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PRO GRADU THESIS

MESSAGES FROM BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Exploring the first self-published media of Japanese *hikikomori*

Centre for East Asian Studies

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KUBINCOVÁ, MÁRIA: Messages from Behind Closed Doors – Exploring the First Self-published Media of Japanese *Hikikomori*

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This thesis explores the self-presentation of Japanese *hikikomori* by analysing the first self-published hikikomori magazine called *Hikikomori News*, produced in a total of ten individual issues published between January 2017 and October 2018, each dedicated to a specific topic. By conducting this analysis, the study aims to bring a novel perspective into the available body of literature on the *hikikomori* topic, which, especially in English language, lacks knowledge derived directly from the own experiences of *hikikomori,* and is instead rich in publications written by external actors (medical specialists, researchers, journalists), or people otherwise empirically relating to, but not having directly experienced, *hikikomori* (parents, family members or recovery supporters).

Given the highly varied, and often very personal, contents of the analysed materials, the study was conducted by coding the available textual material following Braun and Clarke's guides on conducting reflexive thematic analysis to aid the interpretation of the patterns found within the data. The results of the research are presented and discussed in detail in the form of six constricted themes, which revive around the topics of the *hikikomori* experience, support, interrelations between *hikikomori* and people/society/mass-media, the onset variety, the feeling of being dehumanised and employment struggles. This study focuses on a single publication series, which covers a wide range of topics. Due to the existence of other similar sources and sources focused on subsets of *hikikomori* (e.g., female or ageing *hikikomori*), there is great potential in further research of this topic by focusing on first-person accounts and widening the existing knowledgebase.

Keywords: hikikomori, self-presentation, self-published media, first-person accounts, female hikikomori, elderly hikikomori, social problems, official surveys

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Note on Japanese translations and romanisation

Japanese texts in this thesis were translated by the author. Some Japanese terminology is included in its original form and transcriptions use the modified Hepburn romanisation, except for already established names (e.g., *Yomiuri Shimbun*, The Asahi Shimbun). Japanese names follow the Western custom of name order, where the surname follows the given name.

List of Abbreviations

8050	Parents in their 80s, with *hikikomori* children in their 50s
9060	Parents in their 90s, with *hikikomori* children in their 60s
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
DSM-III	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (3rd edition)
DSM-IV	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th edition)
DSM-V	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th edition)
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning
MS	Microsoft
MHLW	Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
NHK	Japan Broadcasting Corporation (*Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*)
PDF	Portable Document Format
WWII	Second World War

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"At this time, Ama-terasu (…), was afraid,
and opening the heavenly rock-cave door,
went in and shut herself inside.
Then (…) the Central Land of the Reed Plains
was entirely dark.
Because of this, constant night reigned,
and the cries of the myriad deities
were everywhere abundant,
like summer flies;
and all manner of calamities arose."
—*Donald L. Philippi, Kojiki*

Natural-Born killers?

(headline, 20 August 2000, Time)

A psychological ailment called '*hikikomori*' is imprisoning 500,000 Japanese people in their homes

(headline, 16 January 2018, World Economic Forum)

Combating an unfounded fear of Japan's recluses

(headline, 15 June 2019, The Japan Times)

Introduction

Reading the article headlines of well-known media outlets provided on the previous page, can give a sense of unease, and create a picture where Japan is facing an unprecedented situation regarding a fraction of the population. It is widely debated that the Japanese society has been struggling with a number of social problems over the past decades, often revolving around the nation's youth. Some of these, like *otaku* (a person with deep interest in and knowledge about a certain topic; like nerd), have shifted from being a perceived social threat to becoming one of Japan's biggest marketing ploys. Others such as *parasaito shinguru* ('parasite singles', i.e. young single people, especially female, who decide to live with their parents in order to save their income for personal luxuries) and *sōshoku danshi* ('herbivore men', i.e. men with a disinterest in relationship and marriage, deemed traditional for males), *hikikomori* (long-term shut-ins; recluses) and NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) have come to be seen as pressing issues over the past decades, which negatively affect the country's shrinking workforce and, in the case of the latter two, a perceived strain on the current welfare system.

