



**THE REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE
SOCIAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY OF ANKARA
THE INSTITUTE FOR AREA STUDIES**

**THE HIKIKOMORI PHENOMENON IN JAPAN: A DEEPER LOOK AT THE
SOCIOECONOMIC AND GENDERED LAYERS**

MASTER'S THESIS

ALEYNA ARIKAN

DEPARTMENT OF ASIAN STUDIES

JUNE 2024



**THE REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE
SOCIAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY OF ANKARA
THE INSTITUTE FOR AREA STUDIES**

**THE HIKIKOMORI PHENOMENON IN JAPAN: A DEEPER LOOK AT THE
SOCIOECONOMIC AND GENDERED LAYERS**

Master's Thesis

Aleyna Arıkan

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hatice Çelik

Department of Asian Studies

June 2024

ETHICS STATEMENT

I hereby declare that I have collected all the written and audio-visual material presented in this thesis in accordance with academic rules and ethical principles; that I have fully cited and referenced all material that is not original to this work in compliance with scientific norms; and that this thesis is the product of my own original work except where indicated by referencing.

Name and Surname: Aleyna ARIKAN

Signature

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to my brilliant advisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hatice elik, for graciously agreeing to take on the role of my thesis advisor despite her exceptionally demanding schedule. I am indebted to her for reassuring me and maintaining my composure throughout the entire process with her sincerity and calm authority. If it were not for her guidance and the peace of mind she provided, my thesis would have taken me another ten years to develop and complete.

Furthermore, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Asst. Prof. Dr. Yusuf Avcı, who served as my unofficial co-advisor and introduced me to the possibility of studying the phenomenon of 'hikikomori' within my field of research as part of the courses he offered. Without his invaluable guidance and feedback, I would not have unearthed my academic fascination for *hikikomori* and mental health anthropology. Dr. Avcı's assistance with this thesis dates well before my thesis proposal; and this thesis would not have materialized in the first place without his generous contributions and insightful ideas.

For coordinating the Asia Anew Certificate Program in 2022, the Center for Strategic Research (SAM) and the Directorate General for Multilateral Political Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye in particular have my sincere appreciation, through which I have met for the first time a sizable cohort of scholars with an interest in Asia. My deepest gratitude goes out to everyone who has helped make this pioneering program a reality, but particularly to Her Excellency K. Nilvana Darama.

Speaking of Asian Studies scholars, I thank my talented peer Nisa Burak zdemir, who was at times the only other student in the classroom, has been an exemplary supporter and true friend throughout the entire process. Her sincere enthusiasm regarding my field of study has served as a tremendous inspiration to me. Her studies and work similarly expanded my horizons.

Last but not least, I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to my mom, Sema Arıkan, who has served as a free of charge life coach and accompanied me on the emotional journey of writing this thesis. Her unconditional encouragement, day in and day out, has been beyond description. I am forever grateful to her for always being my biggest cheerleader.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ETHICS STATEMENT	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	vi
ÖZET	vii
A GLOSSARY OF JAPANESE TERMS	viii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	x
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1. Background	1
1.2. Research Question and Aim	2
1.3. Methodology.....	3
1.3.1. Sampling	4
1.3.2. Theoretical framework	5
1.3.2.1. Social constructionism	5
1.3.2.2. Contextual constructionism.....	7
1.4. Limitations	7
1.5. Thesis Structure	8
1.6. Notes	10
CHAPTER II: DEMYSTIFICATION OF HIKIKOMORI.....	11
2.1. Literature Review	11
2.1.1. Introducing “ <i>hikikomori</i> ”	11
2.1.2. The timely and timeless phenomenon of <i>hikikomori</i>	13
2.1.3. “Guesstimating” the numbers	14
2.1.4. Etiology.....	14
2.1.5. Culture-bound or society-bound: a glimpse into the central discussion	16
2.1.6. Socieconomics and gender	18
2.1.6.1. School non-attendance, family dependency and “middle-class” status....	18
2.1.6.2. <i>Hikikomori</i> as a one-gendered phenomenon.....	21
2.1.7. Media attention and stigmatization.....	23

2.1.8. The current state and future outlook of <i>hikikomori</i> in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.....	26
CHAPTER III: SOCIOECONOMIC AND GENDERED LAYERS OF HIKIKOMORI	29
3.1. Introduction: The interplay between class and gender	29
3.2. Following the trail to <i>hikikomori</i> : The gender perspective.....	30
3.2.1. School refusal and gender.....	31
3.2.2. <i>Ijime</i> : “Feminine” type of bullying in Japanese schools	33
3.2.2.1. <i>Ijime</i> in Japan vs bullying in the West.....	34
3.2.2.2. <i>Ijime</i> and female students.....	36
3.2.3. Motherhood: cocoons, capsules and molds	37
3.2.4. Resolving the gender gap in household tasks and child-rearing: A potential prevention strategy for <i>hikikomori</i> ?.....	40
3.2.5. Hidden in plain sight: Female <i>hikikomori</i> and bias	44
3.2.6. Four female- <i>hikikomori</i> -focused case studies.....	47
3.3. The conditions that set the stage for <i>hikikomori</i> : Socioeconomics perspective.....	49
3.3.1. A product of and a threat to Japanese middle-class households	51
3.3.2. The shifting rules governing success, youth (un)employment, and social status.....	53
3.3.3. Collapse of the gender triad, shrinking middle-class, and exit strategies ...	59
3.3.4. <i>Hikikomori</i> ’s search for identity and social standing	62
3.3.5. “Revitalizing” the <i>hikikomori</i> youth: A brief overview of recent economic policies	66
3.4. Conclusion.....	68
CHAPTER IV: REVISITING HIKIKOMORI IN THE PUBLIC EYE WITHIN THE PARAMETERS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.....	73
4.1. Introduction	73
4.2. Rethinking <i>hikikomori</i> within the context of voluntary lockdowns	75
4.3. <i>Hikikomori</i> ’s debut in Japanese media: Making of a violent stigma	76
4.3.1. What makes the media’s framing of a societal issue so critical: the <i>NEET</i> case	78
4.3.2. High-profile crimes and the 8050 problem: Revival of the <i>hikikomori</i> discourse...80	
4.3.2.1. Kawasaki City Mass Stabbing	80
4.3.2.2. Nerima Ward Filicide Case.....	81
4.4. Post-pandemic stories on <i>hikikomori</i> women.....	82

4.4.1. How gender discrimination triggered social isolation.....	83
4.4.2. “Female <i>hikikomori</i> figures finally align with reality”	84
4.4.3. Gendered job insecurity, exploitation and discrimination.....	86
4.5. Post-pandemic stories on <i>hikikomori</i> socioeconomics.....	88
4.5.1. <i>Hikikomori</i> soft-launch in the service sector.....	89
4.5.2 “Online effect” of the pandemic: Remote support	90
4.5.3. A generation (still) lost: The alarming 8050 problem	92
4.6. Conclusion.....	93
CHAPTER V	97
CONCLUSION.....	97
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	102
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	123

ABSTRACT

THE HIKIKOMORI PHENOMENON IN JAPAN: A DEEPER LOOK AT THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND GENDERED LAYERS

Hikikomori, a psychosocial condition that requires social solutions, is characterized as a specific type of acute social withdrawal that is resistant to medical interventions. Incorporating *hikikomori* within the social sciences, this thesis not only challenges the widely held belief that it predominantly impacts males, but also emphasizes the significant role of primarily middle-class *hikikomori* on the future of the largely homogenous Japanese middle class. By focusing on the underrepresented population of female *hikikomori*, this thesis makes a notable contribution to the limited body of non-medical, qualitative, and feminist literature on the subject. This thesis primarily seeks to investigate, "How have socioeconomic and gendered aspects shaping *hikikomori* and its media portrayal evolved over the decades and resurfaced within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?" It does this by employing a framework that combines social constructionism and contextual constructionism. The thesis also aims to affirm the contextuality of *hikikomori*, as well as its gendered and socioeconomic aspects, within the parameters of pandemic and voluntary lockdowns, as reported in major Japanese newspapers, *Asahi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun* from the mid-2020s to the mid-2024s, using purposive sampling. The thesis reveals a twofold bias, encompassing both the gross underestimation of the number of female *hikikomori* and the struggles faced by mothers caring for *hikikomori* children, highlighting the excessive strain placed on motherhood in Japanese society. Finally, the thesis advocates for a reevaluation and more comprehensive, multi-faceted, and impartial research on the gender aspect of the phenomenon.

Keywords: Japan, *hikikomori*, stigma, COVID-19, gender, social class

ÖZET

JAPONYA'DAKİ HİKİKOMORİ OLGUSUNUN SOSYOEKONOMİK VE TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYET KATMANLARI ÜZERİNE BİR İNCELEME

Psikososyal bir olgu olup sosyal bir çözüm gerektiren olan *hikikomori*, tıbbi müdahalelere direnen spesifik bir tür akut sosyal geri çekilme olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Bu tez, *hikikomori*'yi sosyal bilimler lensine dahil ederken, hikikomorilerin Japonyadaki orta sınıfa özgü, bu homojen sosyoekonomik yapının geleceğini tayin eden başat rolünü vurgulayıp aynı zamanda öncelikle toplumdaki erkekleri etkilediği yönündeki yaygın görüşe de meydan okumaktadır. Yeterince temsil edilmeyen kadın hikikomorilerin varlığına vurgu yapan bu tez, konuyla ilgili sınırlı sayıdaki tıp lensini kullanmayan, niteliksel ve feminist literatüre önemli bir katkı sağlamaktadır. Bu tez esas olarak “*Hikikomori* olgusunun sosyoekonomik ve toplumsal cinsiyete özgü katmanları yıllar içinde nasıl gelişmiştir ve COVID-19 pandemisi bağlamında bakıldığında bu öğelerin medya temsili karşımıza yeniden nasıl çıkmıştır?” sorusuna cevap bulmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu doğrultuda sosyal inşacılık (CSP) ve bağlamsal (contextual) inşacılığı birleştiren bir çerçeveyi benimseyen tez, hikikomorinin toplumsal cinsiyet ve sosyoekonomik katmanlarını ve bunların bağlama göre şekillendiğini, COVID-19 pandemisi parametreleri çerçevesinde, 2020-2024 aralığını baz alarak başlıca Japon gazeteleri olan *Asahi Shimbun* ve *Mainichi Shimbun*'u tarayarak amaçlı örnekleme yöntemiyle göz önüne sermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Tez sonuç olarak *hikikomori* bağlamında kadınlara yönelik iki boyutlu bir önyargının varlığını ortaya koyar. Hem kadın *hikikomori* sayısının toplumsal beklentiler ışığında olduğundan çok daha az görülmesi ve gösterilmesini hem de *hikikomori* çocuklarına bakan annelerin karşılaştığı toplumsal önyargıyı açığa çıkaran tez, konunun toplumsal cinsiyet boyutunun yeniden değerlendirilmesini ve kadın hikikomoriler bağlamında daha kapsamlı, çok yönlü ve önyargısız araştırmalar yapılmasının elzem olduğu sonucuna varır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Japonya, hikikomori, stigma, COVID-19, toplumsal cinsiyet, sosyal sınıf

A GLOSSARY OF JAPANESE TERMS

8050 (Hachimaru-Gōmaru) Mondai

The eighty-fifty problem wherein elderly parents in their eighties bear the responsibility for taking care of their adult *hikikomori* offspring who are in their fifties.

amae

The Japanese ideal prototype for all social relationships, as defined by Doi Takeo (Doi, 1973, p. 72-74), is an intimate bond or relationship such as that between a mother and son.

chōnan

the eldest son, the offspring who was expected to inherit the family line and ensure its continuation according to the Meiji legal code (Kawano et al., 2014).

daikokubashira

An architectural term originally used to describe the central supporting pillar of a building, a masculine metaphor for the family's rock (e.g. “evin direği” in Turkish).

furītā (or freeter)

A term coined by the mass media from the English adjective "free" and the German noun Arbeiter ('worker'), it is employed to denote individuals lacking full-time employment (Heinze & Thomas, 2014, p. 154)

futōkō

School non-attendance, the term which became common since 1990s, replacing *tōkōkyōhi*.

karōshi

death from overwork and mental stress

NEET (nīto)

The term "NEET" was adopted from the United Kingdom. The Japanese NEET or “nīto” is a revised iteration of the original NEET term originated in Britain (Sekimizu, 2021). The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare has established a definition for NEET, classifying it as those who are not employed, not enrolled in school, not homemakers, and not actively searching for job (Uchida & Norassakkunkit, 2015).

sararī man

In Japan, the term "salaryman" is exclusively applied to white-collar employees in the extensive bureaucracy of government agencies and corporations (Vogel, 1971, p. 5).

shakaiteki hikikomori

social withdrawal

shinsotsu-ikkatsu-saiyō

or “simultaneous mass recruiting of recent graduates,” a customary method of transitioning students directly from higher learning to traditional employment (Hori, 2020)

sōchūryū shakai

"general middle-class society"

tōkōkyōhi

school refusal, which is often used interchangeably with *futōkō*, and gained traction in the 1970s

ichiransei oyako

refers to mother- daughter relationships comparable to those of identical twins

ikigai na gai

to be devoid of "ikigai," which refers to a fundamental reason for existence or a genuine passion in one's life

ijime

bullying

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

KHJ: *Zenkoku Hikikomori Kazaokukai Rengōkai* (National Federation of Groups of Families of *Hikikomori*)

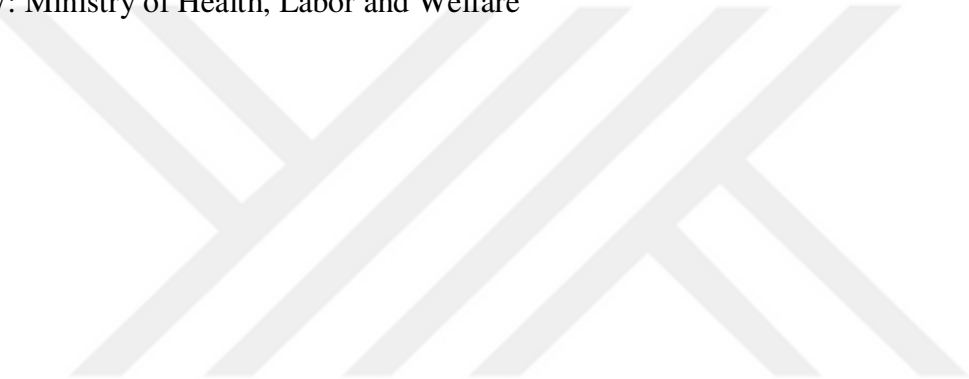
NEET: Not in Employment Education or Training

NHK: *Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai* (Japan Broadcasting Corporation)

NPO: Non Profit Organization

MOE: Ministry of Education

MHLW: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare



CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Maybe Japan's socially withdrawn kids are a harbinger of a new way of life, one forged by the vast changes the country has undergone in recent years.

Ryu Murakami, "Japan's Lost Generation"

1.1. Background

In the late 1990s, a long-lasting type of social withdrawal, commonly seen among adolescents and young adults transitioning into adulthood, became widely recognized in Japan (Kato, Kanba, and Teo, 2020, p. 116). The term for this acute type of social withdrawal was initially coined in 1998 by Tamaki Saitō, a Japanese psychiatrist and authority on youth psychology, in his seminal work 'Adolescence without End.' It was subsequently republished in 2013 with the English translation of Jeffrey Angles. The term made official for this condition was "hikikomori" which is a condensed and widely used form of the term *shakaiteki hikikomori* (social withdrawal), means withdrawal by definition (Saitō, 2013).

Saitō initially discovered and documented *hikikomori* after being astonished by the prevalence of situations where young individuals isolated themselves indoors and cut off ties with the world outside, although not exhibiting symptoms of depression or other mental disorders. Saitō labelled this case as *hikikomori* based on his firsthand clinical observations, thereby establishing it as a 'real' social phenomenon. He explicitly said that hikikomori is not a standalone disorder, but rather a symptom that frequently coexists with other mental disorders (Saitō, 2013, p. 11). Saitō's foresight led him to early on estimate the existence of one million *hikikomori* in Japanese society, which was considered an exaggeration at the time. However, current estimates place the number of *hikikomori* people in post-pandemic Japan at 1.15 million by 2022, surpassing the one million mark.

As per Tamaki Saitō's parameters, in order to be classified as *hikikomori*, one needs to meet all of the following conditions: a) self-isolating within one's own residence and abstaining from social engagement; b) this state has a duration of at least six months; c) psychological factors are not the primary cause of this condition; d) the individual first encounters this state when they are in their late 20s (Saitō, 2013, p. 24).

The criteria have undergone changes throughout time and psychiatric professionals have made certain modifications. More recent research identified the following criteria: a) confinement at home; b) a minimum of six months of social disengagement; and c) the isolation is accompanied by a significant decline in functioning or a sense of distress (Kato, Kanba, and Teo, 2020, p. 117). The criterion list omitted age requirements in order to establish a more comprehensive framework. This measure was imperative due to the fact that *hikikomori* persons from the 1990s were no longer adolescents or young adults.

The rising tide of *hikikomori*, both young and elderly, could be considered a reflection of the (socio)economic, gender-related, and political problems plaguing modern Japanese society. As the youth mature without the inherent social issues that confront them being resolved, a new cohort of school-aged children arises who encounter the precursors to the condition, including non-attendance at school (*futōkō*). Subsequently, these children discover themselves as social outcasts, devoid of aspirations for significant accomplishments that would benefit society at large, as a result of society itself. This cycle persists, yielding twice as many *hikikomori*.

All in all, *hikikomori* is an emerging field of research that reflects the impact of Japan's post-bubble economy on the Lost Generation, who are no longer considered the youth. However, the phenomenon is becoming increasingly widespread, with a growing number of individuals being identified as "hikikomori" in countries such as Spain (García-Campayo, 2007), France (Furuhashi et al., 2013; Teo et al., 2015), Italy (Piotti, 2012), South Korea (Lee et al., 2015), China (Liu et al., 2018) and so forth. Experts from these countries are collaborating to share their experiences. Hence, it is no longer precise to categorize *hikikomori* as a condition exclusive to a certain culture, such as Japanese, although it may have been in earlier times. Although *hikikomori* initially emerged and was recognized as a social issue within Japanese culture and society, its prevalence across several cultures and nations demonstrates that it can arise across diverse cultural contexts, extending beyond Japan and East Asia.

Hence, it is imperative to thoroughly investigate this phenomenon by drawing insights from Japan's decades of experience and empirical knowledge. However, it is essential to surpass existing understandings of the phenomenon, as it is constantly evolving and lacks a fixed form. The criteria defining it may change, including factors such as age, gender, and socioeconomics, which are in a perpetual state of flux, continuously impacted by new waves of social problems and phenomena.

1.2. Research Question and Aim

Guided by the overarching research question: “How have socioeconomic and gendered aspects shaping *hikikomori* and its portrayal evolved over the decades and resurfaced within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?” this thesis aims to provide a deeper look at the gender and socioeconomic aspects of the *hikikomori* phenomenon. Considering the inherent link between gender and socioeconomics, these two factors intertwine and gender is likely to take precedence in the amalgamation of this thesis. The prevailing assumption that *hikikomori* is predominantly a male issue has gone unchallenged for a significant period of time, leading to the disregard of the female population affected by it. To address this issue, a more thorough and analytical approach is taken to shed more light on the female *hikikomori* population and make a rare and valuable contribution to the existing *hikikomori* literature, which has been predominantly focused on the suffering of male *hikikomori*.

To achieve this goal, the process to will consist of two distinct parts: 1) A comprehensive analysis of the literature and an investigation into the gendered and socioeconomic aspects throughout the years since the emergence of this phenomenon. 2) The aforementioned aspects reexamined in the context of COVID-19 from mid-2020 to mid-2024 focusing on media reflections to evaluate how the understanding of *hikikomori* as a social construct, shaped by claimsmakers has evolved over time and in response to the specific circumstances of the pandemic. Due to the context-dependent and time-varying characteristics of the *hikikomori* phenomenon, the COVID-19 lockdown measures present a significant opportunity to examine this contextuality, since Japan, along with the rest of the world, experienced a semi-*hikikomori* state. Thus, COVID-19 provides an appropriate basis for investigating the correlation between *hikikomori* and its surrounding contexts, particularly with regards to the gender and socioeconomic aspects intimately associated with this phenomenon.

Overall, this thesis aims to establish a robust framework for understanding *hikikomori* in relation to gender and social class in varying contexts and to illustrate that we should not make assumptions about the characteristics of *hikikomori* such as it being a “male phenomenon.” To this end, the thesis will critically examine the existing knowledge on these aspects, considering their shifting nature in connection to this phenomenon and the contextual factors that influence public perception, particularly through the media.

1.3. Methodology

This thesis builds on the constructionist approach to social problems, more specifically the ‘social constructionist’ approach that came after as a theoretical framework that brings together

different traditions together in one approach (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). A key feature of a constructionist approach to a complex social issue like *hikikomori* is that it emerges at the margins of different areas of study, where the disciplines of psychology and sociology overlap, and where feminist studies, political sciences, and rhetoric may cross over (Potter, 1996). This thesis also sits within this territory; in order to find a suitable home for a relatively new social phenomenon such as *hikikomori*, it is essential to draw on the existing body of knowledge in clinical psychology and psychiatry. However, in order to liberate it from the constraints of stigma and the medical gaze, it is crucial to go beyond and apply social disciplines and methods to this social phenomenon.

It is crucial to seek alternative pathways, sift through the issue's underlying causes, which in this case may be political economy and socioeconomics; examine it through the lens of feminist studies to address the glaring gender gap in the reflection of the phenomenon, and apply masculinities studies to determine why this phenomenon has been associated with male Japanese youth and what other societal pressures they may be subject to. Thus, youth studies are introduced into the picture. Nevertheless, individuals who were once considered youth are no longer so today; therefore, the scope should also include the middle-aged and elderly in Japan. Family studies are required, as are Buddhist and Confucian teachings, in order to comprehend the symbol of "mother," through the Great Mother archetype, which has come to represent the stereotypical origin of *hikikomori* behavior.

This thesis aims to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the socioeconomics and gender aspects of the *hikikomori* phenomenon. Specifically, in Chapter 4, it will examine these aspects in light of COVID-19 parameters, taking into account media discourse from major Japanese media outlets such as *Asahi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun*. It will also draw insights from post-pandemic online documentaries on Youtube. The analysis will consider the period from mid-2020 to the present (2024), comparing the discourse before and after the pandemic to identify any changes or developments.

1.3.1. Sampling

In order to fill in the lack of qualitative research on *hikikomori*, this thesis employs a qualitative research method known as purposive sampling. This involves selecting online news pieces from the previously stated major newspapers as well as periodic documentaries on Youtube that are relevant to the research question. This study employs purposive sampling because of the specific time frame and restricted variables (gender and socioeconomics).

Additionally, the small sample size is a result of the limited availability of English-language news articles in Japanese newspapers (as addressed in “Limitations”), making random selection unfeasible. The samples are purposefully selected to align with the specific thesis objective, focusing on a narrow issue rather than a general one. Since the research question looks into the evolution and resurgence of socioeconomic and gender-related factors influencing *hikikomori* and its portrayal over time, particularly within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This question guides the selection of specific units to be sampled from the multitude of news articles on hikikomori published between 2020 and 2024, with a specific emphasis on gender and socioeconomic aspects (Bryman, 2012, p. 416). Purposive sampling, according to Bryman, places the research question as the central focus of the sampling process. All pertinent data is utilized to analyze the content and discourse, resulting in the identification of recurring and shared themes.

The preceding chapters, leading up to Chapter 4, employ secondary analysis in the form of an extensive literature review utilizing data from other researchers (Bryman, 2012, p. 312). Subsequently, the secondary data is used as a foundation to examine the findings of the purposive media sampling and identify any new developments related to the phenomenon and the aspects of interest of this thesis.

1.3.2. Theoretical framework

1.3.2.1. Social constructionism

Do social phenomena exist as objective truths apart from individual's subjective interpretations? This is the question that is occupying the social constructionists, as well as the framework of this thesis. Spector and Kitsuse (1973) contend that social phenomena are constructed via the use of language and human interaction. Thus, objective status of those phenomena is inconsequential; what truly important is the claims made by individuals. Individuals assert claims regarding purported or hypothetical circumstances and form them into subjective realities through language. Their proposition further suggests that the role of a sociologist is not to examine the existence of a phenomenon such as *hikikomori*, but rather to reveal the process by which it is brought to attention as a social phenomenon by the individuals that make the claims of its existence, known as the claimsmakers (Spector & Kitsuse, 1973).

Constructionists primarily concentrate on the mechanisms via which individuals interpret certain social conditions as social problems (Best, 2017, p. 16). *Constructing Social Problems*

(CSP) by Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse (1977) is considered the leading perspective in “social constructions of social problems.” They offer the term “claimsmaking” for the process of the construction of problems, defining it as “the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions” (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977, p. 75). The claimsmaking process relating to the thesis’ subject *hikikomori* borrows from medicalization theory (Appleton, 2017) as well as the melodramatic claims (Nelson-Rowe, 2017). In *Deviance and Medicalization: From Badness to Sickness*, it is noted that “deviant behaviors that were once defined as immoral, sinful, or criminal have been given medical meaning” (Conrad & Schneider, 1992, p. 1). Sociologists tend to medicalize issues relating to the society. Melodramatic claims often characterize social problems and phenomena, depicting villains manipulating victims. In this narrative, these villains take the form of “hikikomori,” with the victims being the families and the rest of society (Nelson-Rowe, 2017).

Expanding on the viewpoint of social constructionists that suggest that claimsmakers influence our sense of what the problem is, Joel Best argues, “Claims-makers inevitably characterize problems in particular ways: They emphasize some aspects and not others, they promote specific orientations, and they focus on particular causes and advocate particular solutions” (Best, 2017, p. 16). Saitō, acting as a “claimsmaker,” established his claim by emphasizing the overwhelming majority of males in the *hikikomori* phenomenon. Additionally, his empirical research from a clinic and the symbol of his profession and discipline ultimately concocted *hikikomori* as a psychiatric issue, despite his attempts to present it in a way that avoided a purely medical perspective, his affiliations contributed to the claimsmaking process.

In the same vein, building upon Spector and Kitsuse; Hilgartner and Bosk (1988, p. 53) argue that social problems arise from a collective process of defining and conceptualizing them within society. They align with Blumer (1971, p. 300) in stating that the existence of social problems is essentially determined by how they are defined and interpreted in society. It is proposed that collective definition includes a vast range of potential challenges or “putative situation or conditions that could be conceived as problems” (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988, p. 55). However, the overwhelming majority of these putative circumstances remain mostly unknown or on the periphery of public awareness. As a result, social issues must contend with the difficult task of gaining entry and staying on the public agenda. The designation of a circumstance as a social problem does not inherently imply a worsening in objective conditions. In a similar vein, the mere absence of public discourse regarding a problem does not inherently indicate an improvement in the situation (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988, p. 58). The result of this procedure is instead determined by an intricate cultural and organizational competition. In order to gain

insight into this competition, it is imperative to analyze the “public arenas,” including the research community, movies, policymakers, governments, and non-profit organisations, in addition to the news media (including newspapers, periodicals, and television news).

1.3.2.2. Contextual constructionism

Another type of social constructionism that is relevant to this thesis is contextual constructionism. This is because it looks at the process- and time-specific characteristics of *hikikomori* during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this vein, Chapter 4 aims to invoke the question in relation to the *hikikomori* phenomenon, "How can we hope to articulate objective standards for defining when some form of discrimination should be considered a social problem when we know that these judgements have varied wildly across time and space?" (Best, 2013, p. 238). The importance of context in constructionist work lies in its ability to reveal the intricate connections between events that may not be immediately apparent.

1.4. Limitations

The very nature of *hikikomori* studies suggests an insurmountable structural limitation, or even a “structural impossibility” (Tajan, 2021, p. 201). By virtue of their resistance to the medical gaze, hikikomori subjects can be said to be naturally resistant to all forms of external scrutiny, including that of the general public and scholars. Because being engaged and acknowledged in a social context—whether through spoken interaction, voice recording, or video recording—undermines the subject's identity as a *hikikomori*.

Hikikomori people who really suffer cannot be filmed. So, as soon as I agree to be filmed, it is in a sense that I am no longer a *hikikomori*. It is even possible that if you look at me like that, being filmed by you, there will eventually be people who criticize me, saying ‘you are no longer *hikikomori* because you are filmed like that.’ (Ueyama et al., 2010)

Communicating with a *hikikomori* individual in any capacity immediately interferes with their identity of being a *hikikomori*. The occurrence of any form of contact, be it for therapy, interviews, or research, invalidates the data collected from the investigation. This is because even a momentary interaction breaks the criteria of six months of no social interaction or leaving of the house, thereby disqualifying the individual from being classified as a pure *hikikomori*. A “pure” *hikikomori* cannot, by definition, attest to his or her own experience

(Tajan, 2021, p. 201). To attest to this, s/he would still need to physically emerge from the withdrawal state: either by exiting his/her room, consenting to the entrance of another individual, or agreeing to engage in interpersonal communication. That is why the majority of the accounts and experiences we have about *hikikomori* come from individuals who used to be *hikikomori*. Former *hikikomori* individuals do not diminish their authenticity as *hikikomori* by engaging in social interactions or recounting their experiences, as they no longer identify themselves as such. This is also the reason why it is unlikely that we will ever precisely figure the exact amount of *hikikomori* through surveys, even if they are conducted nationwide and administered by the government.

An additional limitation is that *hikikomori* people are rarely *hikikomori* a single time; rather, they are frequently "double-*hikikomori*," or double-secret from society. Often, families, particularly those from the middle or higher classes, tend to conceal the existence of their *hikikomori* children from the rest of society. Moreover, the Japanese media or the entire nation of Japan may be seen as a macrocasm of those families in relation to the rest of the globe. It is noteworthy to mention that the final chapter of the thesis would have been more methodical and data-driven if the author possessed the ability to read Japanese. This is due to the fact that prominent newspapers, including *Asahi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun*, have translated a mere few *hikikomori* stories from the hundreds available in Japanese into English.

1.5. Thesis Structure

There are a total of five chapters that make up the thesis, with the introduction and conclusion functioning as separate chapters.

This chapter, Chapter 1, provides an overview of the *hikikomori* phenomenon, including its formation, identification as a social problem, and an examination of the limitations inherent in the subject matter and the research process. Additionally, it outlines the methodology and structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2 aims to offer an extensive literature analysis on the *hikikomori* phenomenon in order to provide some insight into it. The literature review encompasses various expert definitions, estimated figures, causes, key debates, and a preview of the forthcoming chapter on socioeconomics and gender. Furthermore, it examines the stigmatizing material produced by the media, and delves into the consequences of COVID-19 for individuals who experience *hikikomori*.

Chapter 3 is structured into two primary subchapters, one focusing on gender (see 3.1.) and the other on socioeconomics (see 3.2.). However, it is important to note that these two layers are intricately interconnected and frequently intersect with each other within the context *hikikomori*. The chapter, overall, primarily focuses on the less explored components of acute social withdrawal, specifically examining issues that have received limited attention, such as female *hikikomori*. It also provides a more thorough examination of the phenomenon's 'middle-class' background characteristic, with the intention of doing a more in-depth analysis of these layers.

3.1. traces the primary causes of *hikikomori* from the perspective of female schoolchildren and adolescents living in the Japanese society, including school bullying (*ijime*), school refusal (*tōkōkyōhi*) and school non-attendance (*futōkō*) in that order, as well as the notion of *amae*. As a result, the gender imbalance in *hikikomori* is called into question, and the reason why females are presented as immune to acute social withdrawal when they are subject to the same social constraints as males is investigated. Finally, previous accounts of female *hikikomori* and their experiences are included as testaments of their existence. Gender in *hikikomori* extends beyond the subjects themselves; thus, mothers are included because of the significant role they play and the labor they put in.

3.2. analyzes how the existence of *hikikomori*, despite their marked middle-class background, jeopardizes the stability of middle-class households throughout the nation. The historical context into which *hikikomori* first emerged, which is the aftermath of the bubble economy that induced the Lost Decades, and the Lost Generation, is examined. This portion additionally provides an account of youth unemployment, the fluctuating criteria for success, the gradual decline of permanent employment and the male-breadwinner model as well as the ensuing emergence of precarious employment—all of which play a role in the *hikikomori* socioeconomics.

Chapter 4 revisits the *hikikomori* phenomenon, this time around considering the viewpoints of the media and thus the public eye in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has provided an unusual chance to explore the relationship between *hikikomori* and public perception from a fresh perspective. The hypothesis that the amorphous nature of *hikikomori* assumes new forms and give rise to new perceptions, problems as well as resolutions based on time and process is tested within this historic point in time such as the pandemic. The media is likely to report on the increase in *hikikomori* individuals due to the COVID-19 restrictions, as these restrictions make it easier for them to isolate themselves from society with relative ease. This isolation may bring them a newfound sense of contentment, especially since they have

access to financial assistance and social support, which may be available to them for the first time (Kato, Shinfuku, and Tateno, 2020; Rooksby et al., 2020). The chapter also examines the coverage of high-profile *hikikomori* cases by two prominent Japanese news outlets, *Asahi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun*, in order to gauge the changes in media agendas after a pandemic. Building on the previous chapter and the thesis' research subject, this chapter places further focus on the gender and socioeconomic dimensions of the *hikikomori* phenomenon using the COVID-19 framework.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, concludes the thesis with a brief summary and some last thoughts on where hikikomori studies, including this research, may go from here. It pinpoints and highlights the areas that require further investigation in *hikikomori* studies, namely addressing gender and socioeconomics.

1.6. Notes

The Japanese names cited in this thesis are provided in the format of given name followed by family name, which differs from the typical Japanese practice of surname preceding given name. Macrons are used to represent long vowels in Japanese. Likewise, Japanese words and terms that are transliterated into the Latin alphabet are distinguished by being written in italics throughout the work, such as *futōkō*, *ijime* and *hikikomori*. The thesis also provides a glossary of Japanese *hikikomori* terminology and acronyms for significant governmental and non-governmental entities.

