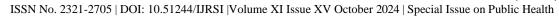
Impact of Globalization and Technology. The interconnectedness brought about by globalization and the prevalence of digital technology play a significant role in the lives of global hikikomori. Online communities, social media, and digital platforms offer alternative avenues for social interaction and expression, influencing how individuals perceive and manage their isolation (Lee & Park, 2015).

Intersection with Migration and Diaspora: For the hikikomori persons who are immigrants or part of diasporic communities, the experience of social withdrawal may intersect with issues of acculturation, identity negotiation, and discrimination (Gupta, 2019). These individuals may face additional challenges in reconciling cultural expectations from their country of origin with those of their current environment.

In essence, the global hikikomori experience represents a complex tapestry of cultural, social, and personal factors that shape their withdrawal from society. Understanding these complexities is essential for developing culturally sensitive interventions and support systems that address the diverse needs of hikikomori worldwide, promoting mental health and well-being across different cultural contexts.

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