This study focuses on the social phenomenon called *hikikomori* (ひきこもり/引き こもり/引き籠もり; lit. to pull inwards), a term of Japanese origin, which has been officially recognised by the Oxford English Dictionary since 2010. Nowadays, many might find the term *hikikomori* familiar. A form of existence, which was first reported in Japan, and thought to only be occurring there, has increasingly been found in foreign news. Despite being a topic of discussion and controversy in Japan during these past two decades, the social phenomenon remains misunderstood by many. Both experts and the general public may suffer from misconceptions. The reason behind this is both simple and complicated – the *hikikomori* phenomenon comprises a wide range of individual experiences, from bullying, harassment, career failure, but also psychological and developmental disorders, to refusal to engage with societal structures. It is therefore a daunting task to try and find one single approach that would solve the issue on all levels.

I have been interested in the *hikikomori* phenomenon for over a decade and chose to write this study as a continuation and expansion of my previous research on the topic[1]. The situation regarding *hikikomori* in Japan has seen a lot of development over the last two decades, which has, at times, been very turbulent. These changes, however, have not been very well reflected in the available articles written by foreign authors (Kawanishi, 2009: 118). Instead, the current standard still seems to be that of sensationalist reporting, often romanticising *hikikomori* as modern-day hermits, situating them as martyrs born from the struggles of contemporary Japanese society, and even demonising them for selfishly refusing to take part in society. This has created a disparity in the knowledge regarding this issue outside of Japan.

In this thesis, I will focus on the own voices of *hikikomori*, by analysing the first magazine self-published by *hikikomori* called *Hikikomori News* and explore what *hikikomori* in Japan are trying to convey to the outside world and other *hikikomori* simultaneously. The reason is simple – it is to bring another perspective into the existing body of literature written about them by external actors. My aim is to understand the contents of the self-published magazine by looking at what kind of information they aim to share. By conducting this study, I hope to bring a different perspective about this topic that will directly reflect the lives of *hikikomori* based on their own experiences.

This research is thus a qualitative analysis of the self-published *Hikikomori News,* utilising the method of reflexive thematic analysis based on the guidelines developed by Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun (2022). The reason behind this choice is the theoretical flexibility of the method, which I believe best suits the nature of this research. The studied time period is November 2016 – October 2018, which covers the time frame when the *Hikikomori News* were being published. Using the results of this research I want to answer the main research questions of this thesis:

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[1] The author's previous master's thesis (The Trend in the *Hikikomori* Problem and its Treatment in Contemporary Japanese Society) submitted in 2019 to Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia, focused solely on studying the first three government surveys on *hikikomori* published between 2010 – 2019. This thesis takes the research on *hikikomori* deeper and focuses on the *Hikikomori News* in particular, offering an original in-depth analysis of this self-publication by *hikikomori*. This thesis uses new and original substantial primary data and the analysis of it using new methodology. In addition, the analysis of existing literature on *hikikomori* in the theoretical framework has been further expanded and updated.

1. What information do *hikikomori* want to convey to the (real and metaphorical) outside world?
2. What messages do *hikikomori* want to communicate among each other, i.e. people with the shared experience of *hikikomori?*

In the first chapter, I will introduce the basic concepts and definitions, as well as the most important actors involved in the process of uncovering and defining *hikikomori.* The chapter will also discuss the evolution of the phenomenon from the initial recognition to a social problem of contemporary Japanese society. I will conclude the chapter by briefly discussing the existing research into the possibility of considering *hikikomori* a medical diagnosis.

In the second chapter I will introduce the methodology of this study, followed by the reasoning behind my choices. I will introduce my data in more detail, to give a clear overview of the nature of the data. Furthermore, I will describe the process of acquiring the data, preparing it for analysis, analytic tools used, and the analysis itself. At the end of the chapter, I will present the themes, which I developed from the data, with supporting examples, which best describe the range of topics appearing in the data. The third and fourth chapters will present and discuss the results of this thesis in the light of the current situation regarding the *hikikomori* problem in Japan.

1. Theoretical background and definition(s) of *hikikomori*

In this chapter I will discuss the development of the phenomenon, starting with definitions, which underwent slight modifications, as the existing knowledge grew with time. Additionally, I will list the key events that prompted the phenomenon to be considered a social issue and compare it to other social problems.