CHAPTER II: DEMYSTIFICATION OF HIKIKOMORI

2.1. Literature Review

This literature review seeks to explore the early and current perspectives and understandings of the *hikikomori* phenomenon in Japan, focusing on the contributions of leading figures and key thinkers in *hikikomori* studies, such as Tamaki Saitō, Hayao Kawai and Michael Zielenziger, who have established the groundwork for future research, as well as up-and-coming researchers in the field, who explore the *hikikomori* phenomenon through the lenses of sociology (Sekimizu, 2022) and mental anthropology (Tajan, 2021). While the literature on the hikikomori phenomenon primarily consists of medical, psychiatric, clinical, and psychological sources, they are interpreted through a research-relevant lens that emphasizes the social, cultural and universal aspects of *hikikomori*; gendered, education-related and socioeconomic factors, as well as media reflections and the recent developments on the phenomenon and the *hikikomori* amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. While expert opinions and academic discussions about *hikikomori* are extremely valuable, hearing about the condition firsthand from the individual perspective of someone who has experienced or is currently experiencing it is a wholly different matter. Commencing with the latter will facilitate this literature evaluation to slightly nudge the issue of *hikikomori* into the realm of social sciences.

Yasuhiko Maruyama, who is now an experienced counsellor but was formerly a *hikikomori*, describes the *hikikomori* experience as the act of combining the need to fulfil others' expectations with the yearning to live authentically without compromising one's actual emotions (Maruyama, 2014, as cited in Sekimizu, 2022). As Tajan (2021) so aptly puts it, The *hikikomori* phenomenon, rather than being homogeneous; represents the stories of multiple distinct individuals, who, in spite of themselves, call attention to the fact that they are not there, while also turning “social renunciation” into a language that is both inherently personal and profoundly social.

2.1.1. Introducing “*hikikomori*”

The term "hikikomori," which Saitō initially coined to refer to the socially recluse youth, was originally *shakaiteki hikikomori* (2013). The word *shakaiteki* ("of the social") referred to the act of "withdrawing" from Japanese "society," until it was abbreviated to "*hikikomori*" (hee-kee-koh-MOR-ee). The Japanese psychiatrist Tamaki Saitō, who first popularized the term *hikikomori* in the literature of society-bound syndromes, administered the first targeted survey of its kind within his research institute between 1983 and 1988. During this time, he established the diagnostic criteria for *hikikomori* as the presence of six months of social lethargy and withdrawal in the absence of a diagnosable underlying mental disorder such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or organic psychosis (Saitō, 2013). Saitō's concept highlights a scenario of pure *hikikomori*, also known as primary *hikikomori*, when the withdrawal is unaccompanied by any psychiatric condition or disorder. The most meticulously constructed diagnostic study on pure *hikikomori* behavior that has been conducted thus far revealed that 46% of individuals with *hikikomori* had never experienced any psychiatric disorder throughout their lives (Koyama et al., 2010). In the same vein, since *hikikomori* resists being studied by psychiatrists and is not an object of psychiatry, Tajan (2021) argues that it is better classified as a psychosocial phenomenon than a mental disorder. Saitō (2013) argues that the issue of social withdrawal was not fully grasped at its dawn, just as it is today. In addition, he questions if it was the result of family pathology or a reflection of societal issues, encouraging not only clinical but also sociological investigation.

In her work, Overell (2018) characterizes *hikikomori* as "willful subjects" who challenge the societal norms and expectations. These individuals exhibit a determination that prevents them from conforming to the national corporate-family fantasy of modern-day Japan. As a result of their refusal to adhere to the prevailing societal will, hikikomori are stigmatised as failures.

In a similar vein, Chan and Lo (2014) argue that previous studies have consistently problematized and raised concerns about the *hikikomori* phenomenon and people. Their research with the *hikikomori* youth in Hong Kong has found that withdrawal from society is a chosen way of life for young individuals, and that the longer individuals withdraw, the higher their quality of life becomes, as long as they have access to social support. Although this statement may be accurate specifically for Hong Kong, it is evident that Japan's social security system is deficient in terms of social benefits (Uzuhashi, 2011, as cited in Sekimizu, 2022). For many years, Japan has had a social security system that relies on the private sector. This system has created a social stigma, which is further supported by the Japanese government's belief that

private corporations, rather than the government, should be responsible for providing life security to the working-age population (Sekimizu, 2022).

2.1.2. The timely and timeless phenomenon of *hikikomori*

Being a relatively recent occurrence, the *hikikomori* phenomenon has gained the interest of the general public, academic circles and mass media due to its relevance and timeliness (Teo et al, 2013). However, while some consider the *hikikomori* phenomenon to be a "timely" reflection of Japan in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, others prefer the term "timeless." Rizzo (2016) argues that *hikikomori* has been around longer than we have assumed, and identifies seclusion as one of Japan's national foundations, citing an edict from Early Modern Japan in the 17th century that sealed the country off from the outside world for two centuries, particularly the Christian world. Koyama et al. (2010) propose that sporadic cases of *hikikomori* first appeared in the 1970s, despite the challenge of determining and restricting a precise timeline for the syndrome, though Tamaki Saitō's book *Shakaiteki hikikomori* (1998) in the late 1990s may have sparked or at least amplified public awareness of *hikikomori*. Furlong goes even further back in time to argue that it is generally accepted that acute social withdrawal existed in Japan by citing a novel written in the 1950s on high school students who refused to go out or connect with people, and the fact that educators and psychologists were informed of a surge in withdrawal beginning in the 1970s (2008, p. 310). According to Martinotti et al. (2020), the increase in *hikikomori* prevalence occurred concurrently with the onset of economic stagnation. The correlation between the emergence of *hikikomori* and the 1990s post-bubble Japanese economy is further supported as follows by Zielenziger (2013):

In the 1980s, when Japan's economy was still humming, no one had ever heard the term *hikikomori*. But after the economy began to sputter and misfire, the pistons began to fail and fluids began to leak, exposing the rigidities and social dysfunction that had finally made the gears seize up. (p. 28)

In this scenario, the Japanese post-bubble economy, or more broadly, an economic downturn, serves as both an underlying cause and a temporal reference point. Even so, holders of the view that self-reclusion is not a recent occurrence in Japanese history, and Japan formalized her two-century-long self-isolation during the Tokugawa shogunate through the Sakoku edict in 1635 (Rizzo, 2016), believe that the 20th century is far too late to be considered

as the starting point of the *hikikomori* phenomenon in its fundamental sense. While this particular metaphor could potentially function as a microcosm representing the *hikikomori* people and contain some veracity, it has not been a prevalent point of discussion in literature on *hikikomori*, but it is still useful and poetic to consider.

2.1.3. “Guesstimating” the numbers

Given the challenges associated with accessing *hikikomori* individuals, who are extremely difficult to reach, and the inclination of Japanese families to conceal the reclusive or any form of marginalized or shunned behaviour of their children, it is highly unlikely that we will ever ascertain the precise number of *hikikomori* residing in Japan. One may argue it is only possible to guesstimate that figure. However, before any official survey or investigation, Tamaki Saitō provided an early approximation of the round number of *hikikomori*, estimating it to be "around or over one million" (2013). This figure was widely considered to be an overestimate by numerous experts and academics. However, it was none other than Saitō who ultimately shed light on the phenomenon on a national and worldwide scale in the early 2000s. This even prompted the BBC to investigate and produce a report titled "Japan: the missing million" (Rees, 2002). As the *hikikomori* phenomenon started to garner attention in the media and among the public, and began to emerge as a significant social problem, the Japanese Cabinet Office sought the services of a group of psychiatrists and clinical psychologists (which of course included Saitō) to conduct the 'Investigation on Youth Consciousness' to conduct surveys in order to arrive at a figure of *hikikomori* youth and individuals (Nihon Naikakufu, 2010). According to the Japanese Cabinet Office's report on the survey's findings, an estimated 541,000 to 696,000 Japanese people between the ages of 15 and 39 and 613,000 Japanese people between the ages of 40 and 64 suffer from *hikikomori*, and therefore are *hikikomori*, as the term refers to both the phenomenon and the individuals affected by it (2010, 2016, 2018). As of the most recent government estimates following the COVID-19 pandemic, 1.15 million individuals are categorized as *hikikomori* nationwide, which is ultimately in line with Saitō's initial estimation. (Takahashi, 2022).

2.1.4. Etiology

Since the research on *hikikomori* is currently in its nascent phase, the exact cause of this phenomenon naturally remains uncertain. However, a thorough examination of the articles

listed in PubMed suggests that the concept of a syndrome characterized by social withdrawal is highly relevant in our contemporary society (Kato et al., 2016). The *hikikomori* phenomenon has been extensively discussed in medical, psychiatric, neuroscientific, and clinical journals, as evident from the reference list of this review. While these discussions have greatly expanded our grasp of the phenomenon, it has been found that there is a lack of effective treatment options for this syndrome, which is inherently resistant to medical interventions (Tajan, 2021). Psychiatrists may have pinpointed the following possible rootcauses of *hikikomori*, but that in no way means the phenomenon is being purely medicalized in this particular study. Rather, it emphasizes the consensus among professionals that the problem is multifaceted and resistant to their kind of treatment. And while there is general consensus on some of the reasons and motivations for the existence of *hikikomori* individuals, the understanding of this phenomenon on an individual level remains elusive.

Why *hikikomori* emerged and has increased to such alarming rates beginning in the 1990s has been the subject of numerous arguments, including but not limited to school refusal or school non-attendance ‘*futōkō*’ (Saitō, 2013), family relationships, where the father's absence may have serious consequences (Funakoshi & Miyamoto, 2015), or dependent behavior described as “*amae*” in Japanese parent–offspring relationships (Kato et al., 2016), the rise of internet-associated addictions (Hussain, 2018), as well as online food delivery and shopping platforms that provide products and services to the doorstep as facilitators of social withdrawal and disengagement (Wong et al., 2019). However, Suwa and Suzuki (2013) challenged this prevailing notion that connects the IT revolution and internet addiction with *hikikomori*, asserting that the *hikikomori* phenomenon originated in the early 1990s, while Internet usage only reached 60% in 2001. This indicates that the *hikikomori* phenomenon existed before the widespread adoption of the Internet.

Psychiatrist Junichirō Itō, who authored the very first authoritative guideline on *hikikomori*, asserts, based on a study conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare of Japan (MHLW), that *hikikomori* does not arise from a singular and certain trigger, but rather from a complex interplay of social, biological, and psychological factors, which manifest in various ways (Itō 2004, as cited in Sekimizu, 2022). In a similar vein, psycho-analyst Tajan (2017) articulates the elusive nature of social withdrawal, which is accompanied by a certain level of clarity, arguing that the behavior of social withdrawal may appear similar, its underlying causes are diverse and cannot be universally applied, thus posing challenges in its treatment. Rosenthal and Zimmerman (2012) argue that the challenge in identifying, defining, and categorising *hikikomori* lies in the fact that a wide range of distinct individual behaviors are consolidated

under the same label, since the term "*hikikomori* behavior" is capable of encompassing an infinite number of behaviors, including minor personality traits like excessive hand washing or an intense fixation on a particular manga, playing online games or simply remain idle in their rooms.

2.1.5. Culture-bound or society-bound: a glimpse into the central discussion

In his influential book "*Shutting out the Sun: How Japan Created Its Own Lost Generation*" (Zielenziger, 2006) published in 2006, Michael Zielenziger presents the theory that *hikikomori* is a "culture-bound" syndrome. This theory, which gained significant attention in the *hikikomori* studies community, suggests that *hikikomori* is distinct to Japanese culture and is also caused by the certain characteristics of it. Furthermore, in line with their research outcomes, Teo and Gaw (2010) concur with Zielenziger's culture-bound theory, suggesting that a significant proportion of *hikikomori* cases exhibiting considerable psychopathology do not satisfy the diagnostic criteria for any recognised psychiatric disorder. They therefore put forth the possibility that *hikikomori* could be classified as a culture-bound syndrome. To support the "culture-bound" theory, Kato et al. argue that severe social isolation has long-standing cultural roots in Japan and define *hikikomori* as "both an idiom of distress and cultural syndrome, and identify overdependence between a mother and son (*amae*) and the absence of a father"(2016, p. 113). While Western societies, according to Doi (1973), have a tendency to view this type of extreme dependence in children as something that must be corrected or surmounted, whereas in Japan, "*amae*" continues to be an acceptable mode of behavior well into adulthood. Iwakabe (2021) affirms that a standard-type family constellation featuring a *hikikomori* child is marked by a father who exhibits emotional detachment and disengagement in parenting, and a mother who remains at home and displays excessive preoccupation with the child's education and well-being.

Additionally, the concept of *amae* Doi (1973) suggests that, in Japan, there is a tendency to consider this mother-child relationship as the benchmark for evaluating all other relationships. In his book *Buddhism and Psychotherapy*, Kawai (1996) attributes the school-phobia that was sweeping Japan during at the time, which was seen as a precursor to *hikikomori*, to the prevailing Great Mother archetype in Japanese culture. Kawai proposes that children experience a dualistic longing to be both in proximity to and in opposition to their mothers. By choosing to abstain from attending school, children can "both be with their mother and be against them" (Kawai, 1998, p. 25). Zielenziger, an advocate of the "culture-bound" notion,

opens the very first chapter of his impactful book *Shutting out the sun* (2007) by introducing Amaterasu, the goddess of the sun in Shinto tradition, and her withdrawal into a cave, which led to the world being shrouded in darkness, as the quintessential representation of the Japanese *hikikomori* phenomenon, which is also a direct explanation of the title he chose for his work. Rizzo (2016) aligns with Zielenziger's analogy of *hikikomori*, characterizing it as an important crossover between a core national narrative and individuals who are regarded as entirely excluded from the society of that particular nation, and further notes that many individuals who identify as *hikikomori* choose to adopt the name Amaterasu or its variations as their online nicknames.

However, Saitō challenges (2013) the culture-bound view by arguing that *hikikomori* is not limited to the bounds of Japan and that social withdrawal can be observed worldwide in societies similar to Japan. Additionally, Furuhashi et al. (2013) suggest that being *hikikomori* could be an additional sign of young people's struggles in negotiating the transition from adolescence to adulthood in wealthy but complex societies with transforming values from collectivism to individualism such as Japan. The *hikikomori*, Japan's recluses, retire into their homes or even rooms to avoid failing the transition to adulthood and minimize their social contact. Speaking from the perspective of cultural psychology, Arnett (2011) proposes that certain cultural concepts underpin the period of emerging adulthood in high-income nations such as establishing independence, agency, and identity becoming more of an individualistic goal for young people as they make the leap from emerging adulthood to adulthood. In terms of mental disorders associated with individualism, Martinotti et al. (2020) identify Japan as a significantly more individualistic nation in the latter half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century compared to the years preceding World War II. Zielenziger (2007) metaphorically interprets the *hikikomori* as cracks forming in the national consciousness after 150 years of suppressing the individual spirit to advance collective interests.

On the other hand, Spector and Kitsuse (1973), from the perspective of social constructionists, contend that human interaction and discourse subjectively generate social phenomena. For instance, Saitō's initial coinage of the term "hikikomori" to describe a specific form of long-term social withdrawal in Japan may have resulted in the misconception that it was uniquely a Japanese phenomenon as the term gained prevalence, despite the fact that it is a universal condition. While Saitō's rhetoric did not explicitly state that *hikikomori* is culture-bound, the linguistic aspects associated with this phenomenon have led to its designation as distinctly Japanese. At this juncture, the globalization of the *hikikomori* phenomenon around the world has provided more context to debunk the "culture-bound" claims.

Although *hikikomori* was widely regarded as a phenomenon specific to Japanese culture, the increasing number of documented cases resembling *hikikomori* since 2000 in various countries such as Spain (García-Campayo, 2007), France, India, the US (Teo et al., 2015), and Oman (Sakamoto et al., 2005) has raised doubts about this widely held belief. Tamaki Saitō further noted that Italy was the first among EU countries to experience *hikikomori* as a social issue (Saitō, 2015, p. 1569 as cited in Sekimizu, 2022). Furthermore, there have been reports from East Asia, particularly from the developed regions of mainland China including Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen (Liu et al., 2018). Within the scope of East Asia, even a regional symposium was held on *hikikomori* at the National University of Singapore in 2017. The symposium invited scholars from Japan, Hong Kong, China, and South Korea, who ultimately determined that in order to develop a "complete biopsychosocial intervention" for the complex condition *hikikomori*, each nation could adopt intervention principles from other regions (Wong et al., 2019, p. 5). Li and Wong (2015) suggest that if this phenomenon continues to be overlooked and insufficiently investigated in non-Japanese cultures during its infancy, other middle- and high-income countries may have similar challenges in the future as Japan is presently experiencing.

2.1.6. Socieconomics and gender

2.1.6.1. School non-attendance, family dependency and “middle-class” status

Hikikomori typically emerges throughout adolescence or early adulthood, and manifests itself as a subtle form of dissent and an endeavour to bypass the obligations imposed by school systems, societal norms, and parental expectations (Iwakabe, 2021). Zielenziger (2007) believes that Japan's economic downturn and exodus of blue-collar factory jobs have eroded the formerly promising social mobility prospects of Japan's system. Thereafter, it appeared less and less likely that children from low-income homes would end up on high-paying career paths unless they performed exceptionally well on high school and college entry exams. Furlong (2008, p. 312) confirms that the *hikikomori* phenomenon is typically linked to educational challenges like falling behind in a system often viewed as very competitive and career worries in a job market marked by increasing precariousness. According to Tajan (2021, p. 26), who bases his definition on the sociocultural discourse, school refusal is a "social disease" characterized by exhaustion on various levels (mental and physiological) and a dysregulation of the autonomic nervous system. In defense of school refusal, Yoneyama (2000, p. 77)

proposes a compelling theory that suggests students who reject the highly alienating and demanding aspects of school do so because this helps them gain agency and empowerment to pursue their own sense of subjectivity. Saitō (2013) supports the prevailing belief that skipping school frequently serves as the catalyst for social withdrawal through his surveys conducted among his *hikikomori* patients. These surveys revealed that "not attending school" was the most often given as the reason when participants were asked about the event that initiated their withdrawal.

According to Kitao (1986, as cited in Sekimizu (2022) *hikikomori* can be considered a facet of "school mental health" and is framed as an outcome of problems within the educational system that require attention from the sector of education. As a result of his surveys and experiences with *hikikomori* cases, Saitō (2013) hypothesizes that while skipping school is not the sole reason that might lead to a condition of withdrawal, the vast majority of instances (68.8 percent of his case studies) appear to have begun when a student began skipping school and his or her period of absence grew longer. School non-attendance to is a major element and trigger to Saitō since it may be an early indicator of adolescent and young adult struggles in adjusting to their environment, a phenomenon we refer to as *hikikomori* in its more severe form (Saitō, 2013). Zielenziger (2007) finds the most worrisome aspect of post-bubble Japan economy to be the plight of its people, since young Japanese face their own kinds of adjustment disorder and create terrifying novel ways to escape a society that crushes their hopes and washes away their every chance at self-actualization in a torrent of rootless materialism.

Saitō's case studies provide insight into the relationship between socioeconomic status and *hikikomori* by revealing that the vast majority of *hikikomori* are the children of middle- or upper-class, college-educated parents. (Saitō, 2013, p. 22). According to Asian Studies scholar Professor Jeff Kingston, *hikikomori* is regarded as a malady primarily affecting the middle class, as individuals from this social group are the ones who can depend on their families for support (Ma, 2018). In a 2006 discussion on current issues in Japan, particularly the *hikikomori* youth phenomenon, Naoyuki Agawa, a former minister, took part in a Q&A session in which he emphasized that unlike in the past, when Japan operated under a model where hard work was rewarded with lifetime employment, there are no longer any guarantees. Consistent with Saitō's theory that *hikikomori* individuals are typically raised in families of at least middle or upper class status, Agawa also implied that that the Japanese population continues to enjoy financial prosperity, which enables them to support one child living with their parents. The *hikikomori*, according to Agawa ("Japan Now Vol. 2, No. 15 (October 26, 2006)," n.d.), "are spoiled" and "do not need work to survive"; as a result, they no longer feel obligated to exert

effort in their pursuit of employment. Furlong (2008) affirms former minister's argument that Japanese families, who are fairly affluent, may have a tendency to excessively spoil their children, and that families can afford high levels of socio-economic protection for their children without putting excessive strain on their budget, and observes that support groups for *hikikomori* have been set up in specific middle-class areas, as it is common for affluent families to spend considerable amounts monthly on private counselling (Furlong, 2008).

In her book *Millennial Monsters*, Allison (2006, p. 85) cites Marx's theory that alienation results from an estrangement in the labor process and argues that the dominant ideology among middle-class children in postwar Japan was that productivity could be measured by academic achievement, an ideology which reduced the children to one-track machines and hindered their human capacities, including interpersonal interactions which eventually results in them becoming *hikikomoris*. Borovay weighs the odds of *hikikomori* simply being “a manifestation of a system that has strived to ‘mainstream’ an unreasonable amount of Japanese citizens into middle-class ideals and social life, but primarily provides ‘custodial’ kinds of care for those who cannot cope with the rigors of ordinary life” (2008, p. 554).

In a stark contrast, while Horiguchi (2011, p. 219) agrees that a certain set of socioeconomic resources are necessary to ensure the *hikikomori* individuals' survival, she refrains from implying that *hikikomori* mainly affects those from middle-class backgrounds; in fact, her field research has shown that *hikikomori* can be found in households within a wide range of socioeconomic strata, including those of the lower and upper classes and those with blue and white collar parents. In a similar vein, in his sociological exploration of the *hikikomori* phenomenon, Teppei Sekimizu explores the impact of socioeconomic variables on the occurrence and management of this problem. Sekimizu (2022, p.232) acknowledges the presence of social stratification but contends that *hikikomori* can impact families of higher socioeconomic status, surpassing the middle class. The mere availability of resources does not ensure that parents can adequately assist their children. Thus, Sekimizu (2022) proposes that the *hikikomori* phenomenon can manifest in various forms across all social classes. Furthermore, it is evident that in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a greater number of people have embraced and have the option of performing remote and online work. Consequently, despite the fact that *hikikomori* typically depend on their families for financial support, there are also individuals within this group who are generating revenue through online means (Suzuki, 2022).

2.1.6.2. *Hikikomori* as a one-gendered phenomenon

As one characteristic of the *hikikomori* 'society-bound syndrome', or 'psychosocial phenomenon', Saitō (2013) observes that it disproportionately and overwhelmingly affects men. Ricci (2008) contends that men who are subjected to the highest societal standards are disproportionately impacted by the need to maintain the illusion of omnipotence, hence the fact that over 90 percent of *hikikomori* are men is not surprising. Since Saitō (2013) indicated that in his survey 80% of the cases have been men, the number and divide may have grown since then. Saitō explains the gender imbalance in *hikikomori* cases by arguing that a woman's tendency to retreat into the home is less likely to be viewed as worrisome than the early indicator for the syndrome, which is school refusal, is accepted to occur only among men (?), and that the stress caused by external expectations is likely to be lower for a woman (Saitō, 2013, p. 174). Among the male *hikikomori*, Saitō (2013, p. 58) reports the ratio of *chōnan* (the eldest son) to be highest. According to Higuchi (2004, p. 123), this may be owing to the responsibilities and expectations placed on the eldest son in a society in which the eldest son has historically been responsible for maintaining the family line.

Borovoy (2008, p. 557) notes in her field notes that, while young males are said to account for the great majority of *hikikomori* cases, their stay in the home is more likely to be connected with a failure to earn a wage and much more likely to be pathologized than a young woman's. In various support groups and facilities she visited and observed, Borovoy (2008) encountered many women in their adult years who chose to remain at home, often contributing to basic household tasks, caring for aged grandparents, or managing the household budget, many of which avoided the label *hikikomori*. Rosenthal and Zimmerman (2012) note that young women may also end up in a *hikikomori* lifestyle as a result of negotiating the family's expectations of becoming a traditional Japanese wife and mother with the chance for self-determination presented by a world of global prospects. In a similar vein, Furlong (2008, p. 312) suggests that the concept of women retreating into the home may be so commonplace in Japanese society that it goes mostly unreported, further calling into question the validity of estimates and "guesstimates" of the phenomenon. Furlong (2008) makes an eloquent statement proposing that not only do women exist as *hikikomori*, though they generally happen to fly under the society's radar, but they also do the majority of the labor providing for the disproportionately high number of adolescent boys and men who are *hikikomori*. Put simply, it is possible that the number of women who are *hikikomori* is underestimated. However, even if it is not, women who are homemakers and mothers of *hikikomori* still bear the primary responsibility for

providing for them, which also makes them a subject of the *hikikomori* phenomenon. For instance, based on a case study conducted by Kato, Kanba, and Teo (2016), the mother of a 39-year-old *hikikomori* named "Mr. T" takes care of his basic necessities, cooks his meals, provides financial support for his lifestyle, and accompanies him to regular appointments at an outpatient clinic.

In a more recent study, Yong et al. look at the correlation between the *hikikomori* phenomenon and gender while also considering the socio-demographics and socio-psychological issues linked to the phenomenon (2020, p. 237). They found some interesting things that are pertinent to this study's literature review, but they also go against the grain of the general belief that the number of *hikikomori* women is underreported. While this discovery is significant for *hikikomori* studies, it is specifically applicable to homemaker *hikikomori* women residing in rural areas. In contrast to the Cabinet Office attitude survey's estimate of approximately 23% of homemaker *hikikomori*, Roseline Yong and her fellow researchers discovered, through their study conducted in a rural area, that the actual percentage is only slightly over 10% (Yong et al., 2020). Rahardjo (2013) examines the connection between Japanese masculinity and *hikikomori* during the post-war period. He suggests that *hikikomori* deviate from the traditional salaryman lifestyle, which was previously considered the embodiment of masculinity in Japan. Instead, *hikikomori* choose to stay at home, a role traditionally associated with women, thereby challenging the notion of masculinity. Rahardjo proposes that these social changes can lead to a more balanced and less gendered division between work and home.

In the same way that Tamaki Saitō defines *hikikomori* as the incapacity to mature, he explains the gender disparity in *hikikomori* by stating that girls mature more rapidly than boys and are therefore "more habituated to feelings of resignation" and thus less perturbed by the pressures of the educational system (Saitō, 2013, p. 175). The literature frequently emphasizes the gender aspect of *hikikomori*, highlighting its disproportionate occurrence among males in Japan. This observation is commonly seen in introductory studies on *hikikomori*. However, the existing research lacks comprehensive case studies, qualitative surveys, and individual narratives specifically focusing on *hikikomori* women. It is noteworthy to mention that women continue to play a crucial role in the phenomenon, even if they do not suffer from the *hikikomori* condition. In this capacity, they serve as primary caregivers and mothers. By placing sufficient emphasis on the aspect of gender, further and more meaningful research can be conducted to address this social issue in Japan.

2.1.7. Media attention and stigmatization

Furlong (2008) believes that media coverage of the *hikikomori* phenomenon is important, but it must be interpreted carefully as media does not only report on but also shape trends and social issues. Social issues are amplified by media and coverage does not necessarily reflect problem size (Cohen, 2011). With this in mind, the media has not always been interested in the *hikikomori* phenomenon. Among the *hikikomori* crimes prior to the turn of millennium, the abduction of a young woman in Niigata in 1990 generated the initial traditional media focus on the *hikikomori* phenomenon in Japan (Furlong, 2008, p. 313). The suspected *hikikomori* was apprehended by law enforcement for abducting a nine-year-old girl and confining her in his room for almost ten years (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 2012). With the turn of the millennium, in tandem with the surge in the cases of *hikikomori*, the year 2000 naturally witnessed a surge in public ‘interest’ regarding the *hikikomori* phenomenon due to the extensive circulation of news articles detailing a series of violent offences committed by young *hikikomori*. In May of that year, a 17-years old boy in Saga Prefecture, who was later identified as a *hikikomori*, hijacked an intercity bus by threatening the driver wielding a kitchen knife and forcing him to operate the vehicle for a continuous period of 19 hours, claiming the life of a woman and injuring five others (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 2012). The following weeks, the Japan Times released an article clarifying that two months prior to the hijacking, the boy had been placed in a mental institution in Saga after barricading himself in his room (“Hijacker Felt Deserted by Parents,” 2000), which would give away his identity as a *hikikomori*. In the wake of this incident that took place in 2000, and amidst the public and media attention, the Japanese government voiced apprehension regarding the potential presence of an astonishing number of one million individuals who were similar to the boy in question, who were *hikikomoris*, who eventually were dubbed as “members of a lost generation” or “long-term recluses in Japan who survive by relying on their parents and generally refuse to leave their homes” (Rizzo, 2016). In parallel with the media coverage and government concern in the beginning of the new millennium, the MHLW put out the very first findings on *hikikomori* via reports in 2001 and 2023, respectively, which semi-officially marked the inception of *hikikomori* studies (Tajan et al., 2017).

Ishikawa (2007) thoroughly examines the coverage of *hikikomori* in the *Asahi Shimbun* and *Yomiuri Shimbun* newspapers from 1983 to 2005. The study reveals a significant increase in the frequency of the term "*hikikomori*" in these newspapers, rising from four occurrences in 1985 to a remarkable 794 occurrences in 2005 (Ishikawa, 2007). This significant rise in both usage and prevalence in traditional media indicates that by 2005, the term had become highly

recognised, alas with a stigma attached to it. Masahisa Okuyama, the founder of the Nationwide Association of Parents of *Hikikomori* Sufferers, who is a *hikikomori* activist and also a parent of a *hikikomori*, referred to as 'KHJ Oya no Kai,' was quoted in a 2003 Japan Times article following these incidents saying, "It is a disease that has the potential to bring about the collapse of the nation" (Shimoyachi, 2003).

Although it is generally acknowledged in by academic and psychiatric circles that violence among *hikikomori* is "exception rather than the rule" (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 2012, p. 85), the media coverage of these incidents was alarming enough to both the Japanese public and the government; thus, we could say that the initial public reception of *hikikomori* was less than ideal. In his seminal work "*Hikikomori: Adolescence without End*," Tamaki Saitō commences the first chapter, "What is social withdrawal?" with an unsettling news story from the 1996 November issue of *Asahi Shimbun* and details in a graphic manner a tragic incident in which a middle school student allegedly murdered his father with a bat in Tokyo (Saitō, 2013, p. 17). At this juncture, Saitō also mentions that the young man was a student who had absenteeism for an entire academic year, which pertains to the onset of *hikikomori* during school years and specifically the earlier mentioned *tokokyohi*, meaning school refusal. Regarding Saitō's introductory remarks in the first chapter, which he perceives as deliberate attempts to captivate the reader, Nicolas Tajan, a psychoanalyst and author of *Mental Health and Social Withdrawal in Japan: Beyond the Hikikomori Spectrum* (Tajan, 2021), offers some insight in his said publication. Tajan identifies a critical translation mistake in Jeffrey Angles' translation of Saitō's work. He contends that the initial sentence of the opening chapter, which depicts the *hikikomori* son as the one who commits the act of killing his father with a bat in the English translation, is, in fact, the opposite. According to Tajan, it should be understood that the *hikikomori* boy was the victim of the crime and was killed by his father (Tajan, 2021, p. 63).

Another, and a more recent news story delves into the relationship between a *hikikomori* son and his father, highlighting the misconception that *hikikomori* individuals labelled as "violent" could sometimes be the ones subjected to violence, fatally so. This case holds particular interest, especially among the Japanese public and media, due to the involvement of a high-profile former top bureaucrat of the agriculture ministry, and former ambassador to the Czech Republic, who served between the years 2005 and 2008 ("Ex-top Official," 2019). Former bureaucrat Hideaki Kumazawa, 76, was apprehended and subsequently received a six-year prison term for the homicide of his 44-year old socially reclusive son ("Six-year Prison Term," 2021). Even the fact that he had a son was unknown to the neighbours until the day of the filicide. For the fear that stemmed from a recent stabbing spree against schoolchildren allegedly

committed by another *hikikomori* at the time, Kumazawa reported that he was compelled to kill his *hikikomori* son, who intermittently exhibited violent outbursts towards him and his wife, out of apprehension regarding a recent stabbing spree against schoolchildren purportedly carried out by another recluse at the time, to prevent his son from attacking elementary school children in the vicinity of their residence, towards whom he had previously expressed annoyance (Kim, 2019). According to a report by Kyodo News, Kumazawa wished to plead not guilty while claiming self-defense, however, the Tokyo High Court rejected it on the grounds that Kumazawa's son did not possess any weapons to suggest that he had pursued or attacked the defendant. Nevertheless, in light of the violence inflicted upon Kumazawa by his son, the judge imposed a meagre six-year prison sentence ("6-yr prison term," 2021).

The discovery made through such a media story that *hikikomori*, previously believed to primarily affect adolescents, young adults, and "adults" aged 15-39, also includes individuals as old as 44, marks a significant shift. This finding has broadened the scope of *hikikomori* from being solely a concern for the youth to becoming a societal issue affecting people of all ages in Japan. Furthermore, "KHJ Hikikomori Kazokukai Rengōkai," a national organization that represents hikikomori families, came up with a new term: "the 8050 (Hachimaru-Gomaru) problem." The 8050 problem refers to a significant number of pension-receiving parents in their 80s in Japan who provide financial assistance to their unmarried children in their 50s, who have suffered from social withdrawal and unemployment since early adulthood, which is a problem that has been on the rise since 2019 according to the MHLW (Yoshioka-Maeda, 2020). It was not until 2019 that a nationwide survey revealed that 613,000 *hikikomori* adults aged 40 and above relied on their parents financially (Cabinet Office, 2019); which goes against the government's previous classification of *hikikomori* as a condition mostly affecting those younger than 40. This finding, along with the news stories that featured *hikikomori* people over 40, suggested that unless the condition is effectively addressed, the withdrawal process may persist into old age (Yoshioka-Maeda, 2020). The recognition that *hikikomori* extended beyond being exclusively a concern among adolescents and that it impacted people of various age groups was strengthened by media attention highlighting real-life examples, including the notorious Kumazawa case. According to Saitō's definition, *hikikomori* is characterized by a lack of maturity (2013), meaning that even though someone may be a 40- or 50-year-old adult, they can still exhibit immaturity. In the Japanese society, where familialism is valued, the responsibility of caring for *hikikomori* individuals falls on their families, which is particularly challenging due to the shrinking labor market, which places legal obligations on parents to care for their "immature" adult children (Sekimizu, 2022).

