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The Revolutionary Act of Staying Indoors

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Asian Languages and Cultures Senior Seminar 397

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12/4/2020

Introduction

There is a certain condition that exists in modern Japan that plagues people's lives and causes their world to come to a halt. Here, the mere thought of leaving their room is unthinkable, let alone going to school or working. They fill their time with games and other mindless entertainment, continuing to live on in their world away from society. Such is the *Hikikomori,* or as it roughly translates to acute social withdrawal. By nature, it is hard to say just how much this condition plagues Japanese people, as they seclude themselves in their rooms, hidden from the world. However, somewhere along with this narrative, the media has portrayed Hikikomori as mostly young adult men. Even in academia, the ratio of male to female Hikikomori is reported as 4:1 (Teo, 2010). Due to the inherent nature of this condition, it is difficult to make a definitive conclusion as to whether or not this bias is true. Regardless of this ratio, societal understandings of a condition that is 4 times more prevalent among men reveal much about the underlying gender expectations that Japanese men face. Therefore, these heavily skewed societal understandings of Hikikomori and will alter how women who are in similar positions are portrayed.

Definitions of a Hikikomori

It is first important to define *Hikikomori* to get a full understanding of its uniqueness from other psychopathologies. In his literary review, Alan Teo cites the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare for Japan on their criteria.

1. A lifestyle centered at home

2. No interest or willingness to attend school or work

3. Persistence of symptoms beyond six months

4. Other mental disorders have been excluded

5. Among those with no interest or willingness to attend school or work, those who

   maintain personal relationships (e.g., friendships) have been excluded (Teo, 2010)

During this social withdrawal, they typically do not leave their room, and have no close and intimate contact with people, except for some exchanges with family members. What's important to note is that people may exhibit these tendencies in various ways that make it hard to predict and generalize behaviors. There are cases where people may communicate exclusively through the internet or some cases where people may step outside, though during times when they feel like they can go unnoticed by society. Notice the emphasis on other mental disorders being excluded; meaning that while Hikikomori may display other symptoms of other mental illnesses, that something about their condition is uniquely different than other diagnoses. By definition, the diagnostic material does not specify gender and does not yet recommend different types of treatment. Therefore, there must be some societal explanation that would explain where such a distinct narrative on the gender difference in Hikikomori.

Psychopathology of Hikikomori Based on Gender

A study done in 2019 by Yong and Nomura reveals that dropping out of schooling or work is heavily associated with Hikikomori. This may be due to childhood trauma that stems from bullying or the ultimate failure to achieve societal expectations. It's important to note the importance of good schooling, which many believe leads directly into a high-paying job and the association of this to masculinity. If we follow the perspective of the male Hikikomori, the argument here is that their relation to manhood has been taken away from them. A review in 212 by Vandello and Bossan calls this phenomenon *precarious manhood,* as they describe the criteria as follows:

1.Manhood must be earned (in the context of society, this would be a high-paying job)

2. Manhood can be taken away at any point in time.

3. You must display this manhood for others to see (stressing the importance that manhood is a social construct and is only sustained through social approval).

Many Hikikomori develop their social withdrawal tendencies in the early 20s and indicating their failure to transition from childhood to adulthood. For the Hikikomori male, when they shut themselves in their room, this is their way of reclaiming that adulthood and defining masculinity for themselves.

But for women, it is more likely that their struggles continue to go unnoticed. In their study, Yong and Numura also cite that while they found a gender difference between men and women Hikikomori, other studies are not so conclusive (Yong, Numura, 2019). Especially in rural areas of Japan, the ratio of men and women who are Hikikomori is very similar. In another survey by Yong, et al., they found a distinction in the association of men and women Hikikomori, "Furthermore, after adjusting for all tested variables as possible confounding factors, being jobless and having fewer outdoor frequencies were associated with being a hikikomori man, and being a homemaker and having no social support were associated with being a hikikomori woman." Clearly, the way in which Hikikomori present themselves is very different, with significant emphasis on jobs for men and homemaker for women. While still pertaining to their social roles, it is the case that Hikikomori women's struggles are "invisible," and thus lack the support and space in society to have their voices heard.

Hikikomori in Anime

It's important to talk about anime as this is one such form that Hikikomori will consume. The concept of animation being able to depict anything to the creator's ability opens an entire world full of creative possibilities. Though, as it seems to be in the case of Hikikomori, the stereotype of Otaku also gets linked to them. Otaku is seen to be very materialistic and also overindulge in purchasing anime paraphernalia. Things like figures, posters, manga, mousepads, games, etc. all have a purpose in allowing these consumers to purchase a lot and fill their room to the brim. In some ways, it offers escapism, but at the same time, it isolates people even more and collects into a suffocating pile of consumerist trash. Of course, each case of Hikikomori is different and unique, but given the stereotype that often is associated with Hikimori about being anime lovers, it is worthwhile to analyze how someone who is a Hikikomori might view themselves through this lens.