1.1 Defining *hikikomori* – the initial attempts

Hikikomori as a potential social issue gained interest in the mid-1990s. The word itself has existed for much longer, in fact a search for the term ひきこもり in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* newspaper archives called *Yomidas Rekishikan*, returned several hits, with the word being used in news articles as early as 1961. Suwa & Suzuki (2013) touched upon the historical usage of the word and clarified, that the term has been used to describe a general state of withdrawal from interpersonal relationships, as well as a psychiatric term to describe withdrawal in patients with a diagnosis of a psychological disorder such as autism (today referred to as autism spectrum disorder), schizophrenia, depression, or in ageing patients. Fig. 1 (on the next page) illustrates the concrete changes in the number of studies between 1986 and 2011, which focused on *hikikomori* in youth, and on *hikikomori* combined with other pathology.

However, it was the Japanese psychiatrist Tamaki Saitō, who coined the term as a description for a state of acute long-term social withdrawal, which he had observed in his patients with an increasing recurrence during his clinical practice (Saitō & Angles 2013: vii). His patients, mostly adolescents or youth, were predominantly male, refusing to leave their rooms for a prolonged period (months to years), attend school or work and severing interpersonal contact. As none of the existing medical conditions had fit these cases, Saitō decided to use the term *shakaiteki hikikomori* (社会的ひきこもり; lit. social withdrawal). The English term 'social withdrawal', which Saitō based the Japanese equivalent on, had been included in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1987 (Saitō 2015). The DSM-III considered social withdrawal not as a stand-alone diagnosis, but rather a symptom accompanying other already existing diagnoses, such as schizophrenia and depression (Saitō & Angles 2013: 10). Saitō himself

observed accompanying conditions such as depression, obsessive behaviour, suicidal ideation, and other in his patients, yet the intricate nature of the symptoms of these recurring cases could not be explained by a single medical cause (Saitō & Angles 2013: vii).

Figure 1: The number of hikikomori studies
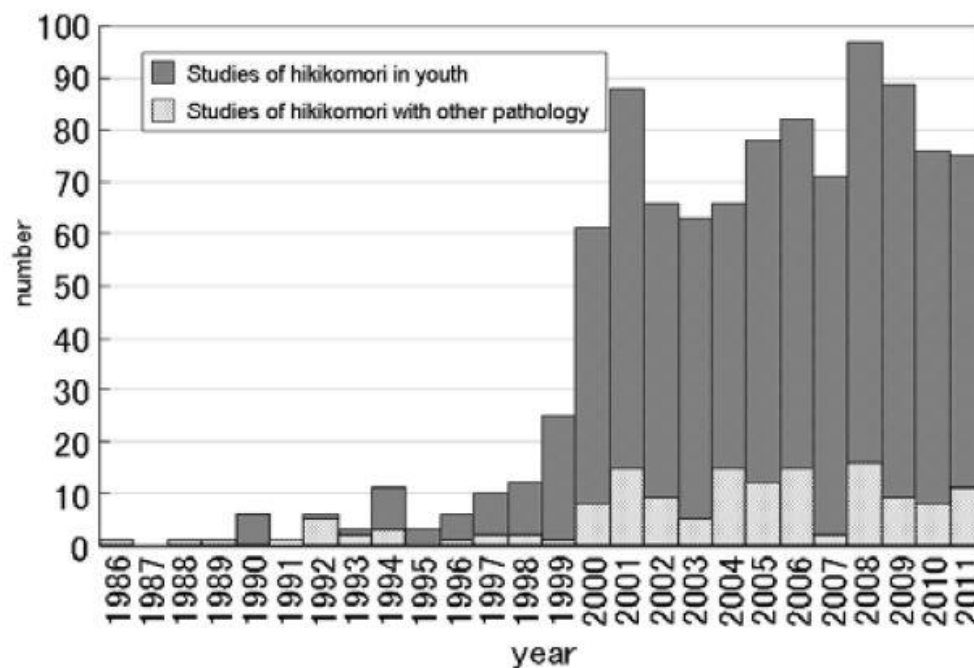
Source: Suwa, M. and Suzuki, K. "The Phenomenon of "Hikikomori" (Social Withdrawal) and the Socio-Cultural Situation in Japan Today". Journal of Psychopathology, 19, 191-198, 2013.

Saitō wrote his first book on *hikikomori* in 1998 published under the title *Shakaiteki hikikomori – Owaranai Shishunki* (社会的ひきこもりー終わらない思春期; lit. Social Withdrawal: Never-ending adolescence), which was translated into English in 2013 as Hikikomori – Adolescence Without an End. In his book, Saitō (Saitō & Angles 2013: 24) established the first definition of *hikikomori*, in which three main conditions had to be met:

- The state of prolonged withdrawal and refusal to participate in social relationships has become a problem by the late twenties.
- It lasts for at least six months.
- No other psychological problem can be identified as the primary cause.