Angles notes in the translator's introduction to "Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End" (*Shakaiteki Hikikomori: Owaranai Shishunki*) that discussing the issue of withdrawal necessitates the use of language, particularly one that is "normalized" (Saitō, 2013). In terms of language, the media's heightened attention to the phenomenon played a vital role in equipping the Japanese population with the necessary terminology such as "*hikikomori*" and "8050 problem" to openly engage in discussions about prolonged social isolation and its ramifications on their personal lives, families, and the entire nation. Although the rise in popularity of the term sparked discourse and communication, it also served as a vessel for the growing stigma associated with the *hikikomori*, which has been generally marked by mental illness, acts of violence and homicide. Given that the media is responsible for popularizing the use of the word "*hikikomori*," it is also the media who has the potential to normalize discussions surrounding this phenomenon.

2.1.8. The current state and future outlook of *hikikomori* in light of the COVID-19 pandemic

The existing body of literature concerning *hikikomori* and COVID-19 predominantly centres around the fear of an increased prevalence of *hikikomori*, while neglecting to address the perspective of individuals who have experience both the state of *hikikomori* and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Hikikomori* phenomenon was considered to be a growing and silent epidemic before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. One might argue that during this period, the *hikikomori* individuals experienced a dual isolation while surviving through both a "silent epidemic" of their own and a global pandemic. Health injustices are brought to the forefront by epidemics, and certain groups that were already subject to inequalities prior to the outbreak are likely to experience heightened vulnerability (Holmes et al., 2020). According to Roza et al. (2021), the chances of *hikikomori* individuals experiencing physical and social isolation were predicted to increase amidst the pandemic, and warned that it is crucial to prevent further isolation of these individuals during this process in terms of clinical and scientific efforts. While there are certain overlaps between COVID-19-related social isolation and *hikikomori*, it is important to acknowledge that *hikikomori* choose to avoid social interactions on their own accord, whereas COVID-19-related quarantining is mandated by government regulations (Kato, Sartorius, and Shinfuku, 2020). Predicting potential alterations to the lives of *hikikomori* individuals in the post-pandemic era, Wong argues that the quarantine measures and the increased awareness of the *hikikomori* way of life could foster a greater appreciation for the

phenomenon and consequently facilitate the advancement of *hikikomori* work within the community (Wong, 2020). Furthermore, it is noted that the line between pathological *hikikomori* and normal seclusion or inactivity is becoming more fuzzy, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Iwakabe (2021) suggests that our understanding can be improved by examining the emotional distress caused by confinement and social isolation, which may provide insights into *hikikomori* for everyone.

While this subchapter has been a brief review of the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic, Chapter 4 will venture much further into the pandemic context and how it relates to *hikikomori* using samples from Japanese media that discuss the *hikikomori* phenomenon, particularly in relation to its gendered and socioeconomic aspects. The fourth chapter will demonstrate that COVID-19 is a suitable framework to study the contextuality of the *hikikomori* phenomenon and will shed new light on it in terms of gender and socioeconomics, given the changes in social and economic expectations during the pandemic and their alignment with *hikikomori* practices.

2.1.9. Conclusion

Hikikomori has been variously described as a "culture-bound" and "society-bound" phenomenon, a "psychosocial condition" or a "idiom of stress," a subject that has been both stigmatized and problematized, medicalized and even empathized with during the pandemic. This review of the literature on *hikikomori* indicates that the phenomenon can be attributed to a multitude of individual factors.

It predominantly affects men and misses the mark when it comes to be identified among Japanese women, and there is a common idea that a significant portion of the *hikikomori* come from middle-class backgrounds. Ultimately, whereas medical expert definitions and quantitative academic research are providing initial insight into the intriguing and complex issue of *hikikomori*, it is also true that they are stripping *hikikomori* individuals of their own means of self-expression (Ishikawa, 2007). Presently, when a substantial volume of medical data and quantitative research has been accumulated, it is essential that the social sciences and humanities contribute to the study of *hikikomori* so that the individual perspectives of each *hikikomori* can be expressed, which would eventually provide them with the most important agency that is "self-expression" and explanation. Solely relying on a medical standpoint is inadequate. Due to its intricate nature and diverse origins, *hikikomori* can and should be studied by various academic fields such as "anthropology, medicine, psychology, and sociology" (Teo

et al., 2013 p. 445). To make up for the shortage of substantial qualitative research, scholars in academic disciplines like sociology, anthropology, and psychology should team up with practitioners in clinical fields like psychiatry, psychoanalysis, family therapy, and social work to achieve greater success and make a difference in people's lives (Teo et al., 2013).



CHAPTER III: SOCIOECONOMIC AND GENDERED LAYERS OF HIKIKOMORI

3.1. Introduction: The interplay between class and gender

Class and gender are inextricably intertwined in practice (Roberson, 2005); just as femininities cannot exist in the absence of masculinities (Enloe, 2014), neither can class and gender behave independently of one another; they are predestined to become entangled at some point beyond our ability to prevent, as observed in the context of the *hikikomori* phenomenon within this chapter. “To understand gender, then, we must constantly go beyond gender. The same applies in reverse. We cannot understand class, race, or global inequality without constantly moving towards gender,” proposes Connell (2005, p. 76), a preeminent scholar in the field of masculinities studies. In addition, contemporary research in feminist anthropology illustrates the need of acknowledging that “class and gender are “mutually determining systems” (Moore, 1995, p. 80). It is for practical reasons, such as to facilitate the organization of this chapter, that the gendered and socioeconomic strata of *hikikomori* will be kept as distinct as achievable. However, gender and socioeconomics naturally intersect, causing the boundaries between them to blur.

This also holds true in the context of *hikikomori*, as Heinze and Thomas propose that it is a contemporary manifestation of social deviance in Japan that challenges typical career paths and gender roles, reflecting an opposing opinion of established values (2014, p. 166). School refusal (*tōkōkyōhi*) can be linked to gender and gender roles in terms of a certain *modus-operandi* of Japanese motherhood, which is directly influenced by middle-class values. *Hikikomori* may find a solution through a non-gender-based and symmetrical division of labor between parents, but this is challenging due to the rigid masculinities of Japanese salaryman husbands. After the World War II, a new image of "masculinity" and financial prosperity drove the "salaryman" ideal and the labor they performed (Dasgupta, 2012). The notion of the "middle-class ideal" become a source of anxiety for *hikikomori* adolescents as they make the transition to adulthood. Male *hikikomori*, who constitute the dominant gender in terms of numbers, are demasculinized if they fail to make this transition and thereby become "failed middle-class sons" (Dziesinski, 2008). Gender performance and masculinity is therefore intricately linked to socioeconomic standing. This is due to the fact that it lies at the core of social problems that have become more

prominent since the 1992 financial crisis and the uncertain prospects of lifetime employment (Kinugawa, 2002). The Japanese government is concerned about both youth unemployment and the rising number of *freeters*, as well as the declining birth rate (Sugimoto, 2003) due to *hikikomori* individuals who are reluctant to leave their homes, marry, or start a family. This trend endangers the traditional "middle-class" family ideal that has been predominant in Japanese culture since the decades following World War II. Anxiety regarding academic achievement and job opportunities for children, as well as fears about future social decline, are common among the middle class (Furlong, 2008). The aging of the Japanese population is on the other hand, "a demographic bomb" that could go off any second, which might trigger a myriad of socioeconomic issues (Tajan, 2021, p. 81).

3.2. Following the trail to *hikikomori*: The gender perspective

The overarching conversation surrounding *hikikomori*, in Japan as well as worldwide, holds that acute social withdrawal is a condition that affects "young Japanese males" exclusively (Dziesinski, 2004, p.4). A portion of Chapter 2.1.5. discussed the 8050 problem, shedding light on the aging *hikikomori* population. It also underscored Saitō's conceptualization of *hikikomori* as an impediment to maturation, a pervasive issue within the adolescent psyche that emerges from an inability to progress along the trajectory of personal growth (Saitō, 2013, p. 28), suggesting that individuals in their 40s or 50s may still display immaturity due to a failed transition from "adolescence to adulthood" (Zielenziger, 2007). In light of the 8050 problems coming to light and the fact that immaturity can manifest in persons of any age, the widespread notion that *hikikomori* is only a problem among young people is called into question. The term is meant to encompass everyone who was unable to successfully navigate the transition into adulthood, whether that transition was interrupted by means of dropping out of school, not participating in the workforce, or completely relying on family for financial support.

The ambiguity surrounding the youth aspect of *hikikomori* and its cultural specificity in Japan is being challenged by globalization. Despite this, the acceptance of the male component remains unquestioned by the Japanese public. If the reported causes of social withdrawal are linked to school systems and family dynamics, it raises the question of whether these stressors and societal influences affect only one specific gender in Japan (Dziesinski, 2004, p. 5). The gender perspective section aims to determine the place of female *hikikomori* in this context through an examination of the development of the phenomenon, starting from the early phases of socialization in the family and school setting; exploring the dynamics of mother-son and

mother-daughter relationships, the influence of the absent salaryman father, and the repercussions of bullying (*ijime*), which culminates in school refusal and non-attendance (*tōkōkyōhi* and *futōkō*, respectively).

3.2.1. School refusal and gender

As pointed out in the literature review portion of the dissertation, numerous scholars concur that school refusal (*tōkōkyōhi*) and school non-attendance (*futōkō*)¹ are potential precursors or catalysts to developing *hikikomori* tendencies (Saitō 2013; Zielenziger, 2007; Iwakabe, 2021; Sekimizu, 2022). *Futōkō*, akin to *hikikomori*, possesses a distinct definition as follows: "*Futōkō* comprises individuals who have been absent from school for over 30 days in a single academic year on account of diverse psychological, emotional, physical, or social circumstances that impede their attendance at school or prevent them from doing so even though they would like to" (MEXT, 2002). The official definition of *futōkō* pertains to schoolchildren who are "unable" to attend school despite their "desire to do so," with an implied sense of culpability (Hou et al., 2023). However, Lock (1986) argues that it is a widely held belief that children exhibiting with school refusal syndrome merely act as if they want to attend class when, in reality, they refuse to do so and spend the entire day at home, frequently in bed. These children can be anywhere from elementary school to college, but junior high school students make up the majority (Lock, 1986, p. 103). Likewise, Koyama et al. (2010) classify *futōkō* and *hikikomori* as a psychopathology characterized by lacking motivation in individuals who abstain from work or school without compelling justification, despite being obligated to do so.

Saitō highlights that although there are various factors that can contribute to a condition of withdrawal, his own research and personal observations indicate that the majority of instances originate from students initially skipping school, which then escalates into prolonged periods of absenteeism (2013). He also emphasizes that "not attending school" was the most frequently reported response in his surveys when participants were asked about the event that triggered their onset of withdrawal (Saitō, 2013, p. 33). Japanese schools exhibit stringent discipline and have little tolerance for non-conformity, leading to frequent instances of *tōkōkyōhi* and *futōkō* (Furlong, 2008). A widely accepted idea is that students experiencing burnout in a highly demanding and isolating educational environment resort to *tōkōkyōhi* as a means of asserting

¹ In 1997, the Ministry of Education (MOE) stopped using the word "school refusal" and replaced *tōkōkyōhi* with *futōkō*, which means "school non-attendance" and emphasizes absence from school without distinction of the cause, and conveys a more neutral connotation (Yoneyama, 2000, p. 93).

their own agency in their quest for ‘subjectivity’ (Yoneyama, 2000, p. 77). The issue of *tōkōkyōhi* which began to gain significant attention in Japan throughout the 1980s, was also characterized as a manifestation of “resistance against social pressures and expectations” (Lock, 1986, p. 99). In a society characterised by the broad and common practice of education in schools, the absence of students from this setting is frequently interpreted as a form of “resistance to the adult society” as well as an indication of mental and physical malady (Kanzaki & Suzuki, 2023). In line with these arguments, Tajan (2015) asserts that “*hikikomori* can be seen as a progression towards subjectivity.”

According to psychiatrist Ushio Isobe (2007, as cited in Nesser, 2009), *tōkōkyōhi* and *hikikomori* share similar outward characteristics but have certain distinct internal differences. The similarities begin with how *tōkōkyōhi* and *futōkō* have garnered the attention of authorities in psychiatry, public health, sociology, education, and psychology, among others (Kanzaki & Suzuki, 2023). One of the reasons why the two go hand in hand is for this reason. Yet where they differ is the level of dedication. *Tōkōkyōhi* is characterized by a strong aversion to attending school and engaging in academic pursuits, accompanied by a feeling of resentment at the limitations imposed by the educational system. *Hikikomori*, instead of harboring resentment towards limitations, actively evade them.

It is important to note at this juncture that the involvement of medical professionals such as psychiatrists and health professionals in shaping the claimsmaking process in these fields presents problems due to its contribution medicalization of the phenomenon which leads to stigma and depoliticization (Conrad & Schneider, 1992). Additionally, the labelling of *tōkōkyōhi* as a nationwide epidemic further reinforces the medicalization of the issue, and this medical framing extends to the *hikikomori* phenomenon. Choosing not to attend school has been considered a deviation from the accepted social conduct. This deviation has been then treated as a medical issue in order to prevent it from becoming a political matter. In line with this, as part of the social constructionist approach, Conrad & Schneider suggest that “the medicalization of depoliticizes deviance in the same manner” (1992, p. 251). By categorizing the absence of children at school as a pathological condition, their inability to attend school and participate in society is disregarded within the framework of the social and educational system. By shifting the attention to the educational system, it may be elucidated that the child's behavior is a kind of protest against a specific component of the school or classroom, such as *ijime*.

All things considered, the progression from *hikikomori* is considered to be a continuum of *tōkōkyōhi* or *futōkō* in the majority of cases. At this juncture, one ponders whether there have been no school-age girls in modern-day Japan who have undergone *tōkōkyōhi* or *futōkō* and

later evolved into *hikikomori*. Lock (1986) notes that school refusal syndrome affects both boys and girls, but there is a lack of statistical data to determine the precise gender distribution. Instead, there are personal accounts from physicians suggesting that more boys are affected than girls. Conversely, in a more recent study; Hou et al. (2023) examined *futōkō* among junior high school students and analyzed a sample of 119 students, of which 63 were girls and 56 were boys. Within this particular cohort, more schoolgirls were adversely affected by school absenteeism compared to boys. In light of the information that both genders suffer from school refusal, what prevented the girls who experienced *tōkōkyōhi* or *futōkō* from evolving into *hikikomori* women later down the line? If so, how did these young women successfully navigate the transition from adolescence to maturity without attending school? If not, have women been mostly excluded from the *hikikomori* equation, or did they recuperate from *tōkōkyōhi* and not reach the *hikikomori* level? The gender dimension of the *hikikomori* phenomenon is rife with unaddressed and unresolved questions. It is commonly assumed as a given that the vast majority of *hikikomori* are male, as if this were an established truth, despite our relatively recent understanding of the phenomenon during the past several decades.

3.2.2. *Ijime*: “Feminine” type of bullying in Japanese schools

Futōkō and *ijime* are two social problems that affect the youth on a national level which have come to be referred as the “twin problems” (Naito & Gielen, 2005, p. 171). Furthermore, an increasing proportion of distressed schoolchildren engage in *futōkō* instead of attending classes due to their incapacity or unwillingness while a considerable proportion of them exhibit psychosomatic symptoms and a dread of *ijime* (bullying), whereas others simply skip school. On the other hand, the coexistence of the “twin problems” of *ijime* and *futōkō* indicates that the educational system in Japan has experienced a decline in its former excellence. Borovoy (2008, p. 554) affirms that *hikikomori* instances which tend to originate from “school refusal” *tōkōkyōhi* (or later referred to as *futōkō*), which is triggered by “some form of school bullying,” which may commence as early as elementary school. She adds that bullies tend to single out children who exhibit characteristics that set them apart from others, such as physical vulnerability, developmental delays, or emotional detachment. By “some form of bullying,” Borovoy must be pointing to *ijime* which is listed among the leading factors leading to *tōkōkyōhi* and *futōkō*. At this point, it has already been established that school non-attendance *futōkō* is often what triggers the transition to the *hikikomori* state (Saitō, 2013). In his research, Yuichi Hattori pointed out a clear connection between *ijime* and *hikikomori*. Through case

studies involving hikikomori individuals, he discovered that in 54% of the cases, these individuals were subjected to *ijime*, which involved “both physical and emotional mistreatment by their peers during their time in Japanese elementary, middle, and high schools” (Hattori, 2006, p. 188). Given that there is an identified correlation between *futōkō* and *hikikomori*; *ijime* and *futōkō* (or simply ‘the twin problems’), as well as *hikikomori* and *ijime*, we could potentially confront a nationwide “triplet problems” situation in which school absenteeism ensues after bullying and *hikikomori* follows school absenteeism.

The term “bullying” is not plainly used in the Japanese context as academics, as well as public, make a distinction between *ijime* and typical bullying that occurs in Western schools. Taki (2001) suggests that Japanese bullying is characterized by a more confined and less violent nature. According to Naito and Gielen (2005, p. 175), the term *ijime*, in dictionary terms, mean “treating a weak person harshly” or “to be cruel to, tease, and bully.” These actions can include tactics to socially isolate someone who stands out due to their low social class, physical appearance, or timid personality. To distinguish bullying from *ijime*, Morita et al. (1999, p. 321) note that ‘*ijime*’ in Japanese, has a feminine connotation, and does not mean ‘conceptual’ violence. If a group of boys physically assault another boy to extort money, most Japanese would not call it *ijime*; yet if they physically harm one or more boys after being insulted, most Japanese consider it *ijime*. The reason many Japanese people associate the term “*ijime*” with femininity can be attributed to this subtle kind of violence; such as avoiding the target/victim altogether, pretending they do not exist, teasing them in a negative way, making false accusations about them, talking harshly and falsely about them behind their back, spreading rumors, forming a group to harass or intimidate them, and so on (Naito & Gielen, 2005).

3.2.2.1. *Ijime* in Japan vs bullying in the West

Woronoff (1997) characterizes Japanese schools themselves as institutions that are far from democratic, as there exists a highly rigid hierarchy, encompassing not only administrators and teachers at the top, but also extending downwards to the pupils, with those in higher grades exerting authority over those in lower grades. In contrast to Western bullying, Taki (2001) views *ijime* as a phenomenon that surpasses the hierarchical structure, arguing that *ijime* specifically involves Japanese students targeting peers of similar age, while traditional bullying usually involves older students targeting younger ones. Similar to the inherent differences between *ijime* in Japan and bullying in Western school environments, the approaches and management styles employed by Western and Japanese parents, specifically mothers, also

diverge. Zielenziger (2007) observes that in cases of *ijime*, which is the precursor of *futōkō* for the most time, a Japanese mother typically refrains from intervening, unlike a Western mother who may approach school authorities to protect her child from mistreatment by older or more popular classmates. Instead, a Japanese mother tends to accept the dominance imposed on her child by the more influential group and often places the blame on her own offspring, questioning what actions they may have taken to provoke the bullying. This is in the same vein with Japanese parents hiding their *hikikomori* children, hiding their psycho-social condition or even sometimes hiding their existence as a whole. On the other hand, one Japanese father who went to great lengths to protect his son, who was 13 at the time, from the *ijime* simply received the recommendation that his son transfer schools, which was after he approached the homeschool teacher about the situation, called the police and the parents of the *ijime* leader (Naito & Gielen, 2005, p. 170). Victims of *ijime* in this case report feeling abandoned not just by their parents but also by their educators, the police, and society at large. This likely explains why some of the victims would stop attending classes and eventually began to isolate themselves.

In addition, Psychiatrist Kosuke Yazamaki highlights the distinction between *ijime* and Western-style bullying by emphasising that while bullying is undoubtedly common in Western educational settings, the Japanese people's cultural, ethnic, and clan associations, or their national ideology, imply a belief in the uniformity of individuals and their shared beliefs and values. Consequently, Japanese children employ *ijime* as a method to exclude those who deviate from this uniformity (Zielenziger, 2007). *Ījime* is also characterized as "ruthless" by Dr. Yamazaki due to the fact that its objective and result are to estrange individuals from the educational setting, culminating in *tōkōkyōhi* and *futōkō* and frequently preceding *hikikomori*, a state in which the individual entirely isolates themselves from society. Sociologist Kawanishi Yuko from Temple University in Tokyo characterizes the school environment in Japan as "extremely nasty and dark," noting that bullying involves both physical and psychological aspects, and that as a result; many sufferers discontinue attending school and eventually isolate themselves from society (Dziesinski, 2005, p. 12). Long-term employment is inaccessible to those who are deprived of education; consequently, exclusion from Japan's homogeneous middle-class society ensues. This course of events facilitates the process of rationalizing the imposition of isolation on individuals that are seen as threats to homogeneity. Despite the considerable discourse surrounding *ijime* and its reputation for being "cruel and dark," Naito and Uwe (2005) argue that Japanese schools are considerably more peaceful environments for group dynamic than, for instance, their American counterparts. Furthermore, they contend that the absence of physical aggression involving guns and knives, in contrast to bullying in the

States, for instance, is attributable to *ijime* which prioritizes psychological intimidation and terror against victims who are considered to be mentally weaker. While there is no agreement on the causes of severe bullying among Japanese children, some attribute the inflexible educational system, which lacks diversity and respect for originality, as a factor that compels students to seek a way to express their resentment (Kawanishi, 2009, p. 112).

3.2.2.2. *Ijime* and female students

To comprehend the reasons behind the remarkably and seemingly low number of women affected by *hikikomori*, we can examine their experiences as students, particularly whether they encountered the precursor to *hikikomori* known as *tōkōkyōhi*, and the research indicating that bullying (*ijime*) contributes to *tōkōkyōhi* presents us with a critical juncture where we must determine if school-age girls experienced bullying that would have led them to refuse attending school down the line.

On bullying, Hoffman (1977) proposed that girls typically exhibit more sympathy than boys towards victims, displaying stronger opposition towards bullies and perceiving the experience of bullying as distasteful. For instance, a study carried out in Switzerland unveiled that girls reported a significantly lower frequency of experiencing verbal or physical bullying compared to boys (Alsaker & Brunner, 2014, p. 257). While Hoffman's view holds true with European countries, his view barely aligns with prior research conducted in Japan among school-age children and adolescents. Surveys conducted in Japan consistently demonstrates that bullying, known as "*ijime*," is significantly more widespread among girls than boys, in contrast to the findings of European researchers that indicate higher rates of bullying targeting boys. Girls' *ijime*, or bullying, in Japan occurs more frequently than girls' bullying in other countries. In fact, its frequency is comparable to, or even surpasses, that of boys' *ijime* in Japan (Morita et al., 1999). Group bullying is a significant issue in *ijime*, and according to a study by Naito and Gielen (2005), it is more prevalent among girls; furthermore, female students have a propensity to use vile forms of social manipulation to isolate the *ijime* victim. Morita et al. (1999, p. 321) argue that Western people emphasize the notion that "bullying is not only a problem for boys," which is diametrically opposed to the Japanese rhetoric's tendency to caution: *Ijime is not only a problem for girls*.

Although Hoffman's research on bullying may not be directly applicable to the non-Western Japanese context, the study also reveals a potentially universal finding. It suggests that "females may possess a more highly developed affective base for engaging in prosocial behavior

compared to males,” as empathy and guilt are the primary prosocial emotions (Hoffman, 1977, p. 720). Although school-age girls in Japan have a higher tendency to participate in *ijime* compared to boys, they exhibit a lower inclination towards physical violence and making violent threats (Morita et al., 1999). This prosocial conduct may be one of the components to explain why certain female *hikikomori*, despite facing bullying, exhibit a higher likelihood of successfully transitioning out of the *tōkōkyōhi* behavior and reintegrating into school, thereby severing the link between school refusal and *hikikomori*. Alternatively, this may not apply to other *hikikomori* women who were unable to sever ties, withdrew from school, and entered a state of *hikikomori*, continuing their lives within the confines of their homes or rooms without attracting the attention of society, unlike their male counterparts. However, it is precisely these *hikikomori* women who should to be further identified and investigated, as it is possible that their stories may shed light on different ways of coping for both the male *hikikomori*, who seem to get the majority of the attention from the public and media, and the female *hikikomori* themselves, who are, for the most time, sidelined.

The Ministry of Education emphasized the prevalence of school non-attendance by substituting the term " *tōkōkyōhi* " with " *futōkō* ." In doing so, they reminded us that *futōkō* could affect any school-age child (Kawanishi, 2009, p. 149). Similarly, when *ijime* was at its height but the notion was that boys were not victims, they announced that *ijime is not limited to girls* (Morita et al. 1999, p. 321). Presently, certain rehabilitation groups advocate the notion that " *hikikomori* could happen to anyone " (Kawani, 2009, p. 150). According to former *hikikomori* and current counselor Okawara Yasuo, "... anyone can be a victim " (Dziesinski, 2004, p. 10). Given the current prevalence of broad social problems that can affect anyone in society, particularly the youth, the belief that *hikikomori* people are predominantly male has little basis and should be revisited.

3.2.3. Motherhood: cocoons, capsules and molds

In Japan, the family unit is primarily responsible for addressing school refusal, as it is viewed as a family issue rather than a social one requiring professional intervention (Sekimizu, 2021). Irrespective of a shortage of gender-balanced narratives concerning school refusal (wherein school boys are disproportionately represented in comparison to girls), an additional gendered aspect persists: the oversimplification and reductionism of Japanese motherhood, akin to the depiction of *hikikomori* where the cocoon-like *amae* bond between a mother and son is primarily cited as the culture-bound culprit of their children's social withdrawal or school

refusal; which Saitō (2013) refers to as a "cultural predisposition" to instill emotionally dependent relationships (*amae*), in which the child depends on the parents for care in an asymmetrical and possibly codependent manner. In regard to the Japanese inclination to label concepts as "uniquely Japanese," *amae* is no exception. The context of male-dominant phenomenon of *hikikomori* may emphasize the significance of the mother-son bond in particular, but the inseparability that exists between a child and his mother is timeless and transcends cultural boundaries. Ortner (1974, p.77) contextualizes this universality by discussing the physical attributes of women and their compelled connection and confinement to nature and domestic environments, saying: "Mothers and their children, according to cultural reasoning, belong together." She reaches this conclusion by examining the nursing bond between mother and kid, while alternative feeding methods are typically considered artificial and makeshift, the one between mother-child is viewed as natural due to the mother's body undergoing lactation processes in direct relation to a specific pregnancy and child, akin to the concept of "*amae*," an unbreakable bond. A deep mother-son connection is often emphasized in cases of *hikikomori*. Kawanishi (2005) suggests that close, protective ties between mothers and daughters are more common nowadays while puberty and sexual differences often hinder the establishment of a very close relationship between a mother and her son. Thusly, the concept of *ichiransei oyako* (identical twin parent-child) emerges between a mother and daughter.

According to Dr. Tajima, a psychiatrist with experience in a prefecturally-funded mental health clinic, mothers who lack a sense of purpose in life (*ikigai ga nai*) beyond their children are often the main cause of the problem, adding that due to their absent husbands, these mothers are unable to promote independence in their adolescents and instead heavily depend on them (Lock, 1986, p. 105). In a similar vein, family therapist Dr. Satoru Saito holds that numerous isolated and discontented wives and mothers, who are denied opportunities for professional growth, devote their entire being to the limited number of children they have. In doing so, they frequently become overly entangled in the lives of their children; this they refer to as the "mother-child capsule" (Kawanishi, 2009, p. 110) situation. Dr Saito argues that this capsule excludes critical external figures, including the father, acquaintances, and other significant individuals, from this closed-knit relationship, despite the fact that their input is essential for the child's healthy development.

While lending precedence to household duties and obligations, Japanese women transition in and out of paid employment (Kondo, 1990). Women are either employed and get paid or work as unpaid laborers at home, sometimes experiencing both situations. Based on his analysis of his *hikikomori* clients, Yuichi Hattori highlights the prevalent co-dependency between the

mother and child in emotionally dysfunctional families. He posits that this co-dependency is the root cause of intense anger that clients feel towards their mothers, often expressed through the statement: "You made me a sick person" (Hattori, 2006, p. 197). Most works also briefly mention father-absenteeism, but it is never identified as the fundamental cause. In the book *Adolescence without end* (Saitō, 2013) which is likely the most significant work on *hikikomori*, the term "father" is referenced a little over forty times, whereas the word "mother" appears well over a hundred times. Because the two phenomena share most traits, the situation is not drastically different when it comes to *tōkōkyōhi*; as both *hikikomori* and school refusal are a form of a social isolation in essence.

In *Dilemmas of Adulthood*, Rosenberger notes that the state relies on mothers as assets for "molding" children into desired psychological characteristics that represent "Japanese-ness" and prepare them to be productive workers and citizens, leading mothers to take on the responsibility of making decisions for their children (2013, p. 102). Perhaps the government and society blame mothers and mothering for *hikikomori* and school refusal because they caused their project of a homogenous middle-class marked by Japanese-ness to fail, and therefore are perceived as failures in their roles as mold holders or shapers of the molds. But they fail to acknowledge that perhaps who was being molded was shattered because it adamantly refused to budge from its perch on the tray, just as it adamantly refused to attend classes where it might have been exposed to *ijime*, the pressures of university entrance exams, or fierce competition. Perhaps the contents stuck because they would not budge. Maybe it snapped because of the strain of being dependent on the mold.

In cases of withdrawal and *hikikomori*, both dependence on and instability with family members are frequently reported. For instance, according to Saito's case studies, 36% of the participants exhibited "reliance on parents and infantile behavior," and 44% reported experiencing instability with family members (2013, p. 43-44). Several Japanese psychologists and psychiatrists suggest that the strong emotional bond between Japanese mothers and their children, along with insufficient support from uninvolved fathers, results in many children facing challenges in competitive school settings (Naito & Gielen, 2005, p. 185). Some people may opt out of attending school, while others may participate in or see instances of bullying, resulting in the formation of reserved yet easily agitated and contentious personalities. Thus, eliminating fathers from the equation and reducing the family unit to the mother constitutes a half-measure; in the event of future reflections on *hikikomori* and/or school refusal, it may be advantageous to place equal emphasis on fathering and mothering.

3.2.4. Resolving the gender gap in household tasks and child-rearing: A potential prevention strategy for *hikikomori*?

It is worth noting that the other significant factor in the progression of a child into *hikikomori* is the absence of the father, which stands in stark contrast to the archetype of the overbearing and dependent mother. A case study involving *hikikomori* individuals found that 91% of them characterized their fathers as "workaholics" and "disengaged from childrearing" (Hattori, 2008, p. 191). Furthermore, the school refusal syndrome is ascribed to a paternal figure whose influence or presence is not felt, in contrast to a maternal figure who is "over-competent and bossy" (Lock, 1986, p. 104). The significance of the maternal role is particularly emphasized with regard to school refusal as well as *hikikomori*. Professional interpretations and explanations for school refusal revolve around "self-centred" full-time housewives, in which it is argued that contemporary Japanese young mothers have had an easy upbringing surrounded by material wealth, and as a result, they tend to treat their children "like pets" while simultaneously presuming and building up to their child's admission to a prestigious university (Lock, 1986, p. 104). The overlap between work and family dynamics has typically been discussed in connection to women (Roberson, 2005); and it is no exception when it comes to school refusal and/or *hikikomori* where mothers and their domestic "full-time housewife" roles are considered the main factor. We must recognize that the reluctance to expand study on men and fathers beyond industrial or corporate settings, and merely mentioning their lack of presence in the family household, is "gender based and biased" (Roberson, 2005, p. 138).

From the 1980s onwards, when democracy and the the economic bubble introduced a materialistic value to Japan at the expense of previously strong family ties, certain conflicts within the Japanese family emerged: many married men neglected their families in favor of pursuing their careers, while many mothers and wives became overly invested in their children's academic achievements (Iwasaki, 2005). In the late 1980s, Japan established itself as the second-largest economy globally on the basis of an inflated economy. However, that economy came crashing in 1992, prompting an upsurge in social problems and an increased demand for mental health services (Kinugawa, 2002). It was during a period of rampant school refusal in Japan, school counseling was introduced among a backdrop of several societal issues. A notable surge in the number of school refusals occurred between 1974 and 1982, from 7,310 to 20,165 (Lock, 1989, p. 103). The increase paralleled the expansion of the fast-paced financial globalization bubble in the 1980s and its accompanying materialistic alignment (Tsuruta, 1999). This illustrates the mutually reinforcing relationship and inseparability of

socioeconomic circumstances, rigid gender roles within families, and the emergence of school rejection, which frequently culminates in *hikikomori*.

In his study, Sekimizu (2021) interviewed fathers whose sons were *hikikomori*. The purpose of the interviews was to identify the challenges faced by fathers of *hikikomori* sons and to establish connections between the “microscopic experiences of these fathers and the macroscopic contexts of Japanese social structures” (Sekimizu, 2021, p. 183). Upon analyzing five father-son *hikikomori* cases, Sekimizu discovered that the male breadwinner model enforced strict gender roles. Each of the interviewees was a typical male provider; domestic responsibilities were delegated to women. According to a recent study by Hamasaki et al. (2023), gender gap-related problems experienced by mothers may play a role in the underlying causes of the *hikikomori* phenomenon. The study suggests that the active involvement of mothers in social activities may operate as a preventive factor against *hikikomori*. Nonetheless, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the gender disparity in child-care has widened even further, reducing the likelihood that mothers will participate in social activities.

In the present circumstances where the gender pay disparity remains unattended and women continue to face job insecurities during the pandemic, the number of men who take child care leave to participate in child-rearing and household tasks is not increasing, despite a greater public awareness of the need for men to partake in child-rearing (Kitazume, 2022). Japan ranks last among the seven major G7 nations in terms of the amount of time men spend on childcare and housework, and it is among the lowest levels globally (Hamasaki et al., 2023, p. 279). Previous research contrasting various countries also shows that Japanese fathers spend considerably fewer hours with their children compared to fathers in other countries (Makino 1995, as cited in Ishii-Kuntz, 2005). Homemaking and childrearing exhibit a significant gender disparity in Japan. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development data indicates that in Japan, women devote five times as many hours to unpaid housework as men (OECD, 2023). Ortner (1974, p. 78) discusses how women are often regarded as the first problematic catalyst in the family unit, with the responsibility falling on them for issues like school refusal and *hikikomori* sons or daughters. She argues that, while men are more involved in the public and political aspects of society, women are typically limited to domestic roles, focusing on relationships within and between families, thus, to certain or socially contentious issues. When we examine the idea that the restriction on mothers' social activities due to domestic responsibilities plays a significant role in creating codependency and producing *hikikomori* individuals, along with the research on Japanese masculinity indicating that the gender-based division of labor at home is a key aspect of defining salaryman masculinity (Hidaka, 2017, p.