Caption: *Image that advertises the anime for Himotou Umaru-Chan. Besides the brown-haired character, every other humanoid figure in the frame is Umaru, though notice the distinction between her two forms. She has many more expressions in her Chibi form and emphasizes her self-indulgent nature when she is in this form.*

Himiotou Umaru-Chan is one such anime that presents the resistance from society for a woman to express her antisocial tendencies in an attempt to sell her deviances as cute and commodifiable. Umaru is a younger sister, a high school girl, and most importantly, a self-

indulgent gamer. Her character represents an interesting dichotomy; in public, she has perfect looks, achieves perfect grades, and is always humble and gracious making her the ideal girl. Though, when she comes home after school, she transforms into a cute chibi version of herself who will stay up throughout the night to play games, eat unhealthily, and keep up on all of the anime shows. In this form, she is helpless, in both physical form and mental capabilities, and all she knows how to do is play games and eat convenience store snacks. Instead of going outside to get her own food, she relies on her brother to provide for her and either cook or pick up snacks for her on his way home from work. Her ideal social standings juxtaposed with such a self-indulgent nature all point to the impossibility of her character, which creates the appeal of the show. Even though she seems to be the most capable, she still relies on her brother to provide the most necessities to her. In her chibi-state, this helplessness enables viewers to feel a sense of superiority to her through her cute demeanor and soft design. This means that the things she says and her desires can be dismissed as something of a childish desire and not be read into much further. Yet when we consider how these qualities in women are undesirable, we can further see the more problematic tendencies of this representation.

In one scene where Umaru-chan is left to attend her apartment alone, we see her in a more naturalistic and regressive state. She can fully eat any snack she wants and drink as much cola as she can, all while playing her favorite game without her brother watching over her telling her when to go to bed. Instead of throwing a party or going out to social events, the emphasis of worry is focused more on if Umaru can properly take care of herself, drawing on her dependency on her older brother. When he finally returns from his business trip, we see her rush to him and confess how, despite being able to stay up as late as she wanted, she missed her brother and the dependent relationship is reinforced. For a Hikikomori to be sustainable, they will need the

support of someone, even though the relationship is skewed. However, Umaru herself cannot be classified as a Hikikomori. For one, she is designed as a high school girl, and she still goes to school, achieves perfect grades even. For another, she has a group of friends who she hangs out with throughout the show. However, it's important to note that these things all take place in another form, her ideal form. This is what she wears when she is seen by people who she doesn't know, and when she comes home, that is her other form.

The idea that Umaru cannot be represented as one person in one form, and that the tendency to play games and eat junk food has to be represented in a more digestible and cute form of a young high school girl plays on the idea of the impossibility of society to accept that women are allowed to express antisocial tendencies. For more or less, Umaru is still expected to produce, and only has the night time to be comfortable. There's another dynamic to the show that is people finding out about her "true" nature at home. One character, Kirie, befriends Umaru in her "true" form, referring to her as *sensei*, as a sign of respect and admiration. Umaru's character represents Japanese society's reluctance to cast women in roles of those who are shut-ins and enjoy games, because of the assumption that women need to be desirable to men. It's not enough to just represent these problems in anime, but create it in a cute and marketable way that appeals to a wider male audience.

Conclusion

With animated depictions of women like this, creators can get the ideal version of a woman at the expense of minimizing someone's problems and experiences. Some numbers estimate that the amount of *Hikikomori* present in Japanese society today may be in the millions and that this problem will continue to rise if things are not done. Is this just an act of reclaiming one's gender identity, or is it also a problem that continues to be overlooked by the masses?

Society's tendency to create desirable depictions of women and create them into a marketable form of media only further alienates and alters the experiences of said population. In that same vein, for men, it creates an even more isolating and pressured instance of providing for society. Again, the gender-role of being a provider has fallen onto men.

It's important to note too, there is a prevalence of *Hikikomori* in other countries as well. Social isolation is a common theme among many late-stage capitalist societies. Japan, however, has taken a different approach to tackle this concept, as it is more talked accepted in society as a condition. Other countries, for example, do not have the same kind of language or understanding for social isolation (Kato, 2011). This is a condition that is reactionary to a larger issue within a society that asks us to turn our bodies into a producing machine. Our sense of worth is determined by our proximity to capital gain, and when that sense of value is lost, how are we to ever gain it back?

People's self-worth should not be based on their relation to goods but their relationship with others. We have effectively removed that by reinforcing stereotypes against many identities, including gender. As we reconcile with how to properly address sexism within our society, it should also reflect our healthcare and how we care for people. Yet, we are so focused on only those who produce, men, and the phenomena that they suddenly remove all of the desire to want to work. In this way, we are overlooking the problems of other identities and effectively bias our understanding and treatment. In this way, if we value the lives of those most vulnerable and overlooked, we can begin to change the ways of thinking and how societies are run. Humans are not meant to be alone, rather grow together.

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