In this case 'non-participation in social relationships' means not having relationships with people outside of immediate family or lacking the means necessary for the forming of intimate and peer relationships. Persons, who refuse to leave their room or house, do so because there is no place they would consider safe outside. This 'safe space' is referred to as *ibasho* (居場所). The length of the withdrawal has also been chosen purposefully by Saitō, as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition (DSM-IV) considers six months as a threshold when considering psychological symptoms. Furthermore, Saitō (Saitō & Angles 2013: 25) aimed to exclude less severe cases in order to minimise spreading unnecessary fear among families dealing with a reclusive family member. He argued that short-term withdrawals are relatively common and should not be considered alarming. Choosing a longer period, on the other hand, could have caused more difficulties with providing necessary treatment. The third condition means that withdrawal does not happen as a response to a primary psychological condition, which often is a cause for withdrawal as the affected individual is unable to integrate into society properly. Any psychological condition is thus a secondary state resulting from the prolonged state of withdrawal and this is what differentiates *hikikomori*. As Saitō stressed, *hikikomori* is not a disease in and of itself, but a state. I will further elaborate on this problem in the upcoming chapters.

It is interesting to note that given the fact Saitō's definition followed his own clinical observations and not a widescale research, there were originally no official estimates included in his first book. However, from 1999 he propagated an estimate of one million *hikikomori* nationwide, later admitting he made up the number based on his observations. Although he received some criticism, this estimate had been considered a fact since 2000 (Horiguchi, 2012: 127). The high estimate prompted other attempts at quantifying the scale of *hikikomori*, however as Horiguchi explains, no official surveys showed a higher number than Saitō's estimate, which, nevertheless, was being widely circulated. Put into perspective, one million *hikikomori* would constitute approximately 1% of Japan's population.

1.2 Defining *hikikomori* – the official view

An official definition by a government department was not issued until 2010, when the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) released policies regarding *hikikomori* for the first time since the appearance of the phenomenon. It reads as follows:

"Hikikomori is a condition of being withdrawn into one's home for more than six months, without attending work or school and having almost no interaction with persons outside of family members including also occasional leavings of the house for activities, e.g., shopping" (MHLW Online 2010).[2][3]

A more comprehensive definition can be found in the Guidelines Regarding the Evaluation and Support of *Hikikomori* (ひきこもり評価・支援に関するガイドライン, *Hikikomori hyōka-shien ni kansuru guideline*) officially issued in May 2010 by the MHLW, which reads:

"The general idea behind the [*hikikomori*] phenomenon identifies situations of avoidance of social participation (school attendance as a part of compulsory education, irregular employment, personal relationships outside of one's family, etc.), which generally lasts for more than 6 months and continues usually in one's household (leaving the house without interacting with other people is acceptable).

In addition, as a rule, *hikikomori* is a non-psychotic phenomenon, in which there is a clear line between states of withdrawal with the existence or absence of schizophrenia symptoms, however it should be noted, that before a formal diagnosis is given, the existence of schizophrenia is, in fact, not unlikely."[45]

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[2] 「仕事や学校に行かず、かつ家族以外の人との交流をほとんどせずに、6ヶ月以上続けて自宅にひきこもっている」状態とし、時々は買い物などで外出することもあるという場合も「ひきこもり」に含める。

[3] Translation taken from the author's master's thesis (The Trend in the *Hikikomori* Problem and its Treatment in Contemporary Japanese Society) submitted to Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia.

[4] 様々な要因の結果として社会的参加（義務教育を含む就学，非常勤職を含む就労，家庭外での交遊など）を回避し、原則的には6ヵ月以上にわたって概ね家庭にとどまり続けている状態（他者と交わらない形での外出をしていてもよい）を指す現象概念である。なお，ひきこもりは原則として統合失調症の陽性あるいは陰性症状に基づくひきこもり状態とは一線を画した非精神病性の現象とするが，実際には確定診断がなされる前の統合失調症が含まれている可能性は低くないことに留意すべきである。

[5] Translation taken from the author's master's thesis (The Trend in the *Hikikomori* Problem and its Treatment in Contemporary Japanese Society) submitted to Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia.

Since then, the definition has remained relatively stable, without any substantial changes to the criteria or phrasing. It is also good to keep in mind that the term *hikikomori* refers to both the individual suffering from the condition, as well as the condition of social withdrawal itself. I will therefore be using the term in both contexts throughout this thesis.