114), it suggests that Japanese white-collar salarymen masculinity could also be a contributing factor to *hikikomori*.

An effective strategy for tackling the psycho-social issue of *hikikomori*, according to Hamasaki et al. (2023), could involve men, particularly fathers, through the reduction of the responsibilities that are readily shouldered by mothers. This would enable mothers to have more time for engaging in social activities, rather than spending excessive time at home performing household tasks and taking care of children, which reinforces the codependent relationship between the mother and child.

A major finding that emphasizes the direct influence of the balanced distribution of financial resources on husbands' involvement in household tasks is that husbands are more likely to take on a greater share of the chores when their wives earn a substantial income and the income gap between them is minimal (Nishioka, 1998). Sugimoto (2023) juxtaposes the lifestyles of blue-collar workers with white-collar salarymen, noting that blue-collar men derive greater joy from home life and community involvement compared to white-collar salarymen who are less engaged in family and domestic responsibilities. Sugimoto (2023, p. 94) observes that, typically, working-class men prioritize family life and actively participate in community matters, after-hours children's soccer teams, and other sports clubs. At this point, a profound awareness presents itself: working-class men who spend more time with their children and help mothers with household chores are less likely to have *hikikomori* children. This provides a more nuanced basis for why *hikikomori* is more common in middle-class families led by salaryman fathers, who provide minimal assistance with childcare or household responsibilities for stay-at-home “full-time housewife” mothers.

In a similar vein, it was noted that both genders had shared domestic and caring responsibilities during the Edo period and the gendered division of labor and women's traditional roles as primary caregivers in the home did not emerge until the late nineteenth century which coincided with the rise in middle- and upper-class urban households (Kim, 2022). Anthropologist Kara Hiroko noted that historically, Japanese fathers were significantly engaged in childcare (Jolivet, 1997, p. 64). Hiroko informed that childcare manuals from the Edo period had been written for the exclusive use of men, who took part in changing diapers, putting babies to bed, and more. In fact, the emphasis on the ideal of the ‘good wife and wise mother,’ did not emerge until the Meiji period, which prescribed certain responsibilities for husbands and wives. The Meiji Restoration, according to Doi (1973), rendered Japan a “fatherless society,” a term coined by Ferdern (1919), an apprentice of Sigmund Freud, the acclaimed “father” of psychoanalysis. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

Western societies developed a conception of political rights predicated on a sex-based division, attempting to distinguish between the public and private spheres on the basis of the prevalent ideology of the time, which held that men should govern society and women should govern the home (Coward, 1989, p. 56; Moore, 1995, p. 22). This domestic/public dichotomy have persisted in Western societies, and was echoed in Japan. Today, being *daikokubashira*, the architectural term for the central support pillar of a house, is the only domestic characteristic that Japanese fathers are prepared to embrace, as it appeals to the masculine senses considerably more than being a nurturing parent or a supportive spouse (Hidaka, 2017, p. 112).

Roberson (2005, p. 127) speculated that Japanese men could distance themselves from domestic responsibilities by leveraging the benefits linked to their identification with white-collar, middle-class salarymen and the accompanying ideologies like "masculinist, capitalist, and statist" that they adopted due to their privileged social status and class position. The issue of gendered domestic labor is rooted in "power relationships" and "production relationships," which are influenced by modern notions of masculinities (Roberson, 2005, p. 74). In this respect, modern salarymen in Japan are viewed as the embodiment of masculinity and are credited with ushering in the country's economic miracle. They are recognized as the primary providers not only for their families but also for the entire nation. Roberson and Suzuki (2003) suggest that people commonly compared 'salarymen' to modern samurai, emphasizing their dedication to the national goal of economic growth. The samurai were warriors, while the 'salarymen' were troops in economic conflicts rather than military ones.

Although it is highly plausible that individuals exhibiting *hikikomori*-like behavior existed throughout history prior to the emergence of the term itself, it is worth noting that the social issue of *hikikomori* was non-existent, for instance, during the Edo period, when home and childrearing responsibilities were not assigned to a specific gender, childcare was not designated to be a feminine task, and middle-class salarymen did not exist, may not be a mere coincidence. As gender-based labor division is a significant contributor to contemporary social issues, it is crucial to address social phenomena such as *hikikomori* and *tōkōkyōhi* or *futōkō* by ensuring that the division is conducted fairly and that both parents bear equal responsibility. While state-run campaigns that restrict women from work socialization contribute to gender inequities and reinforce traditional gender roles; studies (Sekimizu, 2021; Hamasaki et al., 2023) suggest that reducing mothers' household and childcare responsibilities while increasing their social leisure time, as fathers take on more household and childcare duties, could be a valid strategy to prevent *hikikomori*. Moreover, by highlighting the negative aspects of a society that is excessively masculine and patriarchal, the strain on Japanese motherhood could be

reduced. It must be recognized that the mere absence of fathers does not absolve them of responsibility for their children's issues which affect the society at large, such as *hikikomori* and school refusal. In the same vein, the overbearing presence of mothers, and them being synonymous to home, does not obligate them to assume the entirety of the liability as well as responsibilities.

3.2.5. Hidden in plain sight: Female *hikikomori* and bias

A more complete picture of the trail leading to *hikikomori* emerges as one traces its way through the halls of Japan's school system, while encountering instances of *ijime* that leads to school refusal, the homes in which mothers are too involved and fathers are mostly absent, as well as the fabric of materialistic society which became more pronounced during the globalized and privatized Japanese economic bubble (Tsuruta, 1999); it becomes evident that girls, just as boys, have been members of Japanese society all this time; they, too, have encountered school refusal and struggled to transition from adolescence to adulthood. Dziesinski argues that these societal pressures may contribute to a higher incidence of female *hikikomori*, and Japanese daughters may become *hikikomori* for the same reasons that young men do, namely school traumas or *amae*, but Japanese mothers are either too preoccupied with their sons' lives to recognize this, or the societal norms and expectations regarding the domestic, docile and quiet role of women fail to recognize the concerning nature of their daughters' acute social withdrawal. (Dziesinski, 2004, p. 19).

Tajan's investigation into *futōkō* and *hikikomori* uncovers "20 lessons from *hikikomori*," with the twelfth lesson stating that "the *hikikomori* phenomenon is not exclusively limited to males, and the number of women affected is significantly higher than previously believed" (2021, p. 209). According to Berman and Rizzo (2019), the documented cases of *hikikomori* predominantly involve men, which has led to the underrepresentation of girls and women as *hikikomori*. In fact, a recent survey on *hikikomori* conducted in Japan with a sample size of 250,000 individuals aged 15 and older and a response rate of 57% yielded 9096 *hikikomori* responses, the rate of *hikikomori* women standing at a remarkable 51.4% (Nihonhsōkyōkai, 2022, as cited in Marika, 2022, p. 3). Similarly, a recent systematic review, except with a smaller sample size, found that the ratio of *hikikomori* men was lower compared to females. (Nonaka et al., 2022).

In spite of these challenges and ambiguities, why do we readily accept the idea that *hikikomori* is a phenomenon that only affects one gender, even when new research account for

cases in which the number of women hikikomori outnumbers that of men? The context of an incredibly patriarchal Japanese society in which women are already sidelined should be viewed as a limitation in and of itself. This is because official surveys tend to exclude women from the definition of hikikomori provided that they are housewives or care for the elderly (Rubenstein, 2016). It should also not be ignored that Japanese women may be employing self-preservatory coping strategies to prevent themselves from becoming even less significant, more marginalized members of society or non-persons altogether? Furthermore, regardless of gender, determining an accurate count of *hikikomori* individuals has always been challenging due to the inherent character of *hikikomori*, who typically do not actively engage in any form of participation. Benjamin Secher (2002) notes: " . . . the *hikikomori* sufferer who doesn't leave his room to eat is hardly going to pop down to the local health authority to fill in a questionnaire" (Dziesinski, 2004, p. 8). It also suggested that the substantial gender-based barriers separating the public and private spheres in Japan may contribute to a greater degree of societal acceptance for women who remain at home, which could result in either increased acceptance or minimised reporting of *hikikomori* cases (Berman & Rizzo, 2019). Japan considers shyness to be a characteristic of femininity and an element of feminine mystique; therefore, a girl who isolates herself in her room and refuses to venture outside the house is not necessarily straying significantly from socially expected conduct (Dziesinski, 2004, p. 23). As Enloe puts it: "In many societies being feminine has been defined as sticking close to home. Masculinity, by contrast, has been the passport for travel" (1989, p. 21). Therefore, women who lack passports symbolically remaining inside their homes conform to the narrative and do not give rise to suspicion. However, a passport-holding man, who is unrestricted in his movement across the globe declines this privilege, the real nature of the problem is revealed.

Considering the fact that *hikikomori* studies is an emerging field of study and the phenomenon is a relatively new concept and taking account the unexplained inconsistencies in certain nationwide surveys. In 2019, a study focused on older *hikikomori* aged 40 to 64 found an overall drop in the number of female *hikikomori*. Tajan (2021, p. 111) suggests three potential explanations for this slide: 1) successful integration into part-time or full-time jobs; 2) the emergence of mental disorders requiring hospitalization; and 3) difficulties in reaching women in the 40-64 age group, making them a hidden population. These older *hikikomori* women may have opted to not report themselves due to a sense of shame.

While the disproportionality of gender is acknowledged in virtually every paper or academic work devoted to *hikikomori*, the discussion of female *hikikomori* is essentially a footnote in the narrative of male *hikikomori*. Could the development of *hikikomori* as a subject

of mental anthropology contribute to the possibility a “male bias” (Reiter, 1975, p. 14) is utilized to investigate the issue just as much of the anthropology field, justified on the grounds that “men are more accessible and approachable” to outsiders for questioning? Likewise, Dziesinski, in his *hikikomori* research centred on gender, alludes to a “media bias” that obscures the presence of female *hikikomori* while conveniently highlighting female parasite singles² (Dziesinski, 2004). In the research, in which a number of parallels between the two phenomena is identified and media bias is recognized as a factor which could easily obscure the distinction between the two, an insightful question is posed: Is it not possible that a significant number of young women in Japan who are labelled ‘parasite singles’ are, in fact, *hikikomori*?

The fact that female *hikikomori* stays hidden in plain view and is almost certainly underestimated and underreported could be due to a multitude of factors. The recognition of young *hikikomori* women in Japan may be held back due to the fact that parents hold differing social standards for their sons and daughters (Dziesinski, 2004) or by the fact that previous Cabinet Office surveys on female *hikikomori* were classified under alternative classification, such as an affinity group, comprising an estimated 1.55 million individuals across the nation who expressed agreement with survey items including “I empathize with/understand *hikikomori* people” (Tajan, 2021).

An additional element contributing to the surprisingly low count of female *hikikomori* may be the Cabinet Office surveys' definition, which identify *hikikomori* as “people who predominantly stay at home for more than six months, other than for household work, child-care, schizophrenia or physical illness” (Itoh, 2012, p. 137). In this light, highly gendered tasks such as housework, child care, and possibly elder care appear to exonerate women from being classified as *hikikomori*. Nevertheless, this exclusion does not result in the erasure of any male *hikikomori*, which prevents a decline in numbers that could lead to an error in estimation, given that Japanese males are notoriously exempt from these gendered obligations. Other potential contributors to the underestimation likely include societal gender bias, male bias in the field of anthropology and gender bias in news reporting within the media. However, more recent research ((Nihonhsōkyōkai, 2022, as cited in Marika, 2022; Nonaka et al., 2022) has revealed cases in which women suffering from *hikikomori* outnumber their male counterparts, providing optimism for increased recognition of women affected by *hikikomori*. Nevertheless, while quantitative research is valuable, it should not be the sole method employed to achieve a more

² “Parasite singles” was coined by Masahiro Yamada in “The Age of Parasite Singles” about when “hikikomori” was making waves in the media (Dziesinski, 2004, p. 23). According to Yamada (2000), parasite singles are young adults who opt to live at home with their parents while also living the carefree life of a single person.

equitable approach. It is imperative to also perform qualitative research that is more personal in order to combat and reverse bias. The fact that male and female *hikikomori* are just as equally inaccessible and unapproachable to ethnographers, researchers, and members of the media, thereby eliminating any potential for bias and leveling the playing field, should provide perfectly even ground for non-gender-biased research.

3.2.6. Four female-*hikikomori*-focused case studies

Due to the underrepresentation of female *hikikomori* in predominantly male-focused case studies, it would be beneficial to provide a brief review from secondary sources specifically focusing on female *hikikomori* to offer context for the gender-related aspects discussed in this chapter regarding the trail leading to *hikikomori* by drawing inspiration from and paying homage to the seminal work of Dr. Saitō *Adolescence without End*, in which he presents “four case studies,” (Saitō, 2013, p. 18–19) of which only one is a female *hikikomori* and three are male *hikikomori* as well as looking back on three other prominent case studies that featured women *hikikomori* (Dziesinski, 2004; Itoh, 2021; Sekimizu, 2022).

The first case to be featured is the sole female *hikikomori* in the Four Case Studies (Saitō, 2013), who is a twenty-nine-year-old young woman and who did not report experiencing any school-related trauma such as *ijime* that could have resulted in *tōkōkyōhi* or *futōkō*. Unlike the majority of her fellow *hikikomori*, who engaged in school refusal or non-attendance, she successfully completed a technical high school in dress-making without any complications. Difficulties arose subsequent to graduation, during the transition to adulthood and from school to the workforce. Upon starting work at a hat shop, she encountered difficulties in establishing good relationships with her colleagues. Consequently, she resigned from her job to seclude herself in her room for a period of six months. After attempting to reenter the workforce, she secured an office job but struggled to find her place and felt unappreciated and disliked by her boss. Subsequently, she quit her job once more and began crafting handmade items from home for family members. She began working remotely to craft items while also tending to her sick grandfather. Following the passing of her sick grandfather and receiving harsh criticism on the quality of one of her handicrafts by a relative, she went into a deep state of isolation and withdrew from society. She followed a reverse sleep-wake cycle³ (Saitō, 2013, p. 41–42),

³ A survey administered by Dr. Saitō for *hikikomori* revealed that 81% of the participants indicated a tendency to invert their sleep schedule, which entailed a reverse order of day and night (Saitō, 2013, p. 41). This *hikikomori*

similar to that of the majority of *hikikomori*, during which she essentially slept during the day and lived at night, during which she preferred listening to music. Two entire years passed while she remained in her *hikikomori* state, avoiding even face-to-face interactions with family members and rarely leaving her room.

The second case is Naomi Hayashi, who used to be a *hikikomori*, was born in 1973 (Itoh, 2021). Unlike Case 1, she experienced hardship and *futōkō* during the school years. In her junior year of high school, she refused to attend the school. Subsequently, she adopted a *hikikomori* lifestyle for the subsequent six years. Upon establishing connections with individuals at a nearby church, she made the decision to seek treatment at a mental health clinic. Subsequently, she successfully completed the high school equivalency exam, pursued higher education in Japan, and furthered her studies in graduate school in the United States. She successfully navigated the transition from adolescence to adulthood, which had been interrupted when she dropped out and became socially unwelcome, particularly in Japanese society. By managing to return to the original narrative of her life, she found a way out of the *hikikomori* state, as suggested by Sekimizu (2022).

The third female *hikikomori* case to be reviewed was documented in an ethnographic study conducted by Dziesinski (2004) at a non-profit organization serving as a rehabilitation center for *hikikomori*. During an interview, a young woman who used to be a *hikikomori* from ages 17 to 19 shared that she experienced bullying from her parents and at school due to her *hikikomori* status, reflecting the *ijime* phenomenon and lack of parental support. Given the limitations of speaking with the *hikikomori*, the study relied heavily on interviews with counselors, which is the standard procedure. One of the counselors stated, "In Japan, boys go outside; girls stay in the house" (Dziesinski, 2004, p. 16), adding that boys who do not venture outdoors are deemed problematic, yet as long as girls who remain at home leave the house to marry, their parents are unaware of a problem. In this vein, the counselors also noted that despite society's fixed perception that *hikikomori* is predominantly a problem among young men, the gender distribution of *hikikomori* individuals at the center was reported to be equal.

The fourth and final example for this section representing female *hikikomori* is the case of Ms. D, covered by Sekimizu (2022), who was born in the late 1960s, began socially isolating herself from the educational sphere by means of *futōkō*. Following the period of school non-attendance ultimately pulled out of high school. She described her inability to get along with

practice has also been referred to as the "inverted sleep-wake cycle" (Ranieri & Luccherino, 2018) or "reversed day-night cycle" (Tajan, 2021, p. 64).

others as physically and mentally incapacitating, rendering her incapable of pursuing a career, especially full-time (Sekimizu, 2022, p. 74). She associated herself with the phenomenon of *futōkō* until she no longer had any connections with the school. Upon encountering the term "hikikomori" in a book, she found the language to pinpoint her condition and express her feelings. Later, she attended the book's launch party where she learned of a support group, and she has been a consistent participant ever since.

Upon reviewing the four female *hikikomori* cases, it can be inferred that the gender perspective argument of this chapter proposing that Japanese youth encounter similar societal pressures and educational traumas such as being subjected to *ijime*, which could result in school refusal, is relevant for both boys and girls in the Japanese post-war middle-class family setting defined by pronounced gender roles and patriarchy. With the exception of the first example, all of the others displayed non-attendance or school refusal. The first case specifically addressed not getting along with coworkers, but did not mention any issues with school. The third case specified instances of *ijime*. It is worth noting that the third case's caregiving for her grandfather likely placed her in the household work category according to the Cabinet Office surveys, ruling her out of the *hikikomori* category despite her decision to quit her office job in favor of remote work and extended periods of isolation. There is an evident bias in the categorization that causes the numbers to be skewed toward the number of males, as women's labor in household work and child care is excluded from the *hikikomori* category because their gendered performances are in conformity with social expectations and contribute to the retention and sustainability of the middle-class family structure. The fourth case highlights the importance of possessing language to define oneself, which empowered her to seek out a support group, marking the initial step towards finding a place in society. Full-time housewives and women who care for elderly family members are unable to identify their condition, find out about fellow *hikikomori* and communities, or seek assistance if they are deprived of vocabulary, which is crucial for establishing connections with peers and receiving support.

3.3. The conditions that set the stage for *hikikomori*: Socioeconomics perspective

“The post-bubble bills are coming due, and we have just started to pay for our decades of focusing only on the material” (Zielenziger, 2007, p. 34).

Chapter 3.2 retroactively looked at the path to *hikikomori* through the lens of gender to determine if it was fundamentally biased or if it went in both directions, with one being more

socially acceptable and the other receiving more attention and concern because it was not. Gender-defined categories are deeply ingrained in the Japanese psyche. The overabundance of the male demographic within the *hikikomori* phenomenon is frequently ascribed to Japanese social norms, which place greater academic and job-related burden on Japanese men than on women, beginning at an early age and continuing until they obtain employment with a reputable organization (Genda, 2019, p. 19). Gender and social class are indeed inextricably linked in this particular case, as stated at the beginning of the chapter. Gender, like labor, is also a performance (Butler, 1999). Because “gender identity is both constructed and lived” (Moore, 1995, p. 49). Thus, gender constitutes a significant component of socioeconomics, as Japanese women, despite operating in the background, in the sphere of home, are enormous forces that influence the nation's economy.

Japan remaining a “culture of different spheres” (Borovoy, 2005, p. 4) for women and men has contributed to the establishment of gendered societal expectations in Japan. Because men's withdrawal from social and economic spheres as family wage earners signals a more dire catastrophe than women's removal, since women's disengagement in the workforce could still be rationalized by bridal training at home (Rubenstein, 2016). These expectations and rationalizations have demanded that women occupied the world of home, which aligns with the *hikikomori* phenomenon.

Furthermore, it can be inferred that this historical separation of spheres has also created the societal expectation that men should be the main providers for their families, leading to their exclusion from domestic life, which marginalizes the act of staying at home for men, including more extreme cases of it, such as *hikikomori*; as it sidelines women at work spheres. To this end, especially the mid-1980s, when Japan was experiencing significant economic influence and prosperity, the Japanese government formally acknowledged and took advantage of women's domestic labor, providing financial support for the family wage and explicitly emphasizing the role of housewives as crucial for economic growth and capitalist progress (Borovoy, 2005).

Women have persistently resided in the world of the home, which is essentially also the sphere of *hikikomori*, due to their steadfast commitment to the family and housekeeping. In fact, the home has earned the alias “satellite sphere” of Japanese industry, serving as a critical environment that nourished the primary endeavor of economic expansion and prosperity (Borovoy, 2005, p. 8). In order to promote women staying at home, major firms incentivized and endorsed the traditional model of a wife who does not work and a single breadwinner by providing a generous salary package that includes perks, retirement funds, and financial support

for non-working women. Additionally, they offered housing and subsidies for marriage for further promotion of the middle-class “full-time housewife” campaign. It is to be expected that a woman who is expected to be “full-time” devoted to the home would naturally evade the *hikikomori* concerns, thereby writing off a substantial demographic.

It was shocking to Japan, which up until recently had been pushing the idea that wives should stay at home to support their salaryman husbands and raise their children to become the future generation of salarymen or full-time housewives, when this system had a hiccup: sons who refused to follow in their fathers' footsteps and become salarymen. Instead, some became freeters or *hikikomori*, recognizing the flaws in the system and opting out of it. And when it is a male individual who chooses to stay at home instead of pursuing long-term employment and starting a family, it poses a threat to the sustainability of traditional Japanese middle-class families. This is potentially the reason why the average person in Japan often displays disdain towards *hikikomori*, perceiving it as a moral lapse rather than a valid psycho-social condition (Hittori, 2016, p. 198). Without perceiving the genuine suffering experienced by these individuals, the average person in Japan views *hikikomori* as indulged, lazy adolescents who deliberately ignore their parents' desires and recklessly evade social responsibilities. To them, the act of staying at home, or the sheer inability to get out of it, could potentially undermine the entire post-War economic strategy that has been functioning effectively.

This lens will examine the socioeconomics of *hikikomori*, concentrating on both its earlier and future aspects. It will explore how the post-War Japanese economy contributed to the creation of a chiefly middle-class society and how the overall prosperity following the war eventually led to a breakdown at the national level (Allison, 2013, p. 85). The rise of *hikikomori* as a predominantly “middle-class” problem can be viewed from two perspectives: 1) How did postwar and post-bubble changes in the labor market affect the *hikikomori* phenomenon? 2) How does the existence of a social phenomenon such as *hikikomori* threaten the well-established structure of middle-class households and salaryman masculinity in Japan?

3.3.1. A product of and a threat to Japanese middle-class households

While the socioeconomics is a layer to the *hikikomori* phenomenon, it might just as well be the very foundation. In this vein, Saitō (2013) indicates that a financial arrangement that enables the family to sustain the unemployed child's support well into adulthood, thereby sustaining these children in a state of economic dependence, is one of the conditions underlying the increase in the number of *hikikomori*. Additionally, Borovoy (2008) contends that the social

issue of *hikikomori* may be more accurately comprehended as an inherent aspect of Japan's aspiration to encompass a wide range of individuals within the mold of middle-class principle. While Saitō (2013) advocates the notion that social withdrawal could not merely be explained as the product of individual pathology, and it is absolutely necessary to understand it as a pathological system that involves both society and family as well. Borovoy (2008) further argues: "The presence of middle-class women at home in relatively large numbers compared to other industrialized nations, and the notion of the home as a sphere of social support, has created the very conditions for the phenomenon of *hikikomori*" (p. 566). Dr. Saitō asserts that the majority of *hikikomori* families who seek his counsel are those that would be classified as middle-class in modern-day Japan (Saitō, 2013, p. 50). Furthermore, he maintains that the majority of these families have not experienced any familial difficulties, or significant issues, such as a "broken" family circumstance, including divorce. Moreover, the majority of the fathers hold university degrees and work in managerial capacities, whereas the mothers are high school graduates who remain at home.

While acknowledging that affluent families belonging to the middle or upper class, who possess greater financial means, may encounter less difficulty in providing accommodation for their *hikikomori* children, as well as affording their therapy, while families with little resources face a dearth of alternatives in addressing their children's hardships, Horiguchi (2011) argues that this is not always true. Based on her fieldwork, she observes that *hikikomori* is not limited to homogenous middle-class families. She notes, "I saw *hikikomori* from various family backgrounds, including children of both blue-collar and white-collar workers, from two-parent as well as single-parent families, with varying educational backgrounds," (Horiguchi, 2011, p. 219) while simultaneously acknowledging that specific socio-economic resources are necessary to maintain the condition of *hikikomori*, failure to do so would result in their starvation. Recalling an email exchange with a Thai colleague, who was a psychiatrist back then, Saitō (2013) get inquires about *hikikomori* and is asked, "How come they manage to bring food to the table?" Especially when considering other Asian countries, Saitō stresses that the economic component of *hikikomori* should not be overlooked. In his response to his Thai colleague, he explains that the climbing numbers of *hikikomori* nationwide is caused by the economic status that enables families to financially maintain their unemployed children even after they are grown. Further supporting the notion that *hikikomori* are frequently the offspring of upper class or middle-class families, it is argued that families capable of providing substantial socioeconomic security and expecting their children to be financially independent until they

establish a stable position in the labor market may stifle the need for greater introspection and resilience among young people (Furlong, 2015, p. 33).

As part of her thesis, Yong (2008) underscores the globalization trend of *hikikomori* and undertakes a comparative examination of the socioeconomic dimensions of this phenomenon in Hong Kong and Japan. According to her findings, *hikikomori* is primarily observed among individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Hong Kong, as opposed to being perceived as a middle-class issue in Japan; as poverty and a lack of purchasing power are primarily cited as the reasons why Hong Kong's youth opt out of school and society in the first place (Yong, 2008, p. 4). In a similar vein, Tajan contends that disadvantaged nuclear families from lower social strata are more visible in Japan's *hikikomori* phenomenon. This is because they are not hesitant to seek social support or disclose their hardships and "family secrets," a behavior that is considered unthinkable among the larger traditional middle and upper classes, mostly in certain cities of Japan (Tajan, 2021, p. 203-204). He also recognizes that socially isolated individuals from the middle and upper classes in Japan are quite prevalent, but considers them a concealed demographic due to their families' social rank and their inability to blend into a society, rendering them undetected and invisible.

Although it is not a universal rule, there is a prevalent tendency for Japanese *hikikomori* to come from middle-class backgrounds, as observed in cases that have been documented. Not all *hikikomori* must come from the traditional nuclear family model, which consisted of a "rice-winner husband, a homemaker wife, and two samurai children" (Kelly, 1986, p. 604). However, the general pattern of deviating from the traditional middle-class ideal, which is exemplified by *hikikomori*, can be understood in the context of individuals who originate from middle-class families and seek personal agency and an escape from the cycle of producing more salarymen or full-time housewives, which perpetuates the middle-class ideal.

3.3.2. The shifting rules governing success, youth (un)employment, and social status

Watts (2002) presents a compelling case that emphasizes the direct correlation between work and the emergence of two novel social maladies in Japan in the last few decades, indicating that this correlation is not coincidental. He establishes connections between *hikikomori* and *karōshi*, which refers to mortality resulting from excessive labor and exertion. He recollects that a sudden surge of concern regarding *karōshi* occurred in Japan during the early 1990s, when the country's economy was at its most prosperous. This phenomenon suggested that the nation was driving itself towards an untimely demise as a result of labor

excessive output. After decades of economic difficulties, the current emphasis has shifted to *hikikomori*, which is also a phenomenon derived as a result of economic strain and uncertainty.

Currently, the Japanese *hikikomori* individuals appear to be able to maintain a means of livelihood and care by withdrawing to the homes ran by their mothers who are full-time housewives, an environment that provides a secure social support system and a safe haven for poorly functioning youth. A safe haven that is not simply provided by the government, but the private sector via "corporate welfare," which refers to the social security offered to the benefit of the individuals who have successfully navigated the Japanese education system and exams, without any problems such as school refusal or non-attendance, and who have been accepted into prestigious universities and graduated with high grades, who had successfully transitioned from adolescents to adults (Sekimizu, 2022). Yet, given the notable 20 percent jobless rate among graduates from Tokyo University, even those who graduate from these prestigious colleges are not immune to diminishing prospects of obtaining long-term employment or a secure position in society nowadays (Allison, 2013, p. 120).

Furthermore, even if these graduates from prestigious universities manage to gain admission to major, respected corporations, their potential for achievement within the organization is still highly limited, as advancement within the firm is predominantly determined by the entry date of the employee (Vogel, 1971, p. 43). The concept of lifetime employment and a well-established seniority system, which both prioritize older employees with earlier entry dates and long tenure hinder young individuals from entering the work force (Toivonen et al., 2011). Seniority-based hierarchies in Japan have economic and social implications, as these hierarchies favor a system that prioritizes long-term employment and may sideline those who do not suit the criteria, thereby preventing young people and new recruits from advancing in their social status (Berman & Rizzo, 2019).

Thus, despite possessing what it used to take to be a "winner," anyone living in today's society and looking forward to the future can feel stranded. Sugai contends that it is uncomplicated to envision the societal constraints faced by young individuals situated at the lowest stratum of a social hierarchy, while that those of age are entitled to the most autonomy, power, and rewards; which naturally makes entering the workforce somewhat daunting for university and high school students, who make up the majority of *hikikomori* (2016, p. 20).

In the early years after World War II, social equality was not the main idea in Japan because of the conflicts and divisions between social classes. However, starting from the mid-1960s, when Japan was seen as a society where most people belonged to the middle class, as the country gained recognition as a "general middle-class society" (*sōchūryū shakai*), the idea of

social equality became stronger and more important, especially in the 1970s (Chiavacci, 2008, p. 5). This sense of equality and security nationwide came to be called Japan's 'economic miracle' following the war, which is heavily correlated with in-house careers or in other words, lifetime employment. Not only were in-house careers the norm throughout Japan's rapid economic development from the 1950s to the 1970s, but they were also instrumental in the country's technical and industrial prowess during that time (Waldenberger, 2020, p. 80). A combination of seniority-based pay and prospects of promotion encouraged employees to learn on the job and encouraged companies to invest in their employees for the long haul. Japan's school system was also described as highly merit-based, which used to prioritize individual effort as the key factor for achieving social status, rather than one's social background. However, starting from the 1990s, there has been a shift due to increasing inequality and social disparities. This change had been acknowledged by academia, as well as the media, who referred to the 1990s as the transformation from *sōchūryū shakai* to *kakusa shakai*, a divided society (Chiavacci, 2008, p. 6) as well as the 'lost decade' (Genda, 2006). Japan, which saw a severe economic downturn in 1991, followed by a period known as the 'lost decade', came to the realization that the condition of the job market for young individuals never fully improved (Furlong, 2015).

Prior to the 1990s, youth employment was not a significant concern in Japan as it remained relatively low compared to other countries. These low rates were primarily thanks to the employment system called "simultaneous mass recruiting of new graduates" (*shinsotsu-ikkatsu-saiyō*) being firmly in place to facilitate a seamless transition from school to work for young individuals (Hori, 2019, p. 3). However, this system felt a major slump in job prospects between 1993 and 2004, known as the "employment ice age." During this period, individuals who had completed high school or university faced significant challenges in successfully entering the workforce due to the downfall of the bubble economy and ongoing economic depression (Genda, 2019). Hori (2020) contends that a significant portion of the current generation, who are either in or nearing middle-age, continue to be freeters or NEETs. The term NEET can also encompass *hikikomori*, as both groups are distinct yet characterised by a lack of participation in employment.

In the 1990s, the recession affected not only young graduates who were just starting their careers, but also experienced employees and salary earners who believed they had job security. Companies had to let go of these employees to cut costs, and even large companies faced the possibility of bankruptcy, with some actually going out of business. Japanese companies were unable to respond nimbly to the challenges of globalization and the new age (Genda, 2006).

This, coupled with a mountain of debt, prevented them from making swift, flexible decisions or taking decisive action. Organizations made the strategic decision to expand non-regular workforce participation as a means to substitute permanent positions, reduce personnel expenses, and enhance managerial adaptability (Hori, 2020). This process of deviating from standardized employment and the growing disparities among companies have not completely disrupted the life course model, but have substantially undermined it. This structural changes and de-standardization practices have resulted in a newfound sense of vulnerability and a pervasive sense of urgency that has extended even to the core middle class of Japan. Previously, a significant majority held a strong belief in the prospect of actively engaging in Japan's collective economic progress. However, the current state of society is characterized by growing disparities and a clear divide between the “winners and losers” (Chiavacci & Lechevalier, 2020). And it appears that no one is exempt from the possibility of being drawn into the category of losers.

Japanese youth have been disproportionately affected by the turmoil and ill-advised shifts in the Japanese employment system and reduced to the status of "social underdogs" as the reduction in job opportunities for young people caused them to move from one part-time or contract job to another (Genda, 2006). This trend has resulted in an increase in the population of individuals referred to as "freeters," who, unlike traditional salarymen, are unable to obtain steady employment upon graduation and do not anticipate long-term job security or benefits (Ogasawara, 2020, p. 19). Furlong (2015) establishes a connection between this situation faced by youth which is a decline in opportunity structures and social isolation. Specifically referring to *hikikomori*, he further notes that there is evidence indicating that some young individuals are completely withdrawing from social activities and constructing alternative worlds where social interactions are almost non-existent. He problematizes the possibility of other countries emulating Japan's trajectory, which might pose a threat to the economic opportunities of young people and expose them to social seclusion and psychological distress.