1.3 *Hikikomori* as a social problem[6]

According to Horiguchi (2014: 127), public attention was drawn to *hikikomori* after media coverage of three criminal cases, which took place at the turn of the 21st century, identified the perpetrators as being *hikikomori*.

The first recorded incident from December 21, 1999, involved a young man stabbing and fatally wounding a young boy (second-grade pupil) on the playground of Hino Elementary School in Kyoto. The perpetrator had no connection to the boy and the reason, as stated on a note left at the crime scene, was a grudge he held against the school (The Japan Times 2001 Online).

A month later, on January 28, 2000, the police in Niigata discovered 19-year-old Fusako Sano, who disappeared at the age of 9. She was found in the room of 37-year-old Noboyuki Satō. Satō (then 28) allegedly forced the 9-year-old Sano into his car, abducted her and kept her confined in his room. Sano, too afraid to attempt an escape, gradually conformed. Satō's mother, who lived with him in the house, claimed she had no idea about the girl. Her son had often behaved aggressively towards her, until she finally decided to call a rescue centre. Due to Satō's aggressive behaviour towards the rescue workers, police had to be called, which eventually led to the discovery of the girl (BBC News 2000 Online).

On May 3, 2000, in Saga, a 17-year-old boy hijacked a *Nishitetsu*-highspeed bus bound for Fukuoka. Armed with a knife, he threatened the passengers, eventually fatally wounding one woman. More passengers were injured, and some were able to jump off the running bus and contact the police. The perpetrator was known as a loner and a school drop-out since the age of 9.

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[6] This section on *hikikomori* as a social problem is based on the author's master's thesis (The Trend in the *Hikikomori* Problem and its Treatment in Contemporary Japanese Society) submitted to Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia.

All three cases, while differing in nature, had a common link, which was the identity of the perpetrator as a *hikikomori*. After these incidents, the Japanese media started to report on *hikikomori* more frequently, some of which depicted *hikikomori* as violent and dangerous and piqued the interest of foreign media as well. *Hikikomori* have started to be seen as a potentially dangerous group that needed to be rehabilitated. People who identified as *hikikomori,* were noy given a voice and were 'muted' in the initial phases of the debate round *hikikomori* (Horiguchi, 2012: 128).

Following the turn of events, various support organisations, public and private, started to offer help to families with a withdrawn family member. The MHLW released the initial version of their Guidelines in 2001 (finalised in 2003). Japan's national broadcasting organisation *Nippon hōsō kyōkai* (NHK; 日本放送協会) launched an NHK *hikikomori* support campaign (NHK ひきこもりサポートキャンペーン, NHK *Hikikomori sapōto kyampēn*) and in 2002 Tatsuhiko Takimoto released a novel Welcome to the N.H.K featuring a 22-year-old *hikikomori*, which later became a manga and anime, respectively. Besides these, support organisations lead by parents of *hikikomori* called *oya no kai* (親 の会), became a popular support network for mostly parents, but also *hikikomori* (Horiguchi, 2012). One of the most active organisations is the All-Japan Hikikomori KHJ Parents' Association (*Zenkoku hikikomori KHJ oya no kai,* 全国ひきこもり KHJ 親の 会), which was founded in Saitama prefecture by Masahisa Okuyama, a father to a hikikomori son and became more popular with the growing public concerns surrounding *hikikomori* of the early 2000s.

On the other end of the support network spectrum, are the strict and disciplinarian rehabilitation organisations, which are often referred to as 'violent support organisations' by *hikikomori*. One such example, was a private organisation in the city of Nagoya called *Osada-juku* (Osada Cram School), led by Yuriko Osada (Horiguchi, 2012: 131). This organisation took an extreme approach towards both the *hikikomori* children and the parents. They appeared several times in the media, especially after the outbreak of the panic around the aforementioned criminal cases. Often, the members would forcibly enter the room of a *hikikomori* individual, with the consent of the parents, but often against the will of the withdrawn person. They would then forcibly take the person to their

rehabilitation centre. At least one such incident had been broadcast on TV programmes, where Osada was seen shouting at the withdrawn person and their parents, whom she considered to be the main culprits of their child's situation. Allegedly, she even resorted to physical violence, such as pouring buckets of cold water on *hikikomori* individuals and even slapping them (Horiguchi, 2012: 131). In the school's centre, the re-education of withdrawn youth took place in the form of a strict regime of exercising, studying, and performing various tasks, in order to receive more free time as a reward. Those who failed to complete the tasks would receive a punishment in the form of additional studies.

The organisation claimed that the only solution to teach a withdrawn person how to live independently, is physically demanding work. Osada did not have any licenced psychological education and was thus often criticized by the majority of *hikikomori* support groups for implementing such harsh educational practices. However, Osada's sister, Shoko Sugiura, took the disciplinary approach even further (Horiguchi, 2012: 132). Sugiura was arrested in 2006 after a 26-year-old man died on the premises of the Ai-Mental School (The Japan Times 2006 Online), a non-profit organisation (NPO) that she was leading. The man had been handcuffed as a hikikomori and forcibly dragged from his room to the school, where he was chained to a pillar. He was allegedly kept chained there for four days, including during mealtime. He was found lifeless on the fifth morning by a school worker. The cause of his death was traumatic shock he had endured due to the extreme conditions. Parents who contacted the NPO for help said, that they had no idea about such practices.

The situation around *hikikomori* seemed to have calmed down in the 2010s, until another wave of criminal cases that occurred in a short time, caught the attention of Japanese media and the public. On May 28, 2019, a mass stabbing occurred in Kawasaki city, where an initially unidentified man wielding two sashimi knives injured at least 17 people, out of whom 15 were school children, and killed two – a 11-year-old schoolgirl and a 39-year-old Foreign Ministry employee. The perpetrator was found at the crime scene, lying and bleeding on the ground from a self-inflicted wound to the neck. The man was taken to a hospital, where they confirmed his death. This incident caused a shock across Japan and many investigations as to who the attacker was, took place. Finally, the man was identified as Ryūichi Iwasaki, a 51-year-old unemployed man, who was also a *hikikomori* (Kyodo News 2019 Online).

A few days later, on June 1, 2019, 76-year-old former vice minister Hideaki Kumazawa, was arrested by the Tokyo police. Kumazawa, who used to be an ambassador of Japan to the Czech Republic from 2005 to 2008, had allegedly murdered his 44-year-old son Eiichiro, who lived with his parents as a *hikikomori* (The Japan Times 2019 Online). Kumazawa told the police that his son had threatened him and his wife for years while living a secluded life, unbeknownst to the neighbours. Following the mass stabbing in Kawasaki, Kumazawa grew increasingly concerned that his son's behaviour was reminiscent of that of the Kawasaki attacker and might one day lead to him harming children. On the day of the incident, the son was angered by noises coming from a nearby sports day event and started behaving violently. After a verbal dispute with his son, Kumazawa stabbed his son in the chest with a kitchen knife and then turned himself in to the police. His son was taken to the hospital, where he later died. Kumazawa was sentenced to six years in prison in December 2019, which he later appealed and pleaded not guilty, as he claimed he attacked his son out of self-defence. The appeal was rejected under the argument that the son did not possess any weapon during the incident and thus posed no real danger. Additionally, Kumazawa was found to have stabbed his son 30-times, which was believed to be an intention to kill his son (The Japan Times 2021 Online).

These two cases drew public attention back to *hikikomori,* with some newspaper headlines suggesting a wave of fear following the two back-to-back incidents (Rich, The New York Times Online, 2019). According to Saitō (Rich, The New York Times Online, 2019), the crime rate among *hikikomori* is still very low, resulting in at most 10 cases in the past 20 years. Therefore, he sees no correlation between *hikikomori* and crime and argues that the likelihood of them committing violent crimes is not higher than with the general population. Nevertheless, at least one area of concern has been placed into the forefront in the most recent years and more prominently after the Kawasaki stabbings – the ageing *hikikomori* and their ageing parents, which I will discuss more in the chapter 1.4 Official surveys on *hikikomori.*

1.3.1 Differences and similarities with otaku and NEET

When the topic of *hikikomori* is discussed, two other social phenomena are often mentioned simultaneously and sometimes even interchangeably – *otaku* and NEET.

While there can be a certain overlap among these groups, there are still some crucial differences, which I would like to discuss.