During the 1990s and onwards, there has been a process of de-industrialization, which involved a transition from manufacturing to the service industry (Uemura & Tahara, 2014) and and the window of opportunity for *hikikomori* to integrate themselves into the labor force shrunk even further. The trend accelerated the process of labor flexibilization, as it led to an increase in the proportion of non-regular workers in the workforce (Shibata, 2020, p. 116). There has been an ongoing spike in employment within the service industry, since the service sector acted like an “employment sponge” for laid-off workers and exhibited positive employment growth rates, even during the 2005-2009 period that encompassed the global

financial crisis (Uemura & Tahara, 2014). Consequently, it greatly weakened stability and long-term connections. Secure employment in the labor market has thus become an acute problem for the younger generation. The circumstances have become even more bleak for the youth of *hikikomori*, as the transition from the manufacturing sector to the service industry, which required interpersonal communication and social aptitude, did not benefit them at all, given that these have never been their strongest assets.

The percentage of non-permanent employment rose from the 1990s to the 2000s (Sekimizu, 2021, p. 180). In 1984, the rate of non-regular work accounted for 15.3% of the overall employed population. However, by 2002, this number had surpassed 30%. The proportion of males engaged in non-regular employment reached 20% in 2008, marking the first time this figure was observed. Compared to that, the percentage of females in non-regular employment reached 53.5% over the same year. Given these circumstances, Japanese youth have been compelled to rely on their parents for financial support, resulting in significant shaming and social stigma, giving rise to negative connotations to labels such as “freeter,” “parasite singles,” “NEET,” and “hikikomori.”

In this sense, Furlong (2008) characterizes *hikikomori* as a syndrome brought about by economic circumstances that leave adolescents with limited choices. This limitation was introduced to young adults in the real sense, when the labor market in Japan witnessed a downturn in the standard of life and job security beginning in the 1990s (Hamaguchi, 2013, as cited in Sekimizu, 2021). The trend persisted throughout the 2000s and was prompted by a surge in non-regular employment and a steep increase in the unemployment rate. Consequently, youthful full-time workers experienced a reduction in the traditional job security offered by companies, and were instead compelled to accept precarious employment as part-time workers earning irregular wage. The system, according to Zielenziger (2007), which gave the impression that Japan was deliberate and structured to outsiders, is collapsing. Due to the increasing precariousness of the labor market, the Japanese youth are unable to take their place on the “well-oiled conveyor belt” that transports them directly into a dependable workplace after completing pre-school through college (Zielenziger, 2007, p. 32). Similarly, the traditional values and aspirations of Japanese society are also crumbling, as adults can no longer assure their children that hard work and dedication in school or employment would lead to success, as this is no longer the case (Zielenziger, 2007, p. 309). Perhaps, this is the reason why parents, unable to reassure their children that the world outside is as just and equitable as it was in their own time, assume the financial and emotional burden of caring for their *hikikomori* children well into their adult years.

To further delve into the relationship between socioeconomic factors and the prevalence of *hikikomori* in Japan, Nonaka and Sakai (2021) conducted a study in which they analysed data from eight studies spanning almost ten years, the researchers discovered a significant correlation between the incidence of *hikikomori* and the unemployment rate, with the exception of the research conducted in 2018 and 2019. These data indicate that unemployment and household income are factors that increase the likelihood of *hikikomori*. On the other hand, it was found that simply having more job opportunities is not sufficient to prevent *hikikomori*, and that the rate of job openings did not have a strong link with *hikikomori* (Nonaka & Sakai, 2021, p. 5). While longitudinal and quantitative research on the *hikikomori*, an infamously inaccessible population, remain worthwhile, there exists an issue regarding the statistical accounts of youth employment rates, which provides limited insight into individual-level experiences, where every day worries and frustrations occur as young adults navigate the challenges of finding meaningful educational or professional trajectories rather than being simply perceived as structural issues (Husu & Välimäki, 2016, p. 3). Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that NEET and *hikikomori* are distinct groups, and that increasing employment prospects will not alleviate their plight.

Although this may be an effective strategy for NEET, *hikikomori* face societal challenges that transcend economic considerations; they do not wish to participate in the labor force or society at large, so job openings hardly affect them. Thus, while the data presented in the aforementioned study are worth mentioning, they lack specific relevance.

The editor-in-chief of the *hikikomori* platform "HIKIPOS" recounts his experience after college, where he engaged in job hunting and secured an unofficial contract with a reputable company. Initially, everything appeared to be going smoothly. However, just before commencing work at the company, he found himself immobilized, and thought: "If I start to work for a company, I will not have my life anymore" (Ikeida, 2018a). Although he had the chance, during Japan's thriving bubble economy era and as a member of the privileged "bubble generation" born into prosperity, Ikeida never envisioned himself being part of the corporate world in Japan, commuting on crowded subways every day and facing the expectation of working excessively to the point of exhaustion. Even if work opportunities are available, *hikikomori* individuals, similar to *futōkō* students who seek their own subjectivity outside the uniformity and conformity of Japanese schools, may also choose to seek their own individuality outside the predetermined linear path of life. Hence, the issue stems from various aspects of Japanese workplaces, including long work hours, age-based hierarchy, and instances of mobbing. However, the scarcity of job opportunities also exacerbates social isolation by

intensifying competition and placing greater strain on individuals. Consequently, individuals begin to question whether sacrificing their lives for work is truly worthwhile.

The Japanese society often condemns *hikikomori*, describing them as "lazy" while generally agreeing that the hikikomori phenomenon is "a product of the affluence, technology, and convenience of modern Japanese life" (Watts, 2002, p. 1131). Although technology, particularly the evolution of information technology and the internet, is frequently held responsible for the *hikikomori* phenomenon's emergence, Suwa and Suzuki (2013) argue that online or game addiction is not a common occurrence among hikikomori individuals, based on their own findings. They also note that the *hikikomori* phenomenon emerged in the early 1990s, but internet usage only reached 60% in 2001. Hence, it is evident that the *hikikomori* syndrome predates widespread Internet usage. Furthermore, the society which directly correlates *hikikomori* to laziness fails to acknowledge *hikikomori* against the backdrop of the decline of the *shinsotsu-ikkatsu-saiyō* model, which was brought about by the burst of the bubble economy and the challenging globalization. Since then, and following the employment ice-age, Japanese youth have not been presented with the same opportunities as their parents, and in the face of uncertainty, they either become trapped as *hikikomori* or choose alternative occupational paths such as part-time, seasonal, or remote work. The once credible benchmark for attaining success have become fuzzy; the tremendous stress caused by university examinations ended up appearing "not worthwhile" due to the fact that graduation from a prestigious university did not ensure stable or long-term employment, and the age-based hierarchical structure posed a barrier at every step of the corporate ladder. Long-term employment security and salary growth, which were hallmarks of Japan's period of rapid economic expansion, are no longer promised in the postindustrial economy that has been in force since the 1970s (Ogasawara, 2020, p. 19). In return, the once prevalent display of unwavering loyalty from employees, exemplified by their willingness to go to any lengths and work in any location or at any time, is now considered an enormous cost by many due to the lack of assurance of raises in compensation or secure, long-term employment (Ogasawara, 2020, p. 25). A large number of Japanese adolescents, caught in the midst of this uncertainty, stopped attending school to such an extent that school rejection reached nationwide epidemic levels, eventually leading to a state of *hikikomori* for many individuals.

3.3.3. Collapse of the gender triad, shrinking middle-class, and exit strategies

Gender enters the fray when one goes deeper into the issue of class, as stated at the outset of the chapter and consistently demonstrated thereafter. Furthermore, the gender dimension of socioeconomics is indispensable in this instance due to the stark divisions between social and economic structures that are predicated on gender (Ogasawara, 2016, p. 168).

The male-breadwinner family model, which Japan has been unable to forsake although Western countries have long transitioned to the dual-earning model in family households, has been characterized as a model that simply “fit too well” (Ogasawara, 2020, p. 18). Although the combination of male employees and full-time housewives in a family unit is not necessarily exclusive to Japan, a unique “gender triad” (Ogasawara, 2016); consisting of salaried men, full-time housewives, and corporations, emerged as a result of the keen interference of Japanese companies in the personal lives of their employees in the postwar era, with the goal of aligning family lives with corporate goals. The progress towards implementing a dual-earning model, which promotes labor equity and non-gendered economic systems, was stalled by the robustness and prosperity of this trilateral agreement, which played a significant role in recovering Japan's postwar economy from its ruinous state. Although the Japanese government and corporations have benefited from this agreement, Japanese women have been actively seeking ways to avoid their traditional roles as mothers. This includes choosing not to marry and not having children, which has significantly played a part in Japan's declining fertility rate. In fact, the fertility rate reached a record low of 1.26 in 2005 (Ogasawara, 2016, p. 168).

Given the discourses surrounding “satellite sphere,” “gender triad,” and “good wife, wise mother,” women have been the primary subject of discourse regarding state involvement in the family in Japan. However, when considered alongside other social and cultural elements that influence men's relationships with their families, these elements have also had advantages and disadvantages for men (Roberson & Suzuki, 2003, p. 5). Therefore, similar to Japanese women, Japanese men have also started to employ exit strategies to break free from traditional norms that no longer seem to serve them. In light of this, the number of men not getting married has also been increasing, in fact the year 2010 noted that approximately one in five men were never married at age 50. Nevertheless, males who opt to find an exit from this model are frequently seen as socially maladjusted, as the drawbacks of the traditional male breadwinner role are more apparent to women than to men. Included in the group of those searching for a way out are also the *hikikomori*, who are predominantly male. *Hikikomori* individuals, who have been seeking an exit since their time in school, notably during middle and high school, either by routinely not attending or by voluntarily dropping out of school. It is, however, frequently overlooked

that the long work hours and lack of family time can be detrimental and even overwhelming for males who are not *hikikomori*.

For instance, an observation has been noted that there are young fathers who desire to actively participate in raising their children, even though around fifty percent of men in their thirties work a minimum of 10 hours on weekdays (Ogasawara, 2020, p. 19). Particularly since the average Japanese man relies significantly on his wife to provide for his daily needs and psychological well-being, Iwao characterizes working husbands as being subject to control and deserving of pity rather than women (2013, p. 7). She additionally posits that nothing restricts an adult woman from pursuing her passions; once her children reach adulthood, she can engage in a variety of hobbies, volunteer, or teach a skill; in contrast, her spouse would likely lack the willpower to depart from his secure position within the organization.

As previously stated in section 3.2.3.1, reducing the gender disparity in household responsibilities may reduce the number of *hikikomori* children. Although certain young men are eager to close the gap, the gender triad, which includes companies, simply does not permit it. Therefore, it forms a self-perpetuating cycle. Many fathers work excessively for companies, resulting in the companies becoming wealthier. This perpetuates a cycle of fathers being absent from their families due to the allure of stable employment. However, the reliability of this incentive has been increasingly in doubt, causing men and women to realize that it may not be worthwhile and reliable anymore (Ogasawara, 2020). As a result, some of them have been recently seeking an exit strategy. *Hikikomori* belongs to this group, which consists primarily of modern-day Japanese youths, as well. Similar to other young people in Japan, *hikikomori* individuals aspire to escape and exit the present condition of society by either abstaining from all engagement, including economic matters, or securing employment as remote workers or freelancers, which would limit their social interaction and provide greater flexibility. As passive participants in the movement that may contribute to the collapse of the traditional middle-class ideal and long-term employment, *hikikomori* is also integral to the discourse.

Although the *hikikomori* sub-group was previously characterized as "unwilling to rebel and unable to conform" (Toivonen et al., 2011) due to their silent presence indoors, their marked absence from occupational and public spaces has significantly influenced debate pertaining to the societal issues in modern-day Japan. Despite their timid nature and lack of intensity, the *hikikomori* youth has been recognized for their influence on the downturn of economy that has gripped the entire nation. Additionally, their behaviors have prompted reflection on the need to reevaluate the rigid pressures to which young people have been subjected so that they would carry on the Japanese middle-class ideal. This further substantiates their influence, as both

corporations and the government perceive them as a significant risk due to the economic ramifications and their potential to disrupt the long-standing middle-class homogeneity nationwide.

It has been proposed that when there are no major revolutions or mass movements, non-conformist groupings of individuals are the most probable segment of young adults to actively influence social change, such as implementing more sustainable adjustments to globalization (Toivonen et al., 2011, p. 7). According to Toivonen et al. (2011), additional data provides support for the notion that withdrawal is not a pathological condition but rather an indication of the growing marginalization of young individuals in the Japanese labor market. *Hikikomori*, more than other marginalized youth groups, has come to symbolize immaturity due to socially isolated young individuals being viewed as missing not just one, but up to four qualities of *jiritsu*, which refers to independence (Toivonen, 2012a, p. 78). They exhibited a psychological dependence on their parents, indicating a mental dependency. They exhibited a deficiency in social skills and were dependent on others for financial support. Furthermore, their lack of marital status suggested a lack of sexual maturity. It has also been pointed out that the shifts and decline in prospects for young individuals are highly probable to contribute to acute social withdrawal, wherein feelings of pessimism and the perceived absence of a future may induce a profound sense of anomie (Furlong, 2015, p. 33). The *hikikomori* group, overall, have come to be characterized as the disempowered victims of the elites' volatile responses to globalization (Toivonen et al., 2011). However, their very existence threatens to undermine the traditional middle-class Japanese family ideal. Their outward lack of social engagement is generating waves in and of itself.

3.3.4. *Hikikomori's* search for identity and social standing

The root causes of social problems, particularly among young people like *hikikomori*, are often attributed to economic difficulties and the loss of social status that was once attainable. To address the issue of *hikikomori*, the rehabilitation approach focuses on strengthening socioeconomic standing and financial stability. This involves promoting the idea that *hikikomori* males, in particular, should strive to embody the working-class male identity as a solution to their situation and a means of rehabilitation. For this embodiment, there tends to be a masculinization phase attached to the programmes (Dziesinski, 2008). As stated earlier in the chapter's section on gender, being a salaryman in Japan has been considered the epitome of masculinity. However, because most *hikikomori* individuals have been at somepoint *futōkō* or

are dropouts, and have not attended a top university, they are unable to easily integrate into mainstream society as the Japanese educational system does not accommodate youths who have missed significant periods of school such as *hikikomori* who had been *futōkō* before (Locke, 1986). Consequently, it becomes impossible for them to attain the middle-class aspiration of becoming a salaryman, despite coming from a middle-class background. However, it is appropriate as many *hikikomori* express their reluctance to become a salaryman, as they dread the current order for long-term employment in Japan.

As the stereotype suggests, the *sararīman* is not simply employed by Toyota, but rather belongs to Toyota (Allison, 2013, p. 23). Nevertheless, this feeling of identity or attachment has not been rooted in allegiance to a specific corporation, but rather in the secure social identity that it offered. Especially during Japan's growing postwar economy, more and more of young male workers enjoyed the advantages of a strong affiliation with a certain company or job. To clarify, this was an attachment to a secure social standing rather than an attachment to a profession or an occupation (Brinton, 2010, p. 11). Allison (2013) argues that, during this time, the male worker's standing in the social hierarchy was determined by his sense of attachment or belonging; employment became his defining characteristic; and the affiliation inscribed on his business/employee cards bestowed upon him an identity.

Without the immediate sense of identity that comes with a stable job, *hikikomori* people find themselves in a state of limbo during the failed or impending stage of the unsuccessful transition from adolescence to adulthood. This state is marked by a sense of non-belonging caused by their lack of affiliation with a school or university, a company or an organization. *Hikikomori* individuals are excluded from society due to their lack of productivity. The intensity of this feeling and anxiety is so tangible that the chief-editor of HIKIPOS expresses his reluctance to hand over his student ID card and deliberately not submitting his graduation thesis in order to remain in university and maintain his position in Japanese society as a recognized member. "As long as I have my student ID card, I am something in the society," (Ikeida, 2018b) says Vosot (pseudonym), who believes that a man cannot survive in society without some form of social status; if he has no status in society, he might as well not be living. He is able to affirm, "Yes, I am a student." But after I am thrown out of the campus, what am I?" Although Vosot is prepared to go to extreme lengths to maintain his affiliation with the university, he cannot fathom having such an affiliation with a company or even showing up to an interview dressed in the traditional Japanese recruit suit—a dark blue suit and tie with a blue and red stripe—a style that he refers to as "blue mold" (Ikeida, 2018a). Vosot considers what his ultimate goal is after enduring the brutal marathons: "To become the manager of a big company? To buy a

big house? To ride an expensive foreign car? To marry a beautiful woman? To drink in the high-class entertainment district every night?" (Ikeida, 2018c). He concludes that none of those things appealed to him, or at least none of them seemed like an adequate reward in return of the torturous hardships to get there. As Brinton put it, "It may be that fewer individuals in the lost generation than in the prior generation are willing to tolerate what they view as inhumane work conditions for the sake of basing their identity on long-term attachment" (2010, p. 187).

During this suspended, in-purgatory-like state, which Brinton (2010) refers to as "lost in transition," the student's progression from school to work is compromised. The lost generation, which became entangled in the transition from education to employment, symbolizes a more profound shift occurring in Japanese society: a departure from social institutions that had previously assisted individuals in navigating the progression through life's stages. In Japan, these life stages have historically been intricately linked to the "social locations" where people seek stability and a sense of identity (Brinton, 2010, p. 2). During the course of suspended transition, individuals often have a strong need to establish their own sense of identity. For those who are *hikikomori*, unable to secure a job that they deem worthwhile and humane, there may be occasional preference to prolong their student identity by any means possible.

"What is does it mean to be an adolescent in Japan?" Tajan contemplates the potential experience of an adolescent whose identity is reduced to that of a student (2021, p. 54). Furthermore, some who have experienced school non-attendance, dropped out of high school or college, whether they completed their studies or not, may struggle to shift from being "students" to becoming working adults. may never transition from being "students" to "workers," living as "shut-ins" for years in what some (Saitō, 2013) referred to as "never-ending adolescence." Tajan (2021) argues that because of the heavy influence schools have on Japanese society, a growing proportion of students may not be able to navigate adolescence successfully and may instead experience it later in life rather than as adolescents.

Another possibility is that *hikikomori* individuals who have experienced school refusal or *ijime* may be unable to rely on their student status as a means of coping. Therefore, it was necessary to have a terminology that encompasses persons who are experiencing acute social withdrawal. Tamaki Saitō coined the word "hikikomori" (Saitō, 2013), which has subsequently facilitated the identification and self-expression of several recluses. The term "hikikomori" is often utilized by individuals who are socially withdrawn to comprehend their circumstances, establish connections with those who may empathize with their experiences, and perhaps seek assistance from a support group (Sekimizu, 2021). However, due to certain negative portrayal

of *hikikomori* in the media following highly publicised cases of violence, some individuals may feel inclined to distance themselves from the term and the associated stigma.

Rehabilitation centers are beneficial for numerous *hikikomori* individuals who seek to overcome the social stigma associated with being categorized as *hikikomori* or just wish to reintegrate into society. Dziesinski's research on the *Takeyama Gakkô* rehabilitation center focuses on gender socialization, particularly the phase of male re-socialization that occurs after rehabilitation. The steps leading up to adulthood include manual labor, male staff members serving as role models for students, and positive reinforcement and encouragement of traditionally masculine behaviors (2008, p. 3). A key aspect is that numerous activities associated with masculine behaviors involve elements of competition, such as betting on wrestling events, smoking, reviewing horse racing results in the newspaper, playing soccer, and watching sports on television with male staff (Dziesinski, 2008, p. 13).

Within the scope of the center's undertakings, training programs such as the 'Uncle Apprentice Training Program' assist with the reintegration of male graduates into society. Through this initiative, rehabilitated *hikikomori* individuals maintain the mentor-student relationship that was established with a small local business as apprentices. This ensures that the *hikikomori* is socialized in a masculine setting and is prepared to transition into adulthood as a working-class male (Dziesinski, 2008, p. 17). In addition, *hikikomori* individuals who come from middle-class backgrounds and are admitted to the rehabilitation center, in line with the program's objective, are socialized in ways that would enable them to develop a working-class sense of masculinity as a means of establishing social identity. Agriculture-based rehabilitation is an additional approach utilized by a particular NPO situated in a "True Pure Land" Buddhist temple and through which it conducts agricultural work (Tajan, 2021, p. 130). Here, a young priest oversees the temple and serves as the coordinator of the NPO for rehabilitation through agricultural labor, employing former *hikikomori*. In this buddhist school, Tajan (2021) notes having encountered three *ex-hikikomori* who transitioned from their reclusive phase to participate in farming and selling their produce, like as edamame beans, at marketplaces.

Hikikomori is a group of severely marginalized people who choose to remain on the fringes of society unless and until they decide to re-participate in it, which they frequently find difficult to accomplish. The dehumanization and non-personification that accompany it, even though they refuse to partake in society, can still be harmful to one's feeling of identity and belonging. Many *hikikomori* individuals tend to hold onto their most recent social standing—that of a student—in order to preserve it, but some may also be unwilling to extend that period of their lives due to *ijime* and trauma associated with school. Japan does not provide a safety net for

individuals who drop out of society (Zielenziger, 2007). As a result, male *hikikomori*, who mostly come from middle-class backgrounds, often wind up in working-class jobs after being socialized in a masculine environment. Thus, the notion of a "masculine" identity contributes to societal acceptance, revealing insights into current Japanese society.

3.3.5. “Revitalizing” the *hikikomori* youth: A brief overview of recent economic policies

Hikikomori often appears as a phenomenon that overwhelmingly impacts the middle-class. Given that the majority of Japanese people classify themselves as middle-class, the media generally portrays *hikikomori* as a potential problem for the majority of families across the country (Shiokura, 2000, p. 239–40 as cited in Sekimizu, 2021). Taking into account the fact that *hikikomori* is a social issue that poses a risk to middle-class families as a whole, jeopardising the survival of entire families and the perpetuation of family lines, it ultimately poses a national threat (Rubenstein, 2016). In response to this possibility, the Japanese government identified "youth independence" as a political concern in the years following 2000 (Sekimizu, 2021, p. 186).

While the stakes are this high for Japan, *hikikomori* becomes an issue that cannot be simply ignored. The initial recognition was given by the Youth Affairs Headquarters of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications in their White Paper on Youth in January 1990 (Sekimizu, 2021, p. 175). The paper highlighted the country's next generation as a significant national challenge, given the prevailing youth issues. Citing the prevalence of *hikikomori* and school refusal, the paper pointed out that for all the economic prosperity and convenience of modern living, young people generally lacked “spiritual wealth and mental toughness” (Sekimizu, 2021, p. 176). In light of this, contemporary Japanese leaders, including former prime ministers Abe, Suga, and the current prime minister Kishida, have naturally paid attention to the phenomenon, primarily in an effort to revitalize the economy.

The Revitalization Strategy, introduced by Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2013, represented a pivotal moment in the realm of youth employment strategies. In light of the complexities presented by demographic shifts, heightened international competition, and industrial modernization, the Abe administration has placed labor stability and productivity as its highest priorities. The mobilization of non-working population segments, such as *hikikomori* and NEET, was a top priority for the government in an effort to alleviate labor shortages caused by sociodemographic factors in the workplace, ultimately leading to increased economic productivity. In 2016, Abe declared his plans to mobilize *hikikomori* as part of a broader

initiative to aid the country's aging workforce (Takahashi, 2016). He recognized the potential far-reaching consequences that could arise from this phenomenon in conjunction with the aging population and workforce plight. Moreover, in an effort to prevent a population decline to 100 million from 127 million at the time he pledged to ensure the active participation of *hikikomori* in the nation's economy, which was the third-largest in the world at the time [and has since been surpassed by Germany's economy, slipping to the fourth place due to a weak yen as well as an aging and shrinking population, as reported by the Guardian (McCurry, 2024)]. However, Japan's youth employment policies, including education and vocational training and internship programs, concentrated on economic competitiveness and productivity during the Abe administration (Song, 2018, p. 14). These LDP-led policy measures have been marketed as part of revitalization of Japan's economy and the government's quick reaction to demographic challenges and structural restructuring, not necessarily as youth employment policies.

During the Lower House Budget Committee, an opposition lawmaker inquired about the minister responsible for addressing loneliness. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga responded that it was the welfare minister (Takahiro, 2021). Subsequently, in February 2021, feeling somewhat dissatisfied he appointed a minister of loneliness to specifically tackle issues such as "hikikomori" and the rise in women's suicides resulting from the social and economic hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic. This effort was reminiscent of the initiative made by Theresa May in 2018 to tackle the widespread problem of loneliness in the UK. However, the efficacy of PM Suga's initiatives was called into question due to the consolidation of pertinent measures from government ministries and agencies, without endorsing public assistance (*Editorial: Japan Needs Solid Policy to Combat Plague of Loneliness, Social Isolation*, 2021) Loneliness and isolation, including *hikikomori*, transcend the realm of "self-help," which Prime Minister Suga designated as one of the three pillars upon which his ideal society structure should be established. Suga and his administration were strongly advised to develop and execute a comprehensive long-term strategy; nevertheless, his tenure lasted for only a year.

In 2022, PM Fumio Kishida of Japan introduced the concept of "new capitalism," which leverages social concerns to stimulate economic expansion. According to the March Cabinet Survey of 2022, which was conducted on a randomly selected group of individuals aged 10-69, it was found that 2% of the working-age population can be classified as *hikikomori* (Harrison et al., 2023). This suggests that there are approximately 1.46 million *hikikomori* individuals who are not participating in the labor force, but possess skills that could be utilized. Kishida advocated for the promotion of business support for *hikikomori* individuals and urged the government to establish new working arrangements for them, such as enabling remote work

from their rural households. Who or what is at fault for the impending doom of "no future" in Japan engenders anxiety not only within the familial sphere but also on a national and governmental level (Allison, 2013, p. 24): If a child develops into a *hikikomori* who abstains from participating in the economic prosperity compact of the nation, then the home has not fulfilled its responsibility due to failing to produce a productive offspring.

In review of the economic strategies used by recent Japanese Prime Ministers, it is evident that *hikikomori* is primarily regarded as an issue pertaining to the revitalization of economy and youth unemployment. While the focus is on revitalizing the country's economy, there is a lack of specific attention paid to *hikikomori* who are often grouped together with NEETs, parasite singles, and unemployed youth in Japan, without distinguishing their unique characteristics. Because giving careful consideration would lead to the conclusion that increasing employment opportunities is not the solution, given that this is not the objective of the *hikikomori*. There are numerous additional factors at play, but in essence, society serves as the foundation.

Hikikomori will persist in abstaining from societal participation as long as the society and its expectations remain unchanged. Additionally, it is conceivable that extended periods of isolation may lead to the emergence of certain psychosomatic symptoms in some *hikikomori* individuals, even if these symptoms were not the initial cause for their self-imposed seclusion. These symptoms, which may include depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety of others, and insomnia, may manifest when paired with the withdrawal state in the future (Saitō, 2013). With this consideration, government action should encompass psychological assistance in addition to job creation (Keenan, 2021).

3.4. Conclusion

As Weiner put it, "Any study that does not include the role of women (...) remains only a partial study of that society" (1976, p. 228). Similarly, this applies to any survey, article, or piece of work on *hikikomori* that focuses solely on the male viewpoint, assuming that it represents all *hikikomori* in Japanese society. When analyzing the gender dimension of *hikikomori*, it is critical to avoid accepting the "male-dominated" characterization at face value and to scrutinize the reliability of surveys. Additionally, it is important to recognize that the already marginalized female population in Japan may constitute a hidden population, as it is unreasonable to accept certainties in a contemporary phenomenon where so much more information remains to be uncovered. The overwhelmingly male-dominated demography of the

hikikomori phenomenon may be attributed to Japanese societal standards, which uphold gender-defined positions in society (Genda, 2019, p. 19). An employee of a *hikikomori* rehabilitation program discloses the following: “In the case of female *hikikomori*, families have the attitude that it is okay if females do not work, so acute social withdrawal in females is better hidden from parents” (Dziesinski, 2008, p. 7).

It is also necessary broaden the scope of research beyond the *hikikomori* individuals themselves and also consider the gendered roles and responsibilities of their family members and carers. Although there are cases of fathers of *hikikomori* individuals participating in rehabilitation efforts and starting support groups, the responsibility of caring for the *hikikomori* child primarily rests on the mother. This is, again, primarily due to traditional gender roles in Japan that confine women to domestic duties and world of home. Leaving out housewives and caregivers from *hikikomori* surveys (Itoh, 2012), thus ignoring a large population of people who could be *hikikomori* is a very risky error in judgment. While those who stay at home to care for the elderly or *hikikomori* are also considered susceptible to social isolation, especially middle-aged women. Miyaoka et al. (2007) argue that women between the ages 45-55 are at a higher risk of developing depression during this time because of the psychosocial changes brought on by menopause and the premenopause symptoms. Additionally, the researchers note that among this group of middle-aged women, a subset expressed concern for the well-being of their children, citing withdrawal and school dropout as the root causes of their issues. Thus, mothers whose children experience *futōkō*, social withdrawal, or *hikikomori*, can be further classified as a population at risk for developing psycho-social ailments, including *hikikomori*.

The *hikikomori* phenomenon clearly takes a great toll on the physical and mental health of the affected individuals. However, it is also crucial to consider the labor performed by women in their role as mothers, as they are equally involved in the everyday challenges associated with this phenomenon alongside their children at home. They play a crucial role in the story because mental health experts, such as psychiatrists and clinical psychologists, often blame them for their children's *hikikomori* and/or *futōkō* experiences. These experts attribute these phenomena to the mutual dependence (*amae*) fostered between mother and child. Mothers are frequently held responsible for being overbearing and excessively protective, especially towards their sons, more particularly *chōnan*. It is easy for the Japanese to fault mothers for failing to raise socially responsible citizens, according to Horiguchi (2011), who interprets this circumstance as a result of the Japanese being overly engrossed with the cultural symbolism of the mother (Doi, 1973) and postwar beliefs regarding parenting.

Furthermore, raising children often involves substantial obligations. Japanese women have substantial domestic responsibilities and, if employed, labor-market obligations (Tsuya et al., 2005, p. 48). Both paid labor and the execution of domestic and family labor are crucial components of the collaborative household production of married couples. A balance can be achieved by the process of role specialization and a clear-cut division of labor between husbands and wives, or through a combination of shared paid and household labor. Regarding the etiology of *hikikomori*, there is an excessive focus on the mother's role in traditional domestic duties and family dynamics, while the father's role, which is expected to be more involved in public and political matters, is often downplayed (Ortner, 1974). The absence of the father at home or his lack of involvement in raising children is treated as negligible. According to a recent study, it is suggested that husbands taking on a greater share of their wives' household duties and allowing them more opportunities to socialize and spend time outside the home could serve as a preventive measure against *hikikomori* (Hamasaki et al., 2023).

Overall, women take on many parts in the *hikikomori* phenomenon. The public image of this role, and whether it is visible or not is determined by societal preconceptions associated with women. While the number of female *hikikomori* is understated, the importance of women in raising *hikikomori* children is overstated. Because of rigid gender roles and certain postwar social expectations in Japan, the part women play in the *hikikomori* phenomenon becomes contextual. As long as they are in bridal training, caring for the elderly, or staying at home to raise their children, women's extreme social isolation and disengagement in the labor market is not necessarily a reason for alarm in the eyes of the Japanese society (Rubenstein, 2016). Although the absence of women beyond the confines of the household does not cause concern, they bear full responsibility for everything that occurs within it, including the social isolation or nonattendance of their sons or daughters. The selective focus on female labor within *hikikomori* and female *hikikomori* leads to biased and incomplete *hikikomori* studies. As Weiner wisely states, “Whether women are publicly valued or privately secluded, whether they control politics, a range of economic commodities, or merely magic spells, they function within that society, not as objects but as individuals with some measure of control” (Weiner, 1976, p. 228).

The gender layer of *hikikomori* is intertwined with the socioeconomic layer, which has also experienced significant transformations and reforms since Japan's postwar era. Due to the fact that the society was undergoing an internal transformation, gender and socioeconomic status were organically entangled in that change. The state of the labor market at the time must be taken into consideration while discussing socioeconomics. The chances available to adolescents

trying to make the transition into adulthood in the 1990s were drastically different from those of the previous generation, when *hikikomori* emerged as a social issue and increased in number.

During the 1990s, the as Japanese labor market was changing under the feet of young people people, it meant a fundamentally different set of choices and opportunities for them compared to those experiences by their parents (Brinton, 2010, p. 1). The employment and lifestyle choices of the youth were also shifting but the changes taking place in the institutions that had assisted Japan's previous generation's transition from education to the workforce and adulthood went even deeper. The system *shinsotsu-ikkatsu-saiyō* that guaranteed employment upon graduation began to deteriorate and fail the next generation entering the labor market. The graduates who were excluded from opportunities came to be known as the 'lost generation', while the period was referred to as the 'lost decade'. The period spanning from 1993 to 2004 was widely referred to as the "employment ice age" (Genda, 2019). During this period, university and high school graduates were unable to secure employment due to the bursting of the housing bubble and the ensuing economic depression. Japan, in particular, struggled to keep pace with globalization and the trends that emerged in the marketplace.

The consequences were felt by the fundamental middle class of Japan as well, due to the precarious state of the labor market, which even extended to lifelong employees and prevented them from being affected by company-wide cuts and structural measures (Hori, 2020). It was in the midst of this precarious period, marginalized and non-traditional youth groups emerged, including *furitā*, *NEET*, and parasite singles. Indeed, *hikikomori* did as well. It is then critical to situate the subject of this thesis, the *hikikomori*, within the context of the current socioeconomic environment shaped by postwar repercussions in the labor market.

The fact that the majority of *hikikomori* comes from upper middle-class or middle-class households is an additional salient feature of their socioeconomic status. However, given Japan's long history as a uniform middle-class nation, this should hardly come a surprise. By considering that if *hikikomori* is a condition that primarily impacts the offspring of the middle class, then it poses a risk on a national scale, the issue becomes more complex (Sekimizu, 2021). As the job market has become so precarious that the current generation chooses part-time or seasonal employment as vacationers (*furitā*) rather than permanent employment, the extent to which the middle-class ideal will continue to dominate the nation remains uncertain. In addition to the scarcity of permanent employment opportunities and the hindrances posed by age and seniority hierarchies to employment prospects and career advancement within organizations. Success is not assured by hard work, and being a top university graduate does not guarantee a

high-paying, high-benefit position, especially since the position has already been filled by a senior lifetime employee (Sugai, 2016).