Toivonen and Imoto (2012: 12) discuss how in the late 1980s the term *otaku*, originally a formal way of addressing the second person, came to depict a section of the youth, with a strong enthusiasm for a certain form of entertainment, most often *manga* and *anime*. *Otaku* were initially deemed to have underdeveloped social skills and an unhealthy, almost deviant obsession with their topic of interest. The subsequent popularity of anime and manga in the mid-90s led to a redefining of the term. Gradually, the concept of *otaku* was purposefully re-established to denote an appealing sense of fandom and even became one of Japan's soft power weapons. The closest English equivalent would be the word 'nerd', which similarly started out as a derogatory term and was gradually redefined as a term of group identity (Cross, 2005).

On the other hand, the term NEET (ニ ー ト , *nīto*), meaning 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' and originating in the United Kingdom, gained traction in Japan in the mid-2000s and according to Toivonen (2012: 140) went onto two separate developmental paths – one revolving around public policy-making, while the other, a more symbolic one, denoting a group of people with a shared interest.

In the case of the former, Toivonen (2012: 145 argues that adopting the technical term for NEET was a carefully calculated process of quantifying the part of the youth that deviates from the generally established "normal", which is expected from each individual. Furthermore, NEET is one of the many labels that Japanese policy makers attempted to adopt to address the perceived issue of idle youth not following a 'pre-described' path in life, and one that has been heavily inflated over the years in order to cause a 'moral panic'.

NEET as the social category *nīto,* on the other hand, became a more fashionable label with a strong symbolic meaning. It was first Genda Yūji, one of Japan's most prominent labour economists, who extensively wrote about the youth unemployment issue and based on his own unrepresentative surveys described NEET as unversed in communication skills and self-confidence, and built the pillars of the social aspect of NEET (Toivonen, 2012: 147). The term was then heavily popularised with the 'help' of other actors, and mass media managed to not only help raise awareness, but through unnecessary

sensationalism assert a morally biased view, where unemployed youth were lazy and thus undeserving of any sympathy and help (Toivonen, 2012: 148-9).

When comparing the aforementioned terms to the *hikikomori* phenomenon, it is clear that they all share several common denominators, one of which is the deviant youth that do not follow the imagined "natural" order of events. While neither is exclusive of the other and they can all easily overlap, I want to draw some distinctions among them. While *hikikomori* might, and in fact often do, have strong interests and can thus be simultaneously *otaku,* it is not always the case and it is incorrect to immediately assume so. Similarly, while technically speaking, most *hikikomori* could be considered NEET, the *hikikomori* phenomenon often involves a much deeper inability to engage in labour and employment, connected to the individual's mental health and mental well-being.
I admit that the line is very blurry between these two groups and as Toivonen (2012: 150) remarks, NEET is a more factual and policy-focused successor of the *hikikomori* issue. Since the discourse around *hikikomori* has been heavily medicalised, creating an image of a mentally withdrawn youth, the emergence of the term NEET helped reassess the approach of battling the youth unemployment issue, where the consequences on the economy were reliably measurable.

Taking this into consideration, *hikikomori* and NEET have more overlap, however, NEET has always mainly been framed in terms of non-employment and a disinterest in employment. Moreover, the prolonged social isolation of *hikikomori* might not necessarily be present in NEET.

1.4 Official surveys on *hikikomori*[7]

As a response to the medialisation of the cases, the growing public concern prompted the Japanese Cabinet Office (内閣府, *naikakufu*) to conduct four major surveys with the

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[7] This section on the official surveys is based on the author's master's thesis (The Trend in the *Hikikomori* Problem and its Treatment in Contemporary Japanese Society) submitted to Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia.

results being published in 2010[8], 2016[9], 2019[10] and the most recent in March 2023[11]. The aim was to better understand the extent of the problem, give a study-backed estimate and find proper solutions. Although the three surveys took the same approach of sampling, they varied slightly in execution.

The 2010 survey, consisting of 32 questions in nine sections, was conducted between February 18 - 28 2010, where a questionnaire was distributed to 5000 randomly chosen households and subsequently collected at homes. The targeted age group was 15 – 39 while the research team consisted of clinical psychologists and psychiatrists. The Cabinet Office received 3287 (65.7 %) filled-out surveys and published the results in July 2010. Altogether 59 individuals fell into the *hikikomori* category, comprising 1.79% of all valid returned responses. Furthermore, the 2010 survey distinguished between two sub-categories – *hikikomori* in the strict sense (狭義のひきこもり, *kyōgi no hikikomori*) and quasi-*hikikomori* (準ひきこもり, *junhikikomori*). These two sub-categories were then combined into *hikikomori* in the broad sense (広義のひきこもり, *kōgi no hikikomori*). The final estimate resulting in 69.6 thousand *hikikomori* nationwide was calculated as 1.79% of the country's total population aged 15 – 39, which stood at 38.8 million in 2009. In terms of gender distribution, the majority (66.1%) were male. Another category worth mentioning is the so-called *hikikomori* affinity group (ひきこもり親和群, *hikikomori shinwagun*), where researchers placed respondents, who answered affirmatively to the statement "I understand the feeling of being withdrawn at home".