Under these conditions, the present-day young generation does not perceive blind allegiance to a company as worthwhile. Excessive physical or mental effort and working till the end of the day is deemed to only serve to increase the wealth of companies. Toward entirely breaking the gender triad, young men and women choose not to wed, rejecting the state and large corporations' preferred structure of a male breadwinner and a female homemaker. It has been reported that young married men would like to devote more time to their families and assist with domestic chores if their line of work permitted it (Ogasawara, 2020). *Hikikomori*, who abstain from both labor force participation and the marriage market, are thus at the forefront of this movement to abandon the middle-class ideal. Whether by choice or by chance, individuals who exhibit acute social withdrawal almost appear to assume positions similar to social activists, identifying and highlighting social issues within Japanese society. In light of the argument that nonconformist groups of individuals are the most likely subset of young adults to actively wield influence over social change (Toivonen et al., 2011), the *hikikomori* group lends a comprehensive perspective on the current issues related to gender and socioeconomics in Japan. It sheds light on the reasons why many young individuals are unable to participate in society and pinpoints the underlying problems and failures.

CHAPTER IV: REVISITING HIKIKOMORI IN THE PUBLIC EYE WITHIN THE PARAMETERS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

4.1. Introduction

Numerous assumptions and connotations associated with *hikikomori* are time- and process-specific. In other words, the conceptualization of social isolation varies across different “historical and spatial location” (Horiguchi, 2011, p. 123). When we consider, for instance, the 17th century, the concept of mental illness did not exist; instead, there was a state referred to as unreason. Individuals who represented unreason were banished from town centers and moved by boat between cities. Throughout Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the customary course of action regarding madness was to expel the insane from the city walls and keep them at the city gates. (Foucault, 2006, p. 11). This practice of societal exclusion of irrational behavior coincided with the establishment of European confinement institutions, known as ‘le grand renferment.’ Foucault (2006) argues that these institutions were not medical establishments and that their actions were not connected to medical knowledge and practices. They confined those who were mentally unstable, vulgar, without employment, engaged in prostitution, and other individuals who exhibited unethical conduct. During this era, medical considerations took a back seat to ethical ones. Because of their rejection of nature at the time, the mad were considered a subject deserving of medical study and investigation; similar to the contemporary *hikikomori*, who refuse to sell their bodily capacity to labor for a set amount of time, which is deemed to be the ‘natural’ and ‘conforming’ practice today, and are thus shown as antisocial with potential problems in need of medical gaze (Ismail, 2020, p. 705),

Therefore, had *hikikomori* existed in the historical and spatial context of 17th or 18th century Europe, their self-imposed confinement might not have been regarded as a social issue; on the contrary, the widespread confinement practices for the “idle” and “unemployed,” who were deemed “unreasonable,” could have encouraged or even mandated their self-imposed confinement. In contemporary Japan, the situation remains largely unchanged from four centuries ago, although the criteria for evaluation have evolved. Over the course of these

centuries, terms like madness, insanity, mental alienation, nervous disease, mental illness, and mental disorder have successively categorized what was once considered unreasonable behavior (Tajan, 2021, p. 220). However, Tajan (2021) contends that a new transformation is on the horizon, marking the end of clinic. This transformation is exemplified by the phenomenon of *hikikomori*, which defies medical gaze and does not fit into any psychiatric classification despite the medical curiosity the experts seem to have for it.

Today, the concept of social withdrawal must also be considered in relation to social sensitivity. Considering this, it is highly likely that the perception of the *hikikomori* phenomenon and individuals has been reevaluated due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of new measures such as stay-at-home suggestions and social distancing. The *Demystification of Hikikomori* chapter explored the criteria for labelling someone as a *hikikomori*, which includes a minimum of six months of complete isolated confinement at home and social isolation (Saito, 2013). The global impact of COVID-19, including its effects on Japan, prolonged for a duration way over six months, coupled with the emergence of various variants. In fact, according to Rooksby et al. (2020, p. 399), the duration of a lockdown can be represented by a *hikikomori* trajectory, with three months of lockdown being equivalent to a "pre-*hikikomori*" stage.

Further, in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, routines adopted by *hikikomori* well in advance, including online shopping, social interaction, food delivery, distance learning courses, and remote work, have been made widely public (Roza et al., 2021). There is hypothesis that the growing frequency of internet usage for everyday purposes and the convenience it provides may contribute to a rise in conditions resembling *hikikomori* (Kato, Shinfuku, and Tateno, 2020). On a theoretical level, both the entire nation and the world as a whole experienced the *hikikomori* phenomenon to a certain extent. Could this experience have prompted Japanese society to perceive *hikikomori* from a more sympathetic and empathetic perspective than before? In order address such issues, this chapter will analyze the *hikikomori* discourse across various Japanese media, with a specific focus on the *Asahi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun*, within the parameters of both before and after the pandemic, to determine the ways in which the discourse has evolved. Additionally, it will explore the time- and process-specific nature of the *hikikomori* phenomenon and its gendered and socioeconomics layers, as well as how their perception varies under different circumstances.

What has been the overall tone of the media toward the *hikikomori* in the aftermath of the pandemic? In what ways have major media outlets emphasized the gendered and socioeconomic aspects of *hikikomori* following the COVID-19 pandemic? Have any novel challenges or

remedies been raised? In summary, what insights has the pandemic provided on the time- and process-specific nature of *hikikomori*? This chapter will endeavor to provide explanations to these questions primarily by analyzing Japanese media discourse in English. The media has been chosen as the instrument of analysis due to the fact that they predict the sentiments and viewpoints of the public and have a significant impact on the "social construction of reality" as C. Wright Mills puts it: "they influence such consciousness as [people] have of their existence" (Freeman, 2020, p. 7). Since seeing society's reality-building processes in real-time is impossible, the media plays a forecasting role in public sentiment and, by extension, in the establishment of social norms and standards.

4.2. Rethinking *hikikomori* within the context of voluntary lockdowns

Prior to this point, the limitations of social and economic participation had been central to pervasive negative *hikikomori* conceptions. However, the lockdowns and restrictions that occurred locally and internationally reframed not only notions of social interaction and seclusion, but also these parameters (Berman, 2023). Norms for how people should engage in the economy and socialize, as well as other socially constructed realities, crumbled instantly. Since the *hikikomori*'s social and professional limitations were what initially caused the group to be problematic, a shift of these parameters turned the tide, and for the first time, *hikikomori* practices and the rest of society's practices appeared to have aligned.

The fact that unlike China, the United States and European countries, the Japanese government did not resort to coercion or legally binding force—the state emergency was imposed through what have been called "voluntary lockdowns"—makes it all the more fitting to compare and contrast quarantine methods with *hikikomori* practices (Watanabe & Yabu, 2021) No one was arrested, fined, or otherwise punished for leaving their homes under Japan's state of emergency (Watanabe & Yabu, p. 334). Therefore, those who chose to stay at home and isolate themselves from society were not compelled to do so by the government, but rather were voluntary or "willful subjects (Overell, 2018) such as *hikikomori* people. Their act of isolation was their voluntary response to information about the pandemic. The Japanese government issued a verbal "request" for people to refrain from going out, and a significant number of individuals complied with this request. In addition to complying with stay-at-home recommendations, individuals in Japan voluntarily wore masks as a preventive measure to safeguard their own health and the health of others, rather than due to legal obligation (Kushner,

2020). Overall, while the Japanese government did not officially impose a curfew, the streets of heavily populated cities were mostly deserted during the height of the pandemic due to the "requests" voiced by the Abe government under a relatively mild or "soft state of emergency" (Pehlivan Türk, 2021).

In this light, the "voluntary" element represents an intersection or shared characteristic between the Japanese populace that engaged in prolonged self-isolation and the Japanese *hikikomori*, who, for a minimum of six months, refrained from venturing outdoors of their homes for social interactions. The concept of "social distancing" gained worldwide recognition and became a code of conduct, including among the Japanese. *Hikikomori* had been adhering to this principle for a long period of time, well in advance of the pandemic.

Voluntarily engaging in isolation was a means of ensuring one's own survival as well as the well-being of others during the pandemic in Japan. The phrase 'survival' or being a 'survivor' holds significant meaning in this context, as *hikikomori* individuals are often characterized as individuals who have endured and survived trauma, bullying, as well as neglect or abuse from their parents or spouses. Tajan (2021) argues that both *hikikomori* and *ex-hikikomori* individuals might be thought of as "survivors." The concept of "survival" is also embodied in a statement made by former *hikikomori* Yasuhiko Maruyama, who now works as a counselor for *futōkō* and *hikikomori*. He describes his previous *hikikomori* experience as a "way of living like a wild animal," battling between life and death and uncertain about if anyone would recognize it if he were to die (Tajan, 2021, p. 206). Though he does not yet fully define himself as such, another *hikikomori* who may be on his path to become an *ex-hikikomori* says, from his perspective: "Being *hikikomori* is a way to survive. We choose to be *hikikomori* to stay alive. If we continued to be connected to the society or interacting with other, we know that we are going to die or go insane" (The Japan Reporter, 2022).

The "survival" drive is inherent to both *hikikomori* and lockdown situations, despite their obvious differences. The problematized aspect of *hikikomori* isolation is that the source of their threat is not a visible, lethal virus but rather society's deeply ingrained expectations of participation, labor and conformity, which serves as something of a metaphor for the coronavirus in their own lives.

4.3. *Hikikomori*'s debut in Japanese media: Making of a violent stigma

The year 1994 marked the emergence of *hikikomori* as a subject of public discourse in local media, or "private isolation caught public eye" as Horiguchi (2012) put it, beginning with serial

reports in the *Mainichi Shinbun*. From that point forward, *hikikomori* appeared more frequently in the mass media, beginning in the early 1990s. Further, triggered by a string of severe crimes in 1999 and 2000, committed by two men who were referred to be *hikikomori*, the term transitioned from being a private matter within families to being discussed by experts in private settings, and eventually became a topic of public concern that attracted attention from both local and international media (Ismail, 2020, p. 699). The articles in Japan's core print media, namely the *Asahi Shimbun* and *Yomiuri Shimbun*, exhibited a noticeable sense of hysteria throughout the mid-2000s (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 2012, p. 85). This was evident as they published a total of over 650 articles, which is five times higher than the number published in 1999. Thus, *hikikomori* individuals became extensively profiled in the popular media during the year 2000, on account of the aforementioned crimes that were allegedly perpetrated by people who had histories of social withdrawal (Horiguchi, 2011, p. 217). This was when Western media started to participate in the reporting of *hikikomori*, capitalizing on the widespread attention and moral panic surrounding the phenomenon as well as the violence and shock value that seemed to accompany it.

After these two cases and their prior experiences with *hikikomori*, Saitō observes that *hikikomori* began to be discussed “as if they were a dangerous reserve army of potential criminals” (2013, p. 4). He recounts the events, stating that the initial event involved a 37-year-old male *hikikomori* residing in Kashiwazaki City, Niigata Prefecture. The man had held a girl captive for a period exceeding nine years, during which she remained undetected until her discovery at the age of nineteen. While the other incidence took place in Saga Prefecture where a bus carrying approximately twenty passengers was hijacked by a seventeen-year-old boy who fatally wounded a 68-year-old female en route from Saga to Fukuoka (“*Saga Bus-hijacking*,” 2000). The young boy demanded that the bus driver drive for nineteen hours while holding a six-year-old girl captive with a knife and murdering the older woman (Rosenthal & Zimmer, 2012, p. 85).

Though, once the “moral panic” subsided, *hikikomori* people were acknowledged to be in need of support and rehabilitation. From that point forward, until 2004, the “*hikikomori* industry” came into existence, as the government-initiated measures to address the issue through surveys, the development and distribution of guidelines, and active engagement of various sectors including mass media, and private organisations in rehabilitation and support for *hikikomori* (Horiguchi, 2011, p. 217). In this vein NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) initiated a year-long “Hikikomori Support Campaign” in 2003 through the creation of a support website and the production of a multitude of *hikikomori*-themed special programs (Saitō, 2013,

p. 4-5). It was within the same year that the MHLW finalized and distributed the aforementioned guidelines.

4.3.1. What makes the media's framing of a societal issue so critical: the *NEET* case

The media significantly shaped public understanding of social withdrawal by popularizing the term 'hikikomori' in relation to the phenomenon, while disseminating information to the public and often interpreting the main causes of *hikikomori* as believed by experts (Nesser, 2009). However, come 2004, the *hikikomori* surge in mainstream media started to fade when new categories depicting youth issues emerged, with NEET serving as a prime example (Horiguchi, 2011, p. 217). Although the new term NEET masked *hikikomori*, whoever in Great Britain coined this term probably had no idea it would refer to a group of individuals who were so similar to *hikikomori*. To this day, the Japanese continue to frequently mix the terms *hikikomori* and NEET, according to Saitō (2013, p. 5).

Unlike NEET, the *hikikomori* media discourse had directly generated a highly medicalized and stigmatizing narrative, implying that socially withdrawn young people were frequently suffering from mental illness and/or prone to violence. As a result, even though it was initially seen as a societal issue, the *hikikomori* phenomenon became primarily regarded as a matter concerning private households, which made it hard for the government to intervene with public policy measures. In contrast to *hikikomori*, the depiction of NEETs in the media has received extensive official backing and action as labor economists, who promptly framed it as an employment problem, acknowledging its immediate and tangible effect on both the economy and the sustainable future of the social security system (Toivonen, 2012b, p.150).

The ease with which media outlets convey superficial information regarding social withdrawal renders them more comprehensible than the facts presented in scholarly publications; thus, they can effortlessly sway the opinions of the public (Krysinska, 2007, p. 17). Furthermore, the information disseminated through media is readily obtainable in comparison to intellectual or scholarly articles, and viewers are more inclined to engage with it rather than scholarly volumes. With these resources, the media may stigmatize certain groups of people or phenomena, including *hikikomori*. The public's opinion is particularly prone to swaying if they are devoted and loyal followers of media outlets, particularly newspapers, such as the Japanese public opinion. In this vein, Freeman (2000) observes that the Japanese not only rank highly in terms of newspaper readership worldwide, but they have also displayed remarkable loyalty towards their newspapers throughout the majority of the period following

World War II. According to a survey conducted by Foreign Press Center Japan in 1993, 70% of individuals aged 18 or older expressed trust in their newspapers, while 74% reported reading the newspaper daily. On average, respondents spent 41 minutes per day reading the newspaper (Freeman, 2000, p. 21).

Another thing about is the dramatic, as Reuven Frank, executive producer of the NBC Evening News put it: “Every news story should, without sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, rising action and falling action, a problem and denouement, a beginning, a middle and an end” (Epstein, 1973, p. 4). When social problems and phenomena compete for the public's attention, *hikikomori* news that had real "news" value won out and the phenomenon was covered in greater detail than it was in the past when journalists could more readily and naturally add drama to their reporting.

It has been observed by the accounts of family counselors and psychiatry experts that *hikikomori* individuals may occasionally exhibit irritable and violent behavior as a result of the “adolescent mindset” such as throwing violent fits at home (Saitō, 2013, p. 28). However, this is not a universal rule, but rather occurs rarely (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 2012). If this is the case, the NEET population, which is often mistaken for *hikikomori*, should be then expected to suffer similar behavioral patterns. Nonetheless, the introduction of NEET in the widely-read Japanese media, along with the media's specific and methodical portrayal of the condition as an 'economic' issue, and their incorporation of labor economists to discuss it, effectively refuted any potential claims of violence (Toivonen, 2012b). Regarding *hikikomori*, the team of specialists appearing in the news have consisted of licenced psychiatrists, including the credible authority in *hikikomori* studies, Tamaki Saitō. On numerous occasions, he emphasized that *hikikomori* is not a pathological condition and should not be equated with schizophrenia or violence (Saitō, 2013, p. 30). In addition, Saitō clarified that *hikikomori* was a 'state' or 'condition' that did not qualify as a psychiatric disorder or an indication of one (2013, p. 25). However, but in light of the associations his psychiatric profession produces, the *hikikomori* phenomenon has been perceived as a mental disorder concern by the general public since its very debut in media. This is not to imply that the psychological dimension of *hikikomori* is inconsequential; however, it should not be overstated or structured by the media in a manner that associates the phenomenon with "madness" or "danger," particularly in light of the Japanese public's stigmatization of even the most basic mental health issues, such as depression (Zielenziger, 2006). Therefore, although *hikikomori* is medically characterized as a prolonged disengagement from social interactions, it is evident that at its core, *hikikomori* primarily

functions as a social term that signifies a retreat from social conventions and expectations in Japan regarding employment and productivity, distinct from any formal medical diagnosis (Ismail, 2020, p. 705).

In addition, due to how *hikikomori* was introduced to the public as a private issue, there is a prevailing belief among the people that the responsibility for supporting *hikikomori* individuals lies with their families rather than the central government (Tabuchi, 2019). This perception has led to a minimization in the government's obligations, which is particularly problematic given the 8050 problem. Undoubtedly, the situation is a significant hardship for families as their ability to support their *hikikomori* children becomes increasingly uncertain due to aging as well as declining financial and emotional resources, compounded by the onset of various illnesses or dementia (Sekimizu, 2021). A life-or-death situation ensues when a *hikikomori* loses every member of their family, leaving them without any means of support since the government is not deemed liable.

4.3.2. High-profile crimes and the 8050 problem: Revival of the *hikikomori* discourse

4.3.2.1. Kawasaki City Mass Stabbing

Japan has garnered international acclaim for its stringent gun regulations and relatively low levels of violence. However, this reputation has been called into question since the July 8, 2022 assassination of Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, which was executed with a homemade firearm and resulted in a gunshot wound to the neck, raising concerns about whether a government and nation so devoted to gun control had become un-Japanese in nature (Gerry, 2022). A preceding event, which occurred one year prior to the worldwide pandemic, occurred on May 28, 2019. While it did not involve a firearm-related violent crime, it still left a lasting impression on the Japanese public. Unable to obtain armfire, violence perpetrated by a “kitchen knife” made the headlines. The stabbing rampage in the Kawasaki City of the Kanagawa Prefecture was covered in the international media as well as the local. The intense surges of rage it generated catalyzed another murder case, but this time it was not perpetrated by a *hikikomori*; rather, it was directed at him, resulting in his death.

On May 28, 2019, a kitchen knife-wielding 51-year-old man attacked a line of children awaiting the school transport to a private Catholic elementary school in Kawasaki City, Kanagawa Prefecture, near Tokyo (Sekimizu, 2022, p. 233-234). The knife attack claimed the lives of a girl aged 11, who was waiting for her school bus and a man aged 39, who was seeing

his daughter off to school. The stabbing rampage led to 16 more injuries of pupils. The perpetrator thereafter took his own life by inflicting a lethal stab wound to his neck at the scene. Investigators discovered a backpack that had two more knives, pointing to advance planning. In Japan, it is standard for young kindergarten or elementary school children to frequently commute to school unaccompanied using public transportation. Additionally, the custom of these young pupils putting on vibrant yellow hats to enhance their visibility in crowded spaces or while crossing roads gained significant attention on online. However, this specific knife attack instilled anxiety at both the national and governmental level. Then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe even announced that the government would implement measures to guarantee the safety of children during their commute to and from school in response to this incident of mass stabbing (McCurry, 2019).

According to news articles, the assailant had been without a job and socially isolated for a long time. The Japanese media referred to him as a typical example of "hikikomori," meaning he lived with his aunt and her husband, both in their 80s. They were concerned about his future due to their old age and were trying to find ways for him to become self-sufficient (Maiko, 2022). The murder of the young school pupils was a highly sensitive matter that caused widespread uproar. Similarly, the killing of the 39-year-old Satoshi Oyama, who was a diplomat as well as an interpreter in Burmese, received extensive media coverage with patriotic sentiments (*The Diplomat Who Was a Bridge Between Japan and Myanmar* | *the Asahi Shimbun Asia & Japan Watch*, 2019). Oyama had worked for the MOFA since 2004 and served as a bridge between Japan and Myanmar, aiming to establish a lasting relationship and assist Myanmar, which is Japan's last frontier in Asia, in prospering through Japanese developmental aids.

Clinical psychiatrist and *hikikomori* expert Saitō stated, in reference to the Kawasaki mass-stabbing case, that when incidents of this nature occur abroad, media attention is primarily focused on the mourning of the victims and the reassurance of their families, saying, "In Japan the media focuses on the character of the perpetrators and then investigates and criticizes their families. I think it's only in Japan that the family is seen as being complicit" (*Japan's "Hikikomori" Population Could Top 10 Million*, 2019). Additionally, he expressed concern that *hikikomori* may be subject to the same mindset that has historically regarded vulnerable individuals (e.g., the elderly or those with mental illness) as the family's responsibility in Japan.

4.3.2.2. Nerima Ward Filicide Case

Four days subsequent to the Kawasaki mass stabbing incident, a man, aged 77, who was a resident of Nerima Ward in Tokyo, fatally stabbed his son, aged 44 (“Ex-top Official,” 2019). The country was rattled by the revelation that the assailant was a former agriculture vice-minister and a former ambassador to the Czech Republic. According to news reports, the son had been a *hikikomori* for an extended period and had a record of domestic violence (Sekimizu, 2022). This led the father to decide to end his son’s life, since the son’s prolonged reclusive behavior reminded him of the previous Kawasaki incident, where a *hikikomori* went on a stabbing spree targeting school children and parents. According to his statement, he claimed that he was compelled to take the life of his own son in order to keep his son from harming other children. This tragic event occurred following an argument between the father and son regarding the noise coming from a sports festival held at a nearby primary school (Jung, 2019).

In light of these occurrences, the minister of MHLW released a statement on June 26, 2019 affirming that individuals and families in *hikikomori* are characterised by their unique circumstances and backgrounds (Sekimizu, 2022, p. 234-235). The minister further urged all Japanese citizens to spare some time to extend their support to these individuals as they confront the challenges of existence and isolation on a daily basis, while appealing for the cooperation and understanding of all citizens in the pursuit of establishing an all-encompassing society wherein all individuals coexist harmoniously.

Both of these cases, the former of which instigated the latter, played a crucial role in illustrating the extent of the 8050 problem on a national scale. The initial case in Kawasaki involved a 51-year-old *hikikomori* man whose guardian parents were over the age of 80, whereas the second occurred in Nerima Ward and involved the murder of a 44-year-old *hikikomori* son by a 77-year-old parent. The occurrence of the two incidents intensified deep-seated anxieties of parents with *hikikomori* children that their children could potentially become the subject of headlines (Tabuchi, 2019). In keeping with this, the Director of Rakunokai Lila, an NPO, disclosed to *Asahi Shimbun* that he constantly received phone calls following the attacks. The callers on the other end of the line were primarily parents in their 60s or 70s seeking guidance on how to handle their middle-aged *hikikomori* children.

4.4. Post-pandemic stories on *hikikomori* women

In October 2020, the number of suicides in Japan surpassed the total number of COVID-19 deaths for the entire year of 2020 (Web Desk, 2021). PM Yoshihide Suga admitted that women lead the suicide rates, stating: “Women are suffering from isolation more (than men are), and the number of suicides is on a rising trend” (Web Desk, 2021). The increased emphasis on the

mental health effects of the pandemic has resulted in a renewed spotlight on *hikikomori*, which has existed a social phenomenon for decades (Berman, 2023, p. 78). As women's mental health appeared to be at an all-time low and suicide rates surpassed those of men for the first time during the pandemic, the typically marginalized women *hikikomori* demographic was for the first time brought to the forefront in order to determine whether these negative effects prompted them to socially isolate themselves in the face of an already precarious labor market that was more precarious for women during the global pandemic. According to a survey conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2023, 20% of recluses stated that the coronavirus pandemic was the reason for their severe social isolation (Tomoko, 2023). The survey revealed that a total of 1.46 million Japanese residents, with women comprising 40% of this group, had withdrawn from society and are currently facing difficulties in establishing their social standing. They recounted their experiences in the comments section of the NHK piece. Many of the 1,000 entries revealed that women *hikikomori* faced difficulties in expressing their issues.

Female *hikikomori* faced distinct challenges compared to their male counterparts in the midst of the pandemic (Tomoko, 2023). It was discovered that they experienced a “shadow pandemic” of increasing domestic violence (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). This, combined with their exclusion from the workforce, had a more severe impact on them in a disproportionate manner. During this era, certain municipal surveys observed an increase in the number of *hikikomori* women. This finding challenged the notion that *hikikomori* was predominantly a one-gendered, male phenomenon.

4.4.1. How gender discrimination triggered social isolation

Women have been forcibly socially isolated by the Japanese employment system for a long period of time, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this problem by causing layoffs of female employees at a disproportionate rate to those of their male counterparts (Ishibashi & Nakafuji, 2020). One possible explanation for the gender imbalance in the layoffs is that the pandemic's economic impact was felt most strongly by the service, travel, and retail sectors in Japan, which are primarily staffed by women (Statistics Bureau Home Page/Annual Report on the Labour Force Survey 2020, 2020). A study examining the consequences of periodic moderate lockdowns during two emergency declarations in Japan in May 2020 and February 2021 found that women experienced elevated levels of loneliness, depression, and suicidal ideation in comparison to men (Yamamoto et al., 2022). In addition, the study noted that individuals from socially marginalized backgrounds, women, and those with a history of

mental illness treatment exhibited poorer mental and physical health in both years. The isolation experienced by women has been a consequence of the preventive measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ueda et al. (2022) discovered that the prevalence of mental health disorders was more severe among women under the age of 40 compared to women aged 40 and above. Furthermore, the study revealed that young female employees had a higher likelihood than any other group to have encountered unemployment or a drop in income in the past few months, which is indicative of their insecure economic circumstances. In stark contrast to the stable and secure existence of salarymen who secure permanent employment, Japanese women have been recently exposed to the notion of part-time and contemporary work, with limited opportunities for lifelong employment (Hidaka, 2017, p. 122). According to Hidaka (2017), numerous companies have intentionally implemented the practice of hiring female freeters as a means to safeguard the privileges of full-time male staff and preserve the traditional gendered division of labor within the home.

Historically, in Japan, suicide has been perceived as a problem affecting only males, according to Michiko Ueda-Ballmer, an expert on suicide in Japan; yet, the government is now addressing suicide prevention in a manner that includes women, as opposed to concentrating solely on middle-aged men, as a result of the increased visibility of women's suffering brought about by the pandemic (Piser, 2023). The pandemic has exacerbated the misery experienced by Japanese women on a daily basis, shedding focus on generations of difficulties they have faced.

Rosenberger (2013) discusses the ways in which Japanese women endure acute mental distress due to social inequalities and societal pressures related to reproduction. They acknowledge their anxiety and pain but choose to keep this acknowledgment fuzzy and undetected in order to conform to the expectations of a traditional middle-class life as a mother and wife dealing with the demands of providing all kinds of care. At this point in time, it provides optimism to consider that the recent heightened visibility suicidal thoughts among Japanese women, and their sufferings coming to the forefront by the pandemic conditions, which was previously glossed over, may also apply to future *hikikomori* women who were initially not considered part of this phenomenon.

4.4.2. “Female *hikikomori* figures finally align with reality”

To determine the extent of social isolation in Japan amid the COVID-19 pandemic, a nationwide survey was carried out by the Cabinet Office in November 2022. Of the 13,769 people polled, more than 2% of those in the 15–64 age bracket said they rarely leave the house

(Tomoko, 2023). One fifth of these isolated people said the coronavirus pandemic was to blame for their behavior. Approximately 40% of the survey respondents who reported seldom outings from their homes were women. In 2023, Mainichi published an article titled "Statistic catch up with reality," reporting that a government-conducted nationwide survey revealed an estimated 1.46 million *hikikomori* in Japan. Among these, women between the ages of 15 and 39 accounted for 45% of the group, while women between the ages of 40 and 64 accounted for 52% (Kuroda, 2023). The story revolves around a *hikikomori* group discussion event for women, which has been reportedly organized by co-chair Kyoko Kayashi of a support organization since 2016. Kayashi is pleased to note that the survey numbers now accurately reflect the actual situation. She believes that the increase in numbers is due to women who identify themselves as *hikikomori*, even if they are housewives or domestic helpers.

Another news piece that came out two years after the pandemic started also flipped the deeply-embedded gender imbalance by helping showcase the existence of women *hikikomori*; their hardships have since received more recognition in this world that continues to recuperate from the adverse effects of the pandemic. The article in question describes a *hikikomori* survey conducted in the Edogawa Ward of Tokyo. The cover image of this article depicts a ward government official sporting a mask as he distributes the surveys from door to door. And according to the findings, one in every 76 individuals in the Edogawa Ward are "hikikomori," with female *hikikomori* comprising 51.4 percent of the social recluse population (Takahashi, 2022). The article identifies job-related issues, such as difficulties and setbacks in job seeking, as the fundamental factors contributing to *hikikomori*. The survey results also indicate that a significant proportion of *hikikomori* are living together with their spouses. This suggests that the survey did not exclude women who are engaged in household duties or raising children as potential *hikikomori*. Consequently, the reported figures are more accurate and reflective of the actual situation.

NHK journalist Ikegami Masaki notes that female *hikikomori* have faced different kinds of pressures compared to their male counterparts for over two decades (Tomoko, 2023). A *hikikomori* woman who has been socially recluse for ten years says that prior to attending the discussions, she never left the house and only spoke with her husband. Having endured a number of precarious labor market experiences a decade ago, she now desires to rehabilitate herself and reintegrate into society. *Hikikomori* women who spend time in group discussions often cite various factors as catalysts for their withdrawal, which vary from losing their jobs and financial strain to domestic violence and abuse.

Similarly, it was reported in another news article on *hikikomori* that during the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the psychological consequences of being socially isolated, such as irritability, depression, and sentiments of loneliness, have contributed to a rise in instances of domestic violence (Takahashi, 2020). The escalation of domestic violence, aggravated by the financial, health, and security concerns associated with confinement in Japan and other countries, has been identified a "Shadow Pandemic" by the United Nations (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). The catalyst for it was the stay-at-home guidelines implemented to curb the spread of the infection have effectively confined victims with their abusers (Ando, 2020). A women's counselor who also offered assistance to female hikikomori disclosed to *Asahi Shimbun* that a torrent of inquiries from women arose during the novel coronavirus pandemic regarding ways to obtain COVID-19 financial assistance without their husband's knowledge (Ito & Akuzawa, 2023).

4.4.3. Gendered job insecurity, exploitation and discrimination

As part of a podcast discussing *hikikomori* women, NHK highlights the previous misconception that the majority of *hikikomori* were men. However, NHK has since observed that numerous women have reached out on its platform, sharing their experiences of facing discrimination. One of the *hikikomori* women who contacted the NHK platform was a 45-year-old woman named Michi (pseudonym) living in Tokyo (Tomoko, 2023). She described experiencing muscle stiffness⁴ and difficulty leaving her home. She is among the numerous women who became unemployed in their part-time positions due to the industry's decline caused by the pandemic, and has been unsuccessful in securing alternative employment. She expresses her dismay and frustration during a job interview when she was questioned about her mother was in good health and whether she required any assistance. She remarks that it seems impossible for a woman to secure employment unless she demonstrates that she has no obligations to look after any family member. Additionally, she conveyed a sense of self-consciousness about not engaging in activities such as housekeeping, employment, or child-rearing, as others perceive her as being spoiled fully dependent on others.

Due to budgetary constraints resulting from the pandemic, both the corporate and public sectors, including local and municipal governments, chose to substitute their regular employees with nonregular labor, with a predominant percentage made up of women. The main media

⁴ Saitō provides an explanation for experiences such Michi's in the section titled "Symptoms and Development of Social Withdrawal," where he classifies these symptoms as "psychosomatic," referring to a disorder that originates in the mind but manifests in the body (2013, p. 49).

outlets, such as *Asahi Shimbun*, have shed more light on the gendered exploitative working circumstances that disproportionately affected Japanese women throughout and following the pandemic. 54-year-old Mika Aino, a single mother of three and former women's counsellor for her local government, is among those affected by this unfairness. She entered this field with a deep sense of duty to assist other women who had endured domestic violence, as she had (Ito & Akuzawa, 2023). Still, due to her status as a nonregular employee, she received such meagre compensation that she was compelled to enter the gig economy. In order to support herself and her children following her divorce from her abusive partner, she took on extra part-time work on weekends, specifically in cleaning services for hotels and restaurants, solely to meet basic financial needs. Upon requesting a salary increase for her role as a women's counsellor, she was denied due to financial constraints, prompting her decision to resign from her position in 2021. A regular male employee was recruited to replace her, at a significantly higher salary than Aino had previously received. An additional 54-year-old woman who was employed as a counsellor for hikikomori stepped down from her position within the same calendar year. She put it simply by stating that a one-year irregular employment contract would defeat the purpose of establishing lasting relationships with hikikomori individuals, and added: "This job involves life-or-death issues because prolonged social withdrawal can lead to mental or physical illness. Still, no one says it is OK to hire police officers and firefighters on a nonpermanent basis when they also deal with life-or-death situations" (Ito & Akuzawa, 2023).

The article also includes numerous surveys that emphasize the gender disparity, especially in government roles. For instance, in 2020, 75 percent of nonregular public employees were female, according to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Ito & Akuzawa, 2023). Likewise, 92 percent of non-regular government employees were female, according to a separate survey conducted by the National Women's Network. Experts and academics classify this as a structural issue, as Japanese women are not considered to require economic autonomy and are therefore compelled to work as nonregular state employees for meagre salaries.

Although the current generation of women is adversely affected by global economic strains as a result of the pandemic, a previous generation that had emerged from the bubble also encountered similar challenges, which compelled a significant number of them to disengage from society. Continuing along this line of thought, perhaps to offer support for women in present-day Japan, the story of a former hikikomori woman in Tokyo who experienced multiple job layoffs is highlighted as she undergoes her journey of recovery. The story centers on Noriko Inagaki, who became a *hikikomori* subsequent to three consecutive layoffs from her position as a judicial scrivener in the late 1990s (Narabe, 2024). As a result, she developed an intense dread

towards venturing outdoors alone. The Indian film "Madras Beats," which was suggested to her after six months of isolation, motivated her to venture outdoors to work and see more films. As she reintegrated into society, she even embarked on a vacation to India in order to watch more films and visit shooting locations. Presently an entrepreneur, she successfully completed a crowdfunding campaign to acquire the screening rights to the film. As a result, the film debuted in Japanese theaters across the nation in 2023.

4.5. Post-pandemic stories on *hikikomori* socioeconomics

The employment landscape during the 1990s and onwards, characterized by a shift from manufacturing to the service industry, hindered the integration of *hikikomori* individuals into the labor market and exacerbated their situation (Uemura & Tahara, 2014). Nevertheless, the pandemic standards brought about a makeover that no longer prioritized interpersonal contact and social aptitude as extensively as before, while allowing them for more flexible work hours. Agricultural practices and farming-related jobs that were employed to rehabilitate *hikikomori* people were replaced during the pandemic. During the pre-pandemic, working-class jobs and farming therapy were occupied by male former *hikikomori* (Dziesinski, 2008; Tajan, 2021); however, following the pandemic, café therapy has come to be the common transition tool by both male and female *hikikomori* in recovery. Moreover, alternative methods of rehabilitation, such as the metaverse approach, have been implemented to assist *hikikomori* individuals in reintegrating into society. This approach is set to grant them the ability to take on a professional persona by means of a custom-designed avatar, participate in costume play, and engage in economic cosplay (Roquet, 2023, p. 6; Chiwaki, 2023).

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic brought along its incapacitating consequences for *hikikomori* individuals, as well as for everyone else in the world. The issue of the 8050 problem has reappeared and is being discussed anew in light of recent unfortunate news. The focus is on seeking government or social assistance if one has a *hikikomori* son or daughter. Further, it illustrates the extent to which older parents of *hikikomori* endure shame without breathing a word: they will go to unfathomable extremes, such as quietly passing away in their homes during the pandemic, to avoid the social stigma and scrutiny in exchange for keeping their *hikikomori* children a secret (Ikeda, 2023), providing more proof that the stigma associated with *hikikomori* has to be eliminated. The news article also emphasizes that *hikikomori* is no longer limited to young people, but has become a phenomenon that impacts middle-aged individuals who rely on their elderly parents. These parents are concerned about the future of their children once they pass away. Demonstrating that *hikikomori* support from family members can only go

so far, it becomes imperative for social welfare and government assistance to intervene in a timely manner to prevent further tragedies.

4.5.1. *Hikikomori* soft-launch in the service sector

Employment at a café, where one is attired as an adorable and plush bear and serves drinks via a window covering, may be perceived as a favorable option for an individual in the process of recovering from *hikikomori*. This café, established in Osaka by Yuichiro Hiramura, the principal of Mental Support General School, emerged about a year after the onset of the pandemic (Umeda, 2023). Its existence perfectly aligns with the concept of minimizing physical contact and implementing social distancing measures. Instead of using sterile gloves, the servers sport fluffy bear paws. Additionally, they serve from behind a curtain, eliminating any chance of virus transmission for both the servers and customers. While this approach avoids attracting undesired attention to *hikikomori* individuals who are not inclined towards social interaction, it is advantageous for both the customer's well-being and the *hikikomori*'s seamless integration into the workforce. The café owner prioritizes creating a peaceful work environment for sensitive individuals by providing support from counselors and other specialists, without any direct interaction with customers. A female employee in her twenties, employed as a bear at the café, expressed her apprehension when interacting with people in person. However, she noted that the customers treat the staff as if they were actual bears. Even from behind the curtains, she can discern their excitement and anticipation, and appreciates their patience even when the service takes longer than expected.

Another establishment assisting *hikikomori* youth in gradually reintegrating into society amid COVID-19 is 'Café Smile' in Nagoya (The Japan Reporter, 2020). The café is owned and run by a woman entrepreneur who was formerly a *hikikomori* herself during high school and university years. The business owner, driven by personal empathy and understanding, seeks to support young *hikikomori* in their twenties and thirties with gradually reintegrating into society. To this end, instead of referring to them as "employees," she considers them as "helpers," alleviating the burden of work while simultaneously encouraging them to take a step towards navigating a way out of their isolation. She says that they have the flexibility to start work at any time during the day, which is crucial for *hikikomori* individuals who have a distorted concept of time and are accustomed to a reversed day-night schedule. The business owner also refrains from pushing the *hikikomori* helpers to engage in social interaction or

engage in casual conversation with customers, although such interactions often occur organically.

4.5.2 “Online effect” of the pandemic: Remote support

The *Mainichi Shimbun* underscored the positive impact of reduced in-person interactions on *hikikomori* and introduced the unprecedented concept of the "online effect" of the pandemic, which proved particularly significant for *hikikomori* who aspired to reintegrate into society. The news item focuses on the online meetings of the Hikikomori Platform, which was initiated by Takahiro Tahima, a 40-year-old individual engaged in assisting those who have impairments in finding employment. He observes that the number of *hikikomori* participating in the meetings has started to rise when the meetings transitioned to online platforms and in-person gatherings became unfeasible due to the novel coronavirus. Kyoko Hayashi, the director of *Hikikomori UX Kaigi*, provided some perspective on this progress, saying to the *Mainichi Shimbun* that face-to-face gatherings necessitate individuals to remain in one location for an extended period and engage in direct communication with others, adding, “Clearing such hurdles is a very important step toward returning to society. Online meetings could become a step preceding participation in physical meetings” (Murata, 2020).

In a similar vein, the Edogawa Ward of Tokyo has recently started utilizing the metaverse, a technological feature that has become increasingly accessible (Chiwaki, 2023). This decision was prompted by the widespread attention generated when Facebook adopted the term and rebranded itself as Meta in October 2021, during the early stages of the pandemic (Roquet, 2023, p. 1). As of the fiscal year of 2021, the ward reportedly hosted over 9,000 *hikikomori* and *futōkō*, who were helped in their reintegration into society and, eventually, the workforce (Chiwaki, 2023). The initial meeting occurred with a total of 80 attendees, with 50 participating in the metaverse and 30 attending in person. The Mayor of the Edogawa Ward acknowledged that the metaverse is not a comprehensive solution to the underlying problem. However, it serves as a beginning point for individuals who are confined to their rooms and lack social interaction. It is expected to provide some level of assistance in such cases.

The support provided by local and regional governments is of utmost importance for individuals experiencing *hikikomori*, and this has been further intensified by the pandemic, more so than ever before. After years of seclusion, some *hikikomori* individuals who were finally prepared to reintegrate into society were met by an empty and desolate outside world. While some *hikikomori* individuals found solace in not having to worry about financial

assistance and social support during the COVID-19 isolation requirements, others who had made substantial progress in reintegrating into society and the workforce have experienced discouragement and relapsed into a state of despair (Rooksby, 2020). As a way to tackle this problem and restore optimism, the metaverse approach appears to be well-suited for *hikikomori* individuals, particularly because they typically avoid visiting support centers in person (Kaneko, 2006). Additionally, their families, particularly those from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, may conceal their existence and be reluctant to seek assistance for them. Teruo Miyanishi, a professor who has assisted individuals dealing with challenges of *hikikomori*, states that it is not unusual for parents, especially the elder ones, to be reluctant to seek help from the public by sending out an SOS (Tabuchi, 2019). Miyanishi adds that numerous parents often have the mindset of “If only I swallow the bitter pill and endure.” However, this just results in the prolongation of the process of obtaining counsel. However, as they reach out and kickstart their children’s recovery and reintegration journey, *hikikomori* individuals start to make friends in support groups and interact with society more frequently (Kaneko, 2006, p. 240). Although, many experience peaks and valleys; it is not uncommon for members to abruptly quit attending for a few months before returning.

Despite the apparent potential benefits of the metaverse approach—including the ability to adopt a custom-designed avatar, participate in costume play, and engage in economic cosplay—which enables *hikikomori* individuals to lead a professional life through their new identity—it may discourage them from fully integrating into society rather than facilitating their transition into social interaction (Roquet, 2023, p. 6), which is a valid aspect to consider while formulating further virtual events.

In the same vein, building off Foucault's work in *The Birth of the Clinic*, Nicolas Tajan asserts that the 21st century signifies the end of the clinic (Tajan, 2021, p. 230). Tajan questions whether aspects of the clinic will endure in an era focused on cost reduction and the rise of artificial intelligence in healthcare. In a similar spirit, he goes on to note that the "patient" in this setting is now merely a “shadow” of the "user." In this model where online settings and metaverse is employed, computers and software make treatment choices based on the data provided by the user, and doctors only step in to confirm the results (Tajan, 2021, p. 234).

Considering this, it is only reasonable to wonder how *hikikomori*, who are already unfairly stereotyped as having an addiction to the internet or video games, will fare as artificial intelligence and other forms of metaverse-like online advancement gradually make their way into rehabilitation and therapy. It is a make-or-break scenario; by being able to regularly attend these online support events, *hikikomori* could gain encouragement to rehabilitate and

reintegrate into society; alternatively, the stigma associated with internet addiction could worsen, rendering society an even more unwelcoming environment for them after they have maintained an online presence for so long.

4.5.3. A generation (still) lost: The alarming 8050 problem

The news article regarding the *hikikomori* surveys conducted in Edogawa Ward of Tokyo discusses two main points. Firstly, it reports a rare case in which *hikikomori* women outnumbered males, as noted in the preceding subchapter, which was attributed to gendered job insecurity and setbacks in job seeking during the pandemic. Secondly, the article addresses the 8050 problem, drawing from the fact that a significant proportion of the *hikikomori* in the survey were aged 40 to 50, a social phenomenon that emerged during the Employment Ice Age and produced the Lost Generation (Takahashi, 2022). A considerable number of these individuals have since become *hikikomori* and are financially reliant on their parents, who are in their 70s or 80s at this time.

An ensuing news article is situated in Niigata Prefecture and is emphasizing a comparable aspect of the 8050 problem (or phenomenon). The narrative is staggering due to its depiction of three deaths within a single family. The family is a typical Japanese household, consisting of a father who has retired after a lifelong career at a bank, a mother who is a homemaker, and three children, two of whom have moved out. According to Ikeda (2023), the family consisted of a 59-year-old *hikikomori* son who was responsible for taking care of his father, who was bedridden and 91 years old, and a mother who had dementia, aged 88. It is a simple assumption that the parents were caring for their *hikikomori* son prior to their declining health and bedridden state, which reversed the situation. Later in life, he became a *hikikomori*, despite not having dropped out of high school or experienced the typical school non-attendance that most *hikikomori* individuals do. Although he was able to transition from adolescence to adulthood, this process was disrupted. Characterized as a person who primarily remained alone in his room on the second floor, experiencing challenges in socializing and interacting with others, he refrained from seeking new job opportunities and likely had heightened discouragement throughout the pandemic.

The family did not exhibit any indication that they had a shut-in son, and they kept everyone in the dark about it, according to a newspaper distributor who found the bodies after the paper was neglected for several days. The three of them passed because the *hikikomori* son who had become unwell was unable to care for his parents. The aged welfare division of the municipality

responded to this unfortunate news by saying that they would have made house calls and taken action if they had heard from a third party. According to Mainichi Shimbun's interview with sociology professor Minoru Kawakita, who focuses on the 8050 problem, the rising number of people living at home with their parents after reaching the age of 50 is a major factor in the problem's level of prevalence (Ikeda, 2023). Kawatika continued, saying that the three people's untimely deaths would have been avoided if the parents of their *hikikomori* son had gotten outside help. This story generally highlights the unsettling outcomes of parents who fail to seek assistance and conceal the presence of their *hikikomori* offspring.

The narrative surrounding *hikikomori*, which was previously focused on it being a problem primarily affecting young people, has now broadened to include the 8050 problem. This issue has gained greater attention and has become more threatening due to the additional financial strain caused by the pandemic. As a result, the *hikikomori* phenomenon is now seen less as a problem specific to youth, but rather as a problem affecting middle-aged individuals who are unable to transition into adulthood. For the Lost Generation, who were already at a disadvantage as a result of the the Employment Ice-Age, the pandemic has added insult to injury.

4.6. Conclusion

In sum, the debut of the *hikikomori* to the public eye was not a positive one, rather the way it was framed and associated with psychiatric disorders and the appointment of *hikikomori* experts being figures in psychiatry pathologized the phenomenon. The connection between violence and *hikikomori* was emphasized in the media during the mid-2000s, and two high-profile crimes related to *hikikomori* in 2019 further fueled this perception. This created a lasting impact on the way Japanese people view *hikikomori* individuals, with a sense of hysteria and a lasting impression on their collective psyche (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 2012, p. 85). New Start contends that Japanese citizens stigmatize *hikikomori* and perceive it as a collection of isolated issues rather than a systemic problem that affects the entire nation (Ismail, 2020).

The problem with the public perception influenced by the media is that it not only gives way to the medicalization of *hikikomori*, but also places undue emphasis on the role of family support. This leads to the perpetuation of stigma and the tendency to keep socially withdrawn individuals as a family secret (Tajan, 2021, p. 203), while neglecting the involvement of the government. Consequently, *hikikomori* individuals are left with a single means of support, while the complex psycho-social issue of *hikikomori* requires a comprehensive approach from multiple perspectives. Further discourse is needed on the matter of how Japanese society can

evolve to confront these challenges in a post-COVID-19 era, as hikikomori and their families are hesitant to seek assistance for fear of being judged, according to Takahashi (2020).

The nature of a social phenomenon or an issue being time- and process- specific caused *hikikomori* to get in and out of the public agenda (Horiguchi, 2011, p. 123). This fact was solidified through the COVID-19 process in Japan, as well as worldwide, in which a new light was shone on *hikikomori*. The connotations of ‘social isolation’ changed over this course as practices such as ‘social distancing’ and ‘distant work’ became everyday practices for everyone in Japan, who were volunteers in quarantining for their own health and survival (Roza et al., 2021). Revisiting *hikikomori* in a pandemic environment is crucial because it allows us to understand how people in general, for the first time in the last three decades of the *hikikomori* phenomenon, could empathize with the need to stay indoors in order to survive. The pandemic context gave isolation a new meaning; it was no longer unreasonable and no longer a problem that required scrutiny from a medical perspective; rather, it was standard procedure.

On the flip side, a ‘shadow pandemic’ of domestic violence emerged as a result of spouses being cooped up at home (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). *Hikikomori* women who sought assistance at community events and non-profits shared stories of domestic violence. Female *hikikomori* population outweigh the male *hikikomori*, according to certain local surveys conducted in response to concerns that the population of *hikikomori* may be rapidly increasing in the wake of the pandemic ((Kuroda, 2023). As a result of rising job insecurity and financial strain, women's suffering, suicidal ideation, and despair became more apparent (Piser, 2023), which helped further *hikikomori* studies in terms of balanced gender representation. Furthermore, the lockdowns created a level playing field where both men and women were required to stay at home, without one gender being more associated with the household than the other. This may have contributed to a more balanced representation of both genders in the situation.

Even so, the post-pandemic economy has exacerbated gender gaps, further compromising the already weak position of women in Japan. This has resulted in increased insecurity and irregularity in employment, along with lower wages (Ito & Akuzawa, 2023). Women have been employed in non-regular roles in the state, including as *hikikomori* counselors. However, these counselors, who understand that building a connection with a hikikomori takes a significant amount of time, found it illogical to enter into one-year contracts with unfair compensation and no opportunity to provide assistance to their counselees.

On the other hand, innovative alternative employment types that prioritize non-contact and social isolation as a safety precaution against the pandemic enabled *hikikomori* to be soft-launched into the service sector, such as café servers sporting masks and costumes, without the

need for communication that might irritate them after a lengthy absence from social interactions. Since *hikikomori* simply cannot immediately enter the workforce, flexible hours and working a few days a week might be seen as a gentle step into the workforce. Ayukawa, a *hikikomori* counselor, says something along these lines: “After being disconnected from society for such a long time. Telling them to just go get a job is setting the bar too high” (The Japan Reporter, 2022). However, given the success that former *hikikomori* achieved during the pandemic, and in light of this soft-launch, service industry businesses may be motivated to recruit them on their own terms going forward. It makes an intriguing aspect, as the service industry has never been typically the first choice of the socially withdrawn in recovery and vice versa.

The pandemic has provided an opportunity for the rehabilitation of *hikikomori*, who typically avoid seeking help or visiting NPOs in person. This has been made possible through the use of online platforms, which have been extensively utilized by Japanese municipalities like the Edogawa Ward. These municipalities have organized *hikikomori* meetings in the metaverse, while NPOs have conducted online meetings to support individuals who were unable to reintegrate into society due to the pandemic-induced isolation (Chiwaki, 2023; Murata, 2020). However, the viability of the metaverse/online approach has been questioned and criticized due to concerns that it may be too inviting for *hikikomori* individuals to completely avoid real-life society and become excessively immersed in online work. This could undermine their rehabilitation process and hinder their reintegration into the outdoor community (Roquet, 2023). However, the efforts and new venues for helping *hikikomori* making a soft transition would prove beneficial either way as long as enough attention is paid.

However, the 8050 problem generated significant attention in the press as surveys revealed that *hikikomori* individuals, who are now in their 40s to 50s, are being cared for by their elderly parents who are in their 70s or 80s and are no longer able to provide support in whatever capacity. A news story from Niigata Prefecture (Ikeida, 2023) profoundly affected the nation when it reported that a 59-year-old *hikikomori* son and his aging, 91-year-old parents passed away in their home without ever seeking assistance. This incident once more drew attention to the pending Lost Generation problem and the precarious situation these individuals, many of whom are *hikikomori* and dependent on their ailing parents, found themselves in during the pandemic.

The media portrayal of *hikikomori*, separate from the actual experiences of *hikikomori* individuals which may vary significantly, has been a combination of positive and disturbing developments. However, certain truths have emerged, such as the accurate count of *hikikomori*

women and the availability of alternative employment options that may be more suitable for *hikikomori* individuals. Additionally, fresh streams of support have been tested and verified valuable throughout the pandemic.

The unfolding of *hikikomori*-related crimes in 2019 before the pandemic, along with the resulting negative perception equating the *hikikomori* phenomenon with violence, has been partially replaced by the emergence of new information and recurring challenges. This has led to the development of novel viewpoints for the government, employers, families, as well as the general public to contemplate. Ultimately, the pandemic has offered the media an unfamiliar viewpoint on the fuzzy concept and nature of *hikikomori*, which changes and takes shape over time within different contexts. Given that everyone goes through a "pre-*hikikomori*" phase during a lockdown (Rooksby et al., 2020, p. 399), people who were socially isolating for approximately three months were able to understand the *hikikomori* as they adopted the same habits of staying home and relying on technology to communicate, eat, work and study. It also brought attention to lingering and pressing issues including the 8050 problem and the overlooked gender aspect, demonstrating that nothing about this complex phenomenon is set in stone.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to provide a deeper understanding of the amorphous and ambivalent nature of the *hikikomori* phenomenon and its subjects. Recognizing that this piece of literature would make the author a part of the discourse on *hikikomori* and thus a claimmaker in the social constructionist view, efforts are made to focus on significant aspects that have received insufficient attention and have been misrepresented, such as the gender aspect. The analysis of the gender layer of *hikikomori* reveals a twofold gender bias in the phenomenon. The thesis proposes that a dual biased perspective exists within the *hikikomori* phenomenon and its representation of gender, both in terms of readily underestimating the number of female *hikikomori* and inflating the detrimental influence of female carers, usually mothers, on their *hikikomori* offsprings. Both of these prejudices are societal constructs that stem from the Japanese society's perception of girls and women. The society deems it acceptable for women to refrain from engaging in the job market as long as they are married and fulfill household duties. Saitō argues that women have the ability to avoid conforming to societal expectations, particularly when they are simply "assisting with household tasks" (2013, p. 175).

Both society and professionals place excessive importance on the role of a mother figure in inducing severe social withdrawal in their sons or daughters, under the guise that such mothers are "overbearing" and foster "cocooning" or "amae" attachments. The enormous responsibility and burden that were placed on "full-time housewives" and women following World War II in order to lead the nation out of the conflict still appears to cling to them. When a mother's child is discovered to be *hikikomori* by others, she feels an immense amount of shame that puts her health in jeopardy and may even cause her to withdraw from society to avoid the stigma that her *hikikomori* offspring will bring upon her. After all, *if she had been a good mother, her child would not have turned out this way, neither useful to society nor useful to Japan*. The excessive focus on mothers is not only prevalent among the general population, but it is also deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness. "Mother" is frequently cited as one of the main factors contributing to *hikikomori* in academic literature and by professionals in the field of psychiatry. The purpose is to conceal the suffering of *futōkō* girls and *hikikomori* women, whose participation in the education or job market is considered inconsequential. They are mostly

evaluated based on their responsibilities in raising children and managing household affairs. Furthermore, anytime there are issues at home, they are held responsible.

The impact of COVID-19 on the gender aspect of *hikikomori* has resulted in increased concern among municipalities and local governments on the true number of individuals affected by this phenomenon. There has been fear that the prevalence of *hikikomori* may have significantly increased during the pandemic. Despite the unjust treatment of women employees by local governments, who only hired them on contract basis and paid them low wages, one positive outcome was the increased visibility of a significant number of *hikikomori* women, surpassing men, in some localities. Even more so than among adolescents, it has illuminated the acute social withdrawal that occurs during middle age. Regrettably, the “shadow pandemic” brought to light an increase in domestic violence incidents, which compelled women to isolate themselves socially and seek mental and financial support, all while concealing the fact from their spouses.

Another dimension, closely linked to gender, is the socioeconomics layer of *hikikomori*. The socioeconomics layer is arguably the key component of the onset and sustainability of *hikikomori*, given that while middle-class life provides *hikikomori* with financial resources, food, and shelter. In return, though it is being dismantled by the same group of individuals, not through active effort but through apathy to what middle-class life or salaryman life entails. The situation is similar for female *hikikomori*, as the middle-class family ideal constrained them to conform to the archetype of the “wise mother, good wife” and perpetuate the gender triad system. This system brought prosperity to the Japanese government and corporations, but not to the Japanese people, as evidenced by the declining fertility rate across the nation. Similarly, male *hikikomori* and contemporary Japanese youth in general do not see it advantageous to unquestioningly pledge their loyalty to a company for their whole lives, given the excessive working hours and limited opportunities for advancement due to the sway of senior employees in regard to age hierarchy.

Understanding the phenomenon of *hikikomori* requires a careful study of the labor market, as it has been closely linked to the birth and development of *hikikomori* as a social problem. The significance of the salaryman ideal lies in its portrayal as the highest point of masculinity in Japanese society. By choosing not to become a salaryman, male *hikikomori* fails to achieve this societal expectation.

Given that a majority of these individuals had a lack of attendance in school throughout their teenage years and did not finish their education, the subsequent most masculine course of action is to pursue blue-collar occupations and become working class men through the process

of masculine socialization, such as engaging in rehabilitation of farming labor and similar activities. The socioeconomics layer of *hikikomori* is inherently connected to gender. The issue with the *hikikomori* phenomenon, from a societal perspective, is that it undermines traditional notions of masculinity, as it is predominantly associated with the domestic realm and is often perceived as more feminine in nature. Upon further examination, it becomes evident that the underlying issue is within the concept of femininity and its association with a biased perception of gender.

Furthermore, the pandemic has provided a unique chance to investigate the relationship between *hikikomori* and the public's perception of them in a completely novel context. Similar to how *hikikomori* persons voluntarily isolate themselves for their own "survival," the "voluntary" confinement measures enforced by the Japanese government were likewise designed to achieve the same goal. While it is not feasible to definitively establish a direct association between a less damaging portrayal of *hikikomori* after the pandemic compared to before, the preceding chapter demonstrates that rather than attributing difficulties to *hikikomori*, the issues faced by *hikikomori* individuals have been addressed. The issues of *hikikomori* women, *hikikomori* counselors, aging *hikikomori*, and the 8050 problem have received significant attention in the media, particularly in the *Asahi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun*. It is also possible that the media, as it did with *hikikomori* in the early 2000s and again in 2019, will continue to cover social issues and present them in an emotionally charged way amid a media frenzy, emphasizing the possible threats they pose to society as a whole, portraying them as crises (Best, 2017, p. 252). Instances of intense press coverage during a media frenzy caused by violence tend to include reports on delicate family difficulties affecting *hikikomori* individuals, tragic incidences of school-age child killings, and the death of a diplomat, for example, that evokes nationalist sentiments. However, it is important to recognize that an increase in media coverage of crime does not necessarily indicate an increase in actual crime; it should be acknowledged that "the mechanisms that drive the amount of crime in society are different from the mechanisms that drive the amount of crime content in the media" (Sacco, 2005, p. 176).

An additional advancement for *hikikomori* subsequent to the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly in the midst of it, has been the emergence of novel avenues and alternative forms of non-contact employment, such as serving as staff at cafes. The shift from manufacturing to the service sector in Japan did not favor socially isolated individuals. However, the context in which the service sector evolved, which is characterized by minimal social interaction and the use of masks and gloves, has provided recovering *hikikomori*, attempting to reintegrate into

society, with a soft-launch into the workforce. The newfound convenience of distance learning, remote working, and video conferencing via platforms like Zoom has led to the belief that a significant portion of work can be effectively conducted online. Consequently, online support groups and virtual reality meetups have been implemented to assist hikikomori in reintegrating into society, should they want to do so. *Hikikomori* persons, who are known for their reluctance to participate in face-to-face social interactions, were provided with virtual assistance. Furthermore, those who were in the process of transitioning out of their *hikikomori* condition were adversely affected by the pandemic and may have experienced a sense of despair. However, they were also provided with the opportunity to pursue their rehabilitation through virtual means. Ryu Murakami commented over two decades ago on the correlation between technology progress and the phenomenon of *hikikomori* children. He observes that in our current information-driven culture, it is nearly impossible for anybody to completely avoid some degree of social isolation. Murakami highlights the paradoxical situation in Japanese society, arguing:

It is concerned with the increase of socially withdrawn kids, while at the same time it applauds gizmos like the new Sony PlayStation, which comes equipped with an Internet terminal and a DVD player. Technology like that has made it possible to produce animated movies and graphics, as well as conduct commercial transactions, without ever stepping out of the house. (Murakami, 2000)

The effectiveness of government and non-government efforts centered around the metaverse and online gatherings remains uncertain. However, any endeavor aimed at improving the lives of hikikomori represents a noteworthy advancement. When examining various types of assistance, it is essential to put aside the stereotype of the "internet-addicted *hikikomori*" in the way we think, particularly when the middle-aged *hikikomori* of the Lost Generation are surpassing the number of young *hikikomori*. Establishing and maintaining new avenues of assistance for hikikomori is crucial. For instance, the financial aid provided by the government during the pandemic was enormously beneficial for them, maybe serving as the sole positive aspect of their situation. Considering the distressing stories and the elderly parents of the Lost Generation's *hikikomori*, it would be beneficial for both the parents and their *hikikomori* children to continue providing financial support. This is because *hikikomori* parents are primarily concerned about the survival and future well-being of their children after their own passing.

In summary, one could argue that the significance of time, process and context in a phenomenon such as *hikikomori* cannot be overstated. Although the issue of *hikikomori* was distorted into a violent problematization in 2019 due to overgeneralizations based on two incidents, the attention was redirected to the underlying pandemic that is wreaking havoc worldwide the following year. This environment unveiled the anguish experienced by women, characterized by unprecedented suicide rates. Furthermore, it marked a significant shift in attention towards women in the context of *hikikomori*. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light an increase in cases of domestic abuse, exposing a specific subset of women who exhibit *hikikomori* tendencies, in need of government help both in terms of abuse and social withdrawal caused by it. It is necessary that the hardships shown by the transformative period and impact of the pandemic will not be dismissed in the future.

Due to its nature as a living organism that echoes social problems, *hikikomori* is in a constant state of flux and never remains stationary. It is incorrect to label a condition as a "male malaise" based on data derived from specific prejudices and gendered expectations, as the reliability of the data is compromised. Momentary eradication of prejudices and stigmatization of certain issues including *hikikomori* occurs in radically diverse contexts, such as during a pandemic.

As the *hikikomori* issue becomes more globalized, once referred to as a "silent epidemic," it poses a significant risk of evolving into a "silent pandemic." Several countries beyond Japan have experienced the post-pandemic economic difficulties. Just recently, the yen depreciated to its lowest level since 1990 ("Japan's Yen Sinks," 2024), indicating potential hardships for the people as inflation may increase. A reevaluation of the situation post-pandemic is crucial in this context, as it is critical to monitor the *hikikomori* populations in countries that have reported cases. Moreover, further research must be conducted without gender bias, and women must be included in the narrative; therefore, it is essential that the gender dimension of the *hikikomori* phenomenon be reconsidered. We must abandon the mistaken assumption that *hikikomori* is exclusively observed among males, especially as claimsmakers in social sciences who shape the social construct that is *hikikomori*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

6-yr prison term upheld for ex-top bureaucrat over murder of son. (2021, February 2). *Kyodo News+*. Retrieved July 5, 2024, from <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/02/64167fdacfc2-6-yr-prison-term-upheld-for-ex-top-bureaucrat-over-murder-of-son.html>

Akiba, M., Shimizu, K., & Zhuang, Y. L. (2010). Bullies, victims, and teachers in Japanese middle schools. *Comparative Education Review*, 54(3), 369-392.

Allison, A. (2006). *Millennial monsters: Japanese toys and the global imagination* (Vol. 13). University of California Press.

Allison, A. (2013). *Precarious Japan*. Duke University Press. http://books.google.ie/books?id=SEBNAgAAQBAJ&dq=precarious+japan&hl=&cd=2&source=gbs_api

Alsaker, F. D., & Brunner, A. (2014). *The Nature of School Bullying: A Cross-National Perspective*, 250-264.

Ando, R. (2020). Domestic Violence and Japan's COVID-19 pandemic. *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 1-12.

Appleton, L. M. (2017). Rethinking medicalization: Alcoholism and anomalies. In *Images of issues* (pp. 59-80). Routledge.

Arnett JJ. (2001). Emerging adulthood(s): the cultural psychology of a new life stage. In: Jensen LA, ed. Bridging cultural and developmental approaches to psychology: new syntheses in theory, research, and policy. *New York: Oxford University Press*.

Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). The reality of everyday life. *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, 33-42.

Berman, N. (2023). *Hikikomori and Belonging in a Post-Pandemic Japan*. <https://philpapers.org/rec/BERHAB-2>

Berman, N., & Rizzo, F. (2019). Unlocking Hikikomori: an interdisciplinary approach. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 22(6), 791–806. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1544416>

Best, J. (2017). *Images of issues: Typifying contemporary social problems*. Routledge.

Borovoy, A. (2005). *The Too-Good Wife*. University of California Press. http://books.google.ie/books?id=oQae1fqDv1YC&printsec=frontcover&dq=the+too+good+wife&hl=&cd=1&source=gsb_api

Borovoy, A. (2008). Japan's hidden youths: mainstreaming the emotionally distressed in Japan. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 32, 552-576.

Brinton, M. C. (2010). *Lost in Transition: Youth, work, and instability in postindustrial Japan*. Cambridge University Press. http://books.google.ie/books?id=Kz0Byb9JbIIC&printsec=frontcover&dq=brinton+lost+in+transition&hl=&cd=1&source=gsb_api

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble*. Routledge. http://books.google.ie/books?id=RfHIngEACAAJ&dq=feminism+and+the+Subversion+of+Identity&hl=&cd=3&source=gsb_api

Cabinet Office, Director General for Policy on Cohesive Society. (2010.) Wakamono no ishiki ni kansuru chosa (hikikomori ni kansuru jittai chosa) (*Survey on Youth Consciousness (Investigation into actual conditions of hikikomori)*).

Cabinet Office, Director General for Policy on Cohesive Society. (2016.) Wakamono no seikatsu ni kansuruchosa houkokusho (*Survey on Youth Lifestyle*).

Cabinet Office. (2019). Seikatsu jyoukyou ni kansuru tyousa (Heisei 30 nen do).

Chan, H. Y., & Lo, T. W. (2014). Quality of life of the hidden youth in Hong Kong. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 9, 951-969.

Chiavacci, D. (2008, January 1). From Class Struggle to General Middle-Class Society to Divided Society: Societal Models of Inequality in Postwar Japan. *Social Science Japan Journal*, 11(1), 5–27. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ssjj/jyn022>

Chiavacci, D., & Lechevalier, S. (2020, November 25). *Japanese Political Economy Revisited*. Routledge.

http://books.google.ie/books?id=HVYFEAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=japanese+political+economy+revisited&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api

Chiwaki. (2023, February 19). *Tokyo's Edogawa Ward to hold metaverse events for recluses*. The Mainichi. Retrieved May 17, 2024, from <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20230216/p2a/00m/0na/023000c>

Cohen, S. (2011). *Folk devils and moral panics*. Routledge.

Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities*. University of California Press. [http://books.google.ie/books?id=C8zb0oBUZxC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Connell,+R.W.+\(2005\)+Masculinities.+2nd+Edition,+University+of+California+Press,+Berkeley.&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api](http://books.google.ie/books?id=C8zb0oBUZxC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Connell,+R.W.+(2005)+Masculinities.+2nd+Edition,+University+of+California+Press,+Berkeley.&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api)

Conrad, P., & Schneider, J. W. (1992). *Deviance and medicalization: From badness to sickness*, Exp. ed. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1992-98728-000>

Dasgupta, R. (2012). *Re-reading the salaryman in Japan: Crafting masculinities*. Routledge.

Doi, T. (1973). *The anatomy of dependence*. Tokyo: Kodensha International.

Dziesinski, M. (2004). Hikikomori as a gendered issue. Analysis on the discourse of acute social withdrawal in contemporary Japan. Retrieved January, 23, 2022.

Dziesinski, M. (2008). From failed sons to working men: Rehabilitating hikikomori. In *American Sociological Association Annual Meeting. Sheraton Boston and the Boston Marriott Copley Place, Boston, MA* (Vol. 31).

Dziesinski, M. J. (2003). *Hikikomori: Investigations into the phenomenon of acute social withdrawal in contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: Hawaii.

Editorial: Japan needs solid policy to combat plague of loneliness, social isolation. (2021, April 12). The Mainichi. <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20210412/p2a/00m/0op/010000c>

Enloe, C. (2014). *Bananas, beaches and bases: Making feminist sense of international politics*. Univ of California Press.

Epstein, E. J. (1973, January 1). *News from Nowhere*. http://books.google.ie/books?id=RzOY0AEACAAJ&dq=news+from+nowhere+epstein&hl=&cd=3&source=gbs_api

Ex-top official says he killed son to prevent attack against children. (2019, June 3). *The Asahi Shimbun*.

<https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13062428#:~:text=He%20is%20accused%20of%20fatally,children%2C%20the%20sources%20said>.

Falk, G. (2010). *Stigma: How we treat outsiders*. Prometheus Books.

Federn, P. (1919). On the Psychology of Revolution; the Fatherless Society. *Der Aufsteig, Neue Zeit-und Streitschriften*, 12-13.

Foucault, Michel. 2006. *History of Madness*. Oxon, New York: Routledge.

Freeman, L. A. (2000, January 30). *Closing the Shop*. Princeton University Press. http://books.google.ie/books?id=jX1QlWRcxIIC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Closing+the+Shop:+Information+Cartels+and+Japan%27s+Mass+Media&hl=&cd=2&source=gbs_api

Funakoshi A, Miyamoto Y. (2015.) Significant factors in family difficulties for fathers and mothers who use support services for children with hikikomori. *Psychiatry Clinical Neuroscience*. 69(4): 210–219. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pcn.12230>

Furlong, A. (2008). The Japanese Hikikomori Phenomenon: Acute Social Withdrawal among Young People. *The Sociological Review*, 56(2), 309–325. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954x.2008.00790.x

Furlong, A. (2015). Young People and the Social Consequences of the Post-Industrial Economy. *A Critical Youth Studies for the 21st Century*, 25–37. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004284036_004

Furuhashi T, Tsuda H. Ogawa T, et al. (2013). État des lieux, points communs et différences entre des jeunes adultes retirants sociaux en France et au Japon (Hikikomori). *L'évolution Psych.*

García-Campayo, J. (2007). Un caso de hikikomori en España. *Medicina Clinica*, 129(8), 318-319.

Genda, Y. (2006, January 1). *A Nagging Sense of Job Insecurity*. http://books.google.ie/books?id=OeQdzQEACAAJ&dq=a+nagging+sense+of&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api

Genda, Y. (2019, July 4). *Solitary Non-Employed Persons*. Springer. http://books.google.ie/books?id=dcWgDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=solitary+non+employed+person&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api

Gerry, R. (2022). Changing Perceptions of Gun Control in Japanese Society. *The New York Times*.

Hamasaki, Y., Dorard, G., Tajan, N., & Pionnié-Dax, N. (2023, March). Gender gap-related issues among mothers revealed by a comparative study of adolescent hikikomori between Japan and France. *European Psychiatry*, 66(S1), S279–S280. <https://doi.org/10.1192/j.eurpsy.2023.631>

Harding, C. (2018). *Japan story: in search of a nation, 1850 to the present*. Penguin UK.

Harrison, Sakudo, Tae, & Jeong. (2023, April 18). *2% of Japanese Labour Force Could be 'Modern-day Recluses': Government Survey*. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. Retrieved March 10, 2024, from <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/2-percent-japanese-labour-force-modern-day-recluses>

Hattori, Y. (2006, September 12). Social Withdrawal in Japanese Youth. *Journal of Trauma Practice*, 4(3–4), 181–201. https://doi.org/10.1300/j189v04n03_01

Heinze, U., & Thomas, P. (2014). Self and salvation: visions of hikikomori in Japanese manga. *Contemporary Japan*, 26(1), 151-169. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cj-2014-0007>

Hidaka, T. (2017). Masculinity and the family system: The ideology of the 'Salaryman' across three generations. In *Home and Family in Japan* (pp. 112-130). Routledge.

Higuchi, A. (2004). Dare ga hikikomori wo care surunoka?: Kazoku ni okeru gender-ko-sei no shiten kara mita hikikomori-shien no ko-zu [Who takes care of hikikomori?: The structure of hikikomori support from the perspective of gender fairness in the family]. Gender policies of the state and local governments (F-GENS Publications Series 3) Tokyo: Ochanomizu University.

Hijacker felt deserted by parents. (2000, May 18). Japan Times. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2000/05/18/national/hijacker-felt-deserted-by-parents/>

Hilgartner, S., & Bosk, C. L. (1988). The rise and fall of social problems: A public arenas model. *American journal of Sociology*, 94(1), 53-78.

Hoffman, M. L. (1977). Sex differences in empathy and related behaviors. *Psychological bulletin*, 84(4), 712.

Holmes, E. A., O'Connor, R. C., Perry, V. H., Tracey, I., Wessely, S., Arseneault, L., ... & Bullmore, E. (2020). Multidisciplinary research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic: a call for action for mental health science. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 7(6), 547-560.

Hori, Y. (2019). Japan's "Employment Ice-age Generation" Today: Investigating the Impact of Instability in the School-to-work Transition. *Japan labor issues/The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, International Research Exchange Section* [編], 4(20), 3-14.

Horiguchi, S. (2011). Coping with hikikomori: Socially withdrawn youth and the Japanese family. *Home and family in Japan: Continuity and transformation*, 216-235.

Horiguchi, S. (2012). Hikikomori: How private isolation caught the public eye. In *A sociology of Japanese youth* (p. 122-138). Routledge.

Hou, Y., Harada, Y., Ota, M., & Kato, H. (2023). Is School Absenteeism a Spectrum? Development and Validation of Japanese Futoko Spectrum Quotient (FSQ) 1. *Japanese Psychological Research*.

Hussain, W. M. H. W. (2018). Augmented reality games (arg) and Pokémon Go: Preventing hikikomori in Malaysia. *International Journal of Civil Engineering and Technology*, 9(5), 1128-1135.

Husu, H. M., & Välimäki, V. (2016, December 8). *Staying inside: social withdrawal of the young, Finnish 'Hikikomori*. *Journal of Youth Studies*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1254167>

Ikeda. (2023, February 19). *Tragic deaths of man, aging parents on central Japan island highlights social problem*. The Mainichi. Retrieved May 17, 2024, from <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20230217/p2a/00m/0na/016000c>

Ikeida, V. (2018, August 19). *The Odyssey of a Hikikomori, Round 3: "In the Bubble Economy" - Chased and Pressed by Economic Boom*. ひきぽス -ひきこもりとは何か。当事者達
の声を発信-. https://www.hikipos.info/entry/horoki_r3_eng

Ikeida, V. (2018, August 30). *The Odyssey of a Hikikomori, Round 1: "Various Patterns of Hikikomori"*. ひきぽス -ひきこもりとは何か。当事者達の声を発信-.
https://www.hikipos.info/entry/horoki_r1_eng

Ikeida, V. (2018, August 8). *The Odyssey of a Hikikomori, Round 2: "The Japanese Hikikomori in 1980's" - Not Allowed to Live on with Doin. . .* ひきぽス -ひきこもりとは何か。当事者達の声を発信-. https://www.hikipos.info/entry/horoki_r2_eng

Ishibashi, & Nakafuji. (2020, September 7). Women bear brunt of Japan's pandemic job losses. *Nikkei Asia*. Retrieved January 24, 2024, from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Datawatch/Women-bear-brunt-of-Japan-s-pandemic-job-losses>

Ishii-Kuntz, M. (2005). Balancing fatherhood and work: Emergence of diverse masculinities in contemporary Japan. In *Men and masculinities in contemporary Japan* (pp. 216-234). Routledge.

Ishikawa, R., (2007), Hikikomori mondai no saikentou (re-thinking the Hikikomori problem), unpublished PhD thesis, Tokyo Metropolitan University.

Ismail, R. (2020). *New starts at New Start: Recovery and the work of hikikomori*. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 57(5), 698–709.doi:10.1177/1363461520958337

Ito, & Akuzawa. (2023, March 23). *Municipalities exploit women with temporary jobs, low pay* | *The Asahi Shimbun Asia & Japan Watch*. The Asahi Shimbun. Retrieved May 13, 2024, from <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14860036>

Itoh, K. (2012). Difficulties faced by hikikomori: From the life history in autobiographies and private papers. *KG 社会学批評: KG Sociological Review*, (創刊号), 137-141.

Iwakabe, S. (2021). *Working with social withdrawal, or hikikomori, in Japan: From shame to pride*. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 77(5), 1205–1218.doi:10.1002/jclp.23151

Iwao, S. (1993, January 1). *The Japanese Woman*. Thomas Reed Publications. http://books.google.ie/books?id=VZJDswEACAAJ&dq=The+Japanese+Woman:+Traditional+Image+and+Changing+Reality&hl=&cd=3&source=gbs_api

Iwasaki, M. (2005). Mental health and counseling in Japan: A path toward societal transformation. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 27(2), 129-141

Japan Now Vol. 2, No. 15 (October 26, 2006). (n.d.). https://hikikomori.us.emb-japan.go.jp/jicc/japan-now/EJN_vol2_no15.htm

Japan's "Hikikomori" Population Could Top 10 Million. (2019, September 17). nippon.com. Retrieved May 2, 2024, from <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-topics/c05008/japan%E2%80%99s-hikikomori-population-could-top-10-million.html>

Japan's yen sinks to fresh 34-year low against dollar. (2024, April 15). *Nikkei Asia*. Retrieved June 1, 2024, from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Markets/Currencies/Japan-s-yen-sinks-to-fresh-34-year-low-against-dollar>

Jung. (2019, June 10). *Ex-Japanese top official says he killed son to prevent attack on children*. *Koreatimes*. Retrieved May 2, 2024, from https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/world/2024/05/683_270361.html

Kaneko, S. (2006, September). Japan's 'Socially Withdrawn Youths' and Time Constraints in Japanese Society. *Time & Society*, 15(2–3), 233–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463x06067034>

Kanzaki, M., & Suzuki, H. (2023). School refusal as a representation of questioning normality: Understanding the richness of socio-cultural transitions. *Culture & Psychology*, 29(3), 644–659. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X221146487>

Kato, T. A., Hashimoto, R., Hayakawa, K., Kubo, H., Watabe, M., Teo, A. R., & Kanba, S. (2016). Multidimensional anatomy of 'modern type depression' in Japan: A proposal for a different diagnostic approach to depression beyond the DSM-5. *Psychiatry and clinical neurosciences*, 70(1), 7–23.

Kato, T. A., Kanba, S., & Teo, A. R. (2016). A 39-year-old “adulthood adolescent”: understanding social withdrawal in Japan. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 173(2), 112–114.

Kato, T. A., Kanba, S., & Teo, A. R. (2020). Defining pathological social withdrawal: proposed diagnostic criteria for hikikomori. *World Psychiatry/World Psychiatry*, 19(1), 116–117. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20705>

Kato, T. A., Sartorius, N., & Shinfuku, N. (2020). Forced social isolation due to COVID-19 and consequent mental health problems: Lessons from hikikomori. *Psychiatry and clinical neurosciences*, 74(9), 506.

Kato, T. A., Shinfuku, N., & Tateno, M. (2020). Internet society, internet addiction, and pathological social withdrawal: the chicken and egg dilemma for internet addiction and hikikomori. *Current opinion in psychiatry*, 33(3), 264–270.

Kawai, Hayao. (1996). *Buddhism and the Art of Psychotherapy*. Texas A&M University Press.

Kawanishi, Y. (2009). *Mental Health Challenges Facing Contemporary Japanese Society: The 'Lonely People'*. Global Oriental.

Kawano, S., Roberts, G. S., & Long, S. O. (2014, August 31). *Capturing Contemporary Japan*. University of Hawaii Press. <http://books.google.ie/books?id=Zh7HDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=CAPTURING>

[+CONTEMPORARY+JAPAN:+DIFFERENTIATION+AND+UNCERTAINTY&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api](#)

Keenan, H. (2021, January 7). *Melting the Employment Ice Age: How Will Japan Save Its Lost Generation?* - *Glimpse from the Globe*. Glimpse From the Globe. <https://www.glimpsefromtheglobe.com/regions/asia-and-the-pacific/melting-the-employment-ice-age-how-will-japan-save-its-lost-generation/>

Kelly, W. W. (1986). Rationalization and Nostalgia: Cultural Dynamics of New Middle-class Japan. *American Ethnologist*, 13(4), 603-618.

Kim, H. Y. (2022). *Madness in the Family: Women, Care, and Illness in Japan*. Oxford University Press.

Kim. (2019, June 3). Reclusive Japanese man killed by father who feared he might run amuck. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN1T40QD/>

Kinugawa, M. (2002). *Nihon no babule* [The bubble economy of Japan]. Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Hyōronsha.

Kitazume, K. (2022, March 5). *COVID worsens Japan's persistent gender gap in child care*. Nikkei Asia. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Datawatch/COVID-worsens-Japan-s-persistent-gender-gap-in-child-care>

Kondo, D. K. (1990). *Crafting selves: Power, gender, and discourses of identity in a Japanese workplace*. University of Chicago Press.

Koyama, A., Miyake, Y., Kawakami, N., Tsuchiya, M., Tachimori, H., Takeshima, T., & World Mental Health Japan Survey Group. (2010). Lifetime prevalence, psychiatric comorbidity and demographic correlates of “hikikomori” in a community population in Japan. *Psychiatry research*, 176(1), 69-74.

Krysinska, D. (2007). *Hikikomori (Social Withdrawal) in Japan: Discourses of Media and Scholars; Multicausal Explanations of the Phenomenon* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh)

Kuroda, A. (2023, August 15). “Not alone”: Growing number of middle-aged female “hikikomori” shut-ins in Japan. The Mainichi. Retrieved July 5, 2024, from <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20230815/p2a/00m/0na/003000c>

Kushner, B. (2020, April 6). *Japan’s state of emergency has dark history*. Nikkei Asia. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Japan-s-state-of-emergency-has-dark-history>

Lee, Y. J., Seo, M. J., & Choi, T. Y. (2015). Psychopathological Characteristics of Social Withdrawal (Hikikomori) in the Korean Adolescent. *Taehan Sin’gyōng Chōngsin Ūihak Hoeji/Journal of Korean Neuropsychiatric Association/Han-guk Mul Hwan-gyeong Hakoeji*, 54(4), 549. <https://doi.org/10.4306/jknpa.2015.54.4.549>

Li, T. M., & Wong, P. (2015). Editorial Perspective: Pathological social withdrawal during adolescence: a culture-specific or a global phenomenon?. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 56(10), 1039-1041.

Liu, L. L., Li, T. M., Teo, A. R., Kato, T. A., & Wong, P. W. (2018). Harnessing social media to explore youth social withdrawal in three major cities in China: cross-sectional web survey. *JMIR mental health*, 5(2), e8509.

Lock, M. (1986). Plea for acceptance: school refusal syndrome in Japan. *Social Science & Medicine*, 23(2), 99-112.

Ma, A. (2018, January 14). A psychological ailment called “hikikomori” is imprisoning 500,000 Japanese people in their homes — and it’s more of a threat than ever. <https://hikikomori.businessinsider.com/hikikomori-worrying-mental-health-problem-traps-japanese-at-home-2018-1>

Maiko, E. (2022, July 12). *What was behind the Kawasaki attack?* NHK WORLD. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/570/>

Makino, K. (1995). Chichioya to kodomo to katei [Fathers, children, and the family]. *Shakai Anzen [Social Safety]*, 18, 22-29.

Marika, S. M. (2022). COVID-19’s Impact on the Recovering Hikikomori Individuals in Japan- A Qualitative Survey Analysis Through CHIME Framework.

Martinotti, G., Vannini, C., Di Natale, C., Sociali, A., Stigliano, G., Santacroce, R., & di Giannantonio, M. (2020). Hikikomori: psychopathology and differential diagnosis of a condition with epidemic diffusion. *International Journal of Psychiatry in Clinical Practice*, 1–8. doi:10.1080/13651501.2020.1820524

McCurry, J. (2019, May 29). “My heart is broken”: Japan mourns victims of mass stabbing attack. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/29/my-heart-is-broken-japan-mourns-victims-of-mass-stabbing-attack>

McCurry, J. (2024, February 15). *Japan loses crown as world’s third-largest economy after it slips into recession*. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/15/japan-recession-economy-falls-behind-germany-worlds-largest>

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology-Japan (MEXT). (2022). *Results of the 2021 survey on problematic behavior, futoko, and other student guidance issues for pupils and students*. [MEXT](https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20221021-mxt_jidou02-100002753_1.pdf). Retrieved from https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20221021-mxt_jidou02-100002753_1.pdf [In Japanese, title translated by Yuejiang Hou, author of “Is School Absenteeism a Spectrum? Development and Validation of Japanese Futoko Spectrum Quotient (FSQ)]

Miyaoka, Y., Kamo, T., Kametani, M., Kosuga, F., & Masaki, T. (2007). Is Empty Nest Syndrome Related to the Onset of Depression in Middle-aged Women?. *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 28, 89.

Mlambo-Ngcuka. (2020, April 6). *Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic*. UN Women – Headquarters. Retrieved May 20, 2024, from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>

Moore, H. L. (1995). *Feminism and anthropology*. University of Minnesota Press.

Morita, Y., Soeda, H., Soeda, K., & Taki, M. (1999b). Japan. In P. K. Smith, Y. Morita, J. Junger-Tas, D. Olweus, R. Catalano, & P. Slee (Eds.), *The Nature of School Bullying: A Cross-National Perspective* (p. 309-323). New York: Routledge.

Murakami, R. (2000). Japan's lost generation. *The Time*.

Murata. (2020, September 21). *Online “hikikomori” meetings for shut-ins across Japan welcoming more participants*. The Mainichi. Retrieved May 13, 2024, from <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200921/p2a/00m/0na/021000c>

Naito, T., & Gielen, U. P. (2005). Bullying and ijime in Japanese schools: A sociocultural perspective. In *Violence in schools: Cross-national and cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 169-190). Boston, MA: Springer US.

Narabe. (2024, January 13). *Ex-shut-in brings inspirational Indian film to fans in Japan | The Asahi Shimbun Asia & Japan Watch*. The Asahi Shimbun. Retrieved May 13, 2024, from <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15083364>

Nelson-Rowe, S. (2017). The moral drama of multicultural education. In *Images of Issues* (pp. 81-100). Routledge.

Nesser, L. (2009). *Hikikomori-a generation in crisis: investigations into the phenomenon of acute social withdrawal in Japan* (Master's thesis).

Nihon Naikakufu (Cabinet Office of Japan). (2010). *Wakamono no Ishiki ni kansuru Cho^sa (Hikikomori ni kansuru Jittai Cho^sa)*. A report on a survey of youth consciousness: a Hikikomori field survey. Chiyoda, Tokyo, Japan: Cabinet Office of Japan.

Nishioka, H. (1998). Men's domestic role and the gender system: Determinants of husband's household labor in Japan. *Journal of Population Problems*, 54(3), 56-71.

Nonaka, S., & Sakai, M. (2021, July). A correlational study of socioeconomic factors and the prevalence of hikikomori in Japan from 2010 to 2019. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 108, 152251. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comppsy.2021.152251>

Nonaka, S., Takeda, T., & Sakai, M. (2022). Who are hikikomori? Demographic and clinical features of hikikomori (prolonged social withdrawal): A systematic review. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 56(12), 1542-1554.

OECD (2023), *G7 Gender Equality Implementation Report 2023: Promoting Gender Equality Through G7 Policy*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b7117089-en>.

Ogasawara, Y. (2016). The gender triad: Men, women, and corporations. *Power in contemporary Japan*, 167-182.

Ogasawara, Y. (2020). The slow decline of the male-breadwinner family model in contemporary Japan and its ramifications for men's lives. *Japan Labour Issues*, 4(20), 15-28.

Otake, T. (2023, May 11). *Japan steps into post-pandemic phase with scrapping of COVID measures*. The Japan Times. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/05/07/national/japan-postpandemic-era-covid-changes/>

Overell, R. (2018). Queer will: Hikikomori as willful subjects. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 19(2), 206-219.

Pehlivantürk, B. (2021). Japonya'da Covid-19 Salgını: Toplumsal Uyum, Demokratik Özgürlükler, Dünya Sağlık Diplomasisi. In H. Çelik & E. Demir (Eds.), *COVID-19 SALGINI Ülke Deneyimleri, Bölgesel Etkiler ve Küresel Yansımalar* (pp. 145–173). Nika Yayınevi.

Piotti, A. (2012). *Il banco vuoto : diario di un adolescente in estrema reclusione*. Franco Angeli - Torrossa. <https://www.torrossa.com/en/resources/an/2653139>

Piser. (2023, July 10). Gender Inequality Is Driving a Mental Health Crisis in Japan. *The Nation*. Retrieved January 24, 2024, from <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/loneliness-women-japan-gender-inequality/>

Potter, J. (1996). Discourse analysis and constructionist approaches: Theoretical background. British Psychological Society.

Rahardjo, W. (2013). Changing Ideals in the Hegemonic Salaryman: A Study of Post-War Japanese Masculinity in Relation to Hikikomori, Freeters, and Women in the Workforce.

Rees. (2002, October 20). Japan: The Missing Million. BBC NEWS. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/correspondent/2334893.stm>

Ricci, C., & Piotti, A. (2008). Hikikomori: adolescenti in volontaria reclusione. (No Title).

Rizzo, F. (2016). Hikikomori: the postmodern hermits of Japan

- Roberson, J. E. (2005). Japanese working-class masculinities: Marginalized complicity. In *Men and masculinities in contemporary Japan* (pp. 144-161). Routledge.
- Roberson, J. E., & Suzuki, N. (Eds.). (2003). *Men and masculinities in contemporary Japan: Dislocating the salaryman doxa* (Vol. 56). Psychology Press.
- Rooksby, M., Furuhashi, T., & McLeod, H. J. (2020). Hikikomori: a hidden mental health need following the COVID-19 pandemic. *World Psychiatry*, 19(3), 399.
- Roquet, P. (2023). Japan's Retreat to the Metaverse. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(7), 1501-1510.
- Rosenberger, N. R. (2013). *Dilemmas of adulthood: Japanese women and the nuances of long-term resistance*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Rosenthal, B., & Zimmerman, D. L. (2012). Hikikomori: The Japanese phenomenon, policy, and culture. *International Journal of Mental Health*, 41(4), 82-95.
- Roza, T. H., Spritzer, D. T., Gadelha, A., & Passos, I. C. (2021). Hikikomori and the COVID-19 pandemic: not leaving behind the socially withdrawn. *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry*, 43, 114-116.
- Rubinstein, E. (2016, May 4). Emplotting Hikikomori: Japanese Parents' Narratives of Social Withdrawal. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 40(4), 641-663. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-016-9495-6>
- Sacco, V. F. (2005). *When crime waves*. Sage Publications.
- Saitō, T. (2013). Hikikomori: Adolescence without end (J. Angles, Trans.) *University of Minnesota Press*. (Original work published in 1998).
- Sakamoto, N., Martin, R. G., Kumano, H., Kuboki, T., & Al-Adawi, S. (2005). Hikikomori, is it a culture-reactive or culture-bound syndrome? Nidotherapy and a clinical vignette from Oman. *The International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine*, 35(2), 191-198.

Sekimizu, T. (2022, July 7). A Sociology of Hikikomori. Rowman & Littlefield. http://books.google.ie/books?id=zit4EAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=a+sociology+of+hikikomori&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api

Shibata, S. (2020). Re-packaging old policies? 'Abenomics' and the lack of an alternative growth model for Japan's political economy. In *Japanese Political Economy Revisited* (p. 101-124). Routledge.

Shimoyachi, N. (2003, April 21). Group seeks care for socially withdrawn. Retrieved from <https://hikikomori.japantimes.co.jp/news/2003/04/22/national/group-seeks-care-for-socially-withdrawn/>

Six-year prison term upheld for ex-top Japanese bureaucrat over murder of son. (2021, February 3). Japan Times. Retrieved from <https://hikikomori.japantimes.co.jp>

Song, J. (2018). Young people, precarious work, and the development of youth employment policies in Japan. *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 19(3), 444-460.

Spector, M. and J. Kitsuse (1977) *Constructing Social Problems*, Menlo Park, California, Cummings Publishing Company.

Spector, M., & Kitsuse, J. I. (1973). Social Problems: A Re-Formulation. *Social Problems*, 21(2), 145–159. <https://doi.org/10.2307/799536>

Statistics Bureau Home Page/Annual Report on the Labour Force Survey 2020. (2020). Retrieved February 4, 2024, from <https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/roudou/report/2020/index.html>

Sugai, M. (2016) Hikikomori; An Investigation into the Socio-Cultural and Socio-Economic Constructs Influencing Specific Symptomatology of Hikikomori in Japan. *The Forum*, 30, 15-26.

Sugimoto, Y. (2003). *An Introduction to Japanese Society*. Cambridge University Press. http://books.google.ie/books?id=3C_BFE6YO6gC&printsec=frontcover&dq=An+introduction+to+Japanese+society&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api

Suwa, M., & Suzuki, K. (2013). The phenomenon of “hikikomori” (social withdrawal) and the socio-cultural situation in Japan today. *Official Journal of the Italian Society of Psychopathology*, 19, 191-198.

Suzuki, K. (2022, September 26). Hikikomori: A Path Forward for Japan’s Recluses? <https://unseen-japan.com/japan-hikikomori/>

Tabuchi, S. (2019, June). *Violent incidents trigger anxiety among recluses and their parents* | *The Asahi Shimbun Asia & Japan Watch*. The Asahi Shimbun. Retrieved May 21, 2024, from <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13062470>

Tajan, N. (2015). Japanese post-modern social renouncers: An exploratory study of the narratives of Hikikomori subjects. *Subjectivity*, 8, 283-304.

Tajan, N. (2021). Mental health and social withdrawal in contemporary Japan: beyond the Hikikomori spectrum. *Routledge*.

Tajan, N., Yukiko, H., & Pionnié-Dax, N. (2017). Hikikomori: The Japanese Cabinet Office’s 2016 survey of acute social withdrawal. *The Asia Pacific Journal*, 15(5), 1.

Takahashi, A. (2022, June 30). *Tokyo ward estimates 1.3% of residents are ‘hikikomori’* | *The Asahi Shimbun Asia & Japan Watch*. The Asahi Shimbun. Retrieved May 13, 2024, from <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14642030>

Takahashi, M. (2016, November 28). *Why Half a Million Young Japanese Can’t Face School or Work*. Bloomberg. from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-11-27/why-half-a-million-young-japanese-can-t-face-school-or-work>

Takahashi, T. (2020, May 15). *The trouble with linking COVID-19 to “hikikomori.”* The Japan Times. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/05/15/commentary/japan-commentary/trouble-linking-covid-19-hikikomori/>

Takahiro, O. (2021, February 13). *Suga appoints minister of loneliness as suicides surge* | *The Asahi Shimbun Asia & Japan Watch*. The Asahi Shimbun. Retrieved April 19, 2024, from <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14187206>

Taki, M. (2001). Japanese school bullying: ijime. URL: <http://www.nier.go.jp/a000110/Toronto.pdf>.

Teo, A. R., & Gaw, A. C. (2010). Hikikomori, a Japanese culture-bound syndrome of social withdrawal?: A proposal for DSM-5. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, 198(6), 444-449.

Teo, A. R., Fetters, M. D., Stufflebam, K., Tateno, M., Balhara, Y., Choi, T. Y., ... & Kato, T. A. (2015). Identification of the hikikomori syndrome of social withdrawal: Psychosocial features and treatment preferences in four countries. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 61(1), 64-72.

Teo, A. R., Stufflebam, K. W., & Kato, T. A. (2013). The Intersection of culture and solitude: The hikikomori phenomenon in Japan. *The handbook of solitude: Psychological perspectives on social isolation, social withdrawal, and being alone*, 445-460.

The diplomat who was a bridge between Japan and Myanmar | The Asahi Shimbun Asia & Japan Watch. (2019, June 26). The Asahi Shimbun. Retrieved April 30, 2024, from <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13063116>

The Japan Reporter. (2022, May 15). *How Japan Is Dealing With Hikikomori Problem*. YouTube. Retrieved May 20, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1TwfeSRDeQ>

Tipton, E. K. (2009). How to Manage a Household: Creating Middle Class Housewives in Modern Japan. *Japanese Studies*, 29(1), 95-110.

Toivonen, T. (2012). *Japan's emerging youth policy: getting young adults back to work*. Routledge.

Toivonen, T. (2012). NEETs: The strategy within the category. In *A sociology of Japanese youth* (pp. 139-158). Routledge.

Toivonen, T., Norasakkunkit, V., & Uchida, Y. (2011). Unable to conform, unwilling to rebel? Youth, culture, and motivation in globalizing Japan. *Frontiers in psychology*, 2, 207. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00207>

Tomoko, M. (2023, November 9). *Japan's female recluses*. NHK WORLD. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/2391/>

Tsuruta, H. (1999). The bubble economy and financial crisis in Japan. *International Journal of Political Economy*, 29(1), 26-48.

Tsuya, N. O., Bumpass, L. L., Choe, M. K., & Rindfuss, R. R. (2005, March 1). IS THE GENDER DIVISION OF LABOUR CHANGING IN JAPAN? *Asian Population Studies*, 1(1), 47–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441730500125805>

Uchida, Y., & Norasakkunkit, V. (2015). The NEET and Hikikomori spectrum: Assessing the risks and consequences of becoming culturally marginalized. *Frontiers in psychology*, 6, 1117. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01117>

Ueda, M., Nordström, R., & Matsubayashi, T. (2022). Suicide and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. *Journal of Public Health*, 44(3), 541-548.

Uemura, H., & Tahara, S. (2014). The transformation of growth regime and de-industrialization in Japan. *Revue de la régulation. Capitalisme, institutions, pouvoirs*, (15).

Ueyama, K. Tsuiki, K. and Tajan, N. 2010. “Hikikomori nitsuite” ひきこもりについて (About Hikikomori). Video-recorded interview.

Umeda, M., & Kawakami, N. (2012, February 2). Association of childhood family environments with the risk of social withdrawal (‘hikikomori’) in the community population in Japan. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 66(2), 121–129. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1819.2011.02292.x>

Umeda. (2023, January 29). *People suffering emotionally find relief working as “bears” at Osaka cafe*. The Mainichi. Retrieved May 13, 2024, from <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20230125/p2a/00m/0na/017000c>

Vogel, E. F. (1971). *Japan's New Middle Class; the Salary Man and His Family in a Tokyo Suburb*. Univ of California Press. http://books.google.ie/books?id=WAvLGfmEonUC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Japan%E2%80%99s+New+Middle+Class%3B+the+Salary+Man+and+His+Family+in+a+Tokyo+Suburb.&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api

Waldenberger, F. (2020). 'Growth oriented' corporate governance reform—can it solve Japan's performance puzzle?. In *Japanese Political Economy Revisited* (pp. 56-76). Routledge.

Watanabe, T., & Yabu, T. (2021). Japan's voluntary lockdown: further evidence based on age-specific mobile location data. *The Japanese Economic Review*, 72(3), 333–370. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42973-021-00077-9>

Watts, J. (2002, March). tokyo Public health experts concerned about "hikikomori." *The Lancet*, 359(9312), 1131. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(02\)08186-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(02)08186-2)

Web Desk. (2021, February 23). Japan appoints Minister of Loneliness after suicides claim more lives than COVID-19. *The Week*. Retrieved June 3, 2024, from <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2021/02/23/japan-appoints-minister-of-loneliness-after-suicides-claim-more-lives-than-covid-19.html>

Weiner, A. B. (1976, January 1). *Women of Value, Men of Renown*. http://books.google.ie/books?id=vv1lQgAACAAJ&dq=Women+of+Value,+Men+of+Renown:+New+Perspectives+in+Trobriand+Exchange&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api

Wong, J. C. M., Wan, M. J. S., Kroneman, L., Kato, T. A., Lo, T. W., Wong, P. W. C., & Chan, G. H. (2019). Hikikomori phenomenon in East Asia: regional perspectives, challenges, and opportunities for social health agencies. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 10, 512.

Wong, P. W. (2020). Potential changes to the hikikomori phenomenon in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. *Asian journal of psychiatry*, 54, 102288.

Woronoff, J. (1997). *Japanese Social Crisis*. Springer.

Yamada, M., "The Growing Crop of Spoiled Singles," in *Japan Echo*. Vol. 27, Issue 3, June 2000, p. 49-53.

Yamamoto, T., Uchiumi, C., Suzuki, N. et al. Mental health and social isolation under repeated mild lockdowns in Japan. *Sci Rep* 12, 8452 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598->

Yoneyama, S. (2000). Student discourse on Tokokyohi (School Phobia/Refusal) in Japan: burnout or empowerment?. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21(1), 77-94.

Yong, K. F. (2008). Exploring hikikomori: a mixed methods qualitative research. *HKU Theses Online (HKUTO)*.

Yong, R. K., Fujita, K., Chau, P. Y., & Sasaki, H. (2020). Characteristics of and gender difference factors of hikikomori among the working-age population: a cross-sectional population study in rural Japan. *Nihon Koshu Eisei Zasshi (JAPANESE JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH)*, 67(4), 237-246.

Yoshioka-Maeda, K. (2020). The '8050 issue' of social withdrawal and poverty in Japan's super-aged society. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 76(8), 1884-1885.

Zielenziger, M. (2007). Shutting out the sun: How Japan created its own lost generation. *Vintage*.

CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION

DEGREE INSTITUTION DEPARTMENT

MA Social Sciences University of Ankara, Asian Studies (2021-2024)

BA Hacettepe University, Translation and Interpreting (English) (2015-2019) GPA: 3.48

WORK EXPERIENCE

Intern Translator at the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, Department of Foreign Relations and Protocol (2018, July)

Translator at Directorate of Communications of the Presidency of Türkiye (2020-Present)

CERTIFICATES

Asia Anew Training Program Certificate [Center for Strategic Research (SAM) & Directorate General for Multilateral Political Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye]

FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Turkish (Native)

English (YDS: 97.5)

Spanish: (Spanish I-VIII completed at Hacettepe University)

PUBLICATIONS:

Arıkan, A. (2022). Nicolas Tajan, Mental Health and Social Withdrawal in Contemporary Japan: Beyond the Hikikomori Spectrum. *Bölge Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 1(2), 108-111.