In other words, this group consists of respondents, who are not *hikikomori,* however, they expressed a positive attitude towards *hikikomori* by understanding their feelings and could thus potentially become *hikikomori*. Here most respondents were female (63.4%).

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[8] A Survey on the Youth's consciousness (A factual survey on *Hikikomori*) (若者の意識に関する調査（ひきこもりに関する実態調査）, *Wakamono no ishiki ni kansuru chōsa (Hikikomori ni kansuru chōsa)*). Cabinet Office. 2010. Available online: https://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/kenkyu/hikikomori/pdf_index.html

[9] A Research Survey on the Youth's Life (若者の生活に関する調査報告書, Wakamono no seikatsu ni kansuru chōsa hōkokusho). Cabinet Office. 2016.Available online: https://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/kenkyu/hikikomori/h27/pdf-index.html

[10] A Survey on the Living Circumstances (生活状況に関する調査, Seikatsu jōkyō ni kansuru chōsa). Cabinet Office. 2019. Available online: https://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/kenkyu/life/h30/pdf-index.html

[11] A survey on Children's and Youth's Consciousness and Life (こども・若者の意識と生活に関する調査, *Kodomo – Wakamono no ishiki to seikatsu ni kansuru chōsa*). Cabinet Office. 2023. Available online: https://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/kenkyu/ishiki/r04/pdf-index.html

Age-wise, most *hikikomori* were aged 35 - 39 (23.7%) and 62.7% of *hikikomori* have graduated, whereas only 18.6% were comprised of school-dropouts. The most common onset age was 15-19 (25.4%) and the duration of withdrawal was in most cases between 1 - 7 years (56%). The most recurrent trigger of withdrawal was the inability to find a job during the job-hunting period or adapt to the workplace (44%).

The 2016 survey conducted between December 11 - 23 2015, followed a similar process, where 5000 randomly chosen households with a focus on age group 15 – 39 and their close relatives. There were 3104 valid responses (62%) and the results were published in September 2016. This 2016 survey contained 5 added questions, totalling at 37 and the same criteria for identifying *hikikomori* were used as in the 2010 survey. Interestingly, one of the added questions inquiring about current work excluded those, who answered that they are engaged in housework and childcare. This affects mostly women, who due to their roles being identified as a housewife and doing household chores are not seen as struggling with social withdrawal and needing help. (Masangkay, The Japan Times, Online 2016; Saitō, Discuss Japan – Japan Foreign Policy Forum 2019 Online).

The total number of *hikikomori* in this study was 49, which corresponded to 1.57% of all valid responses. Again, a combination of sub-groups of quasi-*hikikomori* and *hikikomori* in the strict sense was used, and the overall estimate, based on the number of the population aged 15 – 39 in 2015, resulted in 54.1 thousand *hikikomori*. This survey also considered including respondents, who suffered from schizophrenia, into the total estimate, which would then rise to 56.3 thousand. Again, most of the *hikikomori* were male (63.3%), while the affinity group was mostly female (59.3%). Most *hikikomori* were equally distributed in age categories 20 – 24 and 25 – 29 (24.5 % each, 49% combined), while those aged 15 – 19 made up only 10.2%.

Like in the previous survey, most *hikikomori* had already graduated, and the most common trigger of withdrawal was again a failure to find a job or adapt to the workplace (23%). The most common onset age was 20 – 24 (34.7%) and duration of withdrawal between 1 - 7 years (53.1%). At first glance, comparing the two surveys it might seem that the number of *hikikomori* had decreased between 2010 and 2016. However, it is imperative to note, that the age group 35–39 from the first would have had aged out of the targeted age range during the second survey, which means a number of *hikikomori* older than 39 could have been left out, as many *hikikomori* and experts alike criticised the

decision of the Cabinet Office to not include people older than 39 in the second survey (Takashi K., & Shiori T., Asahi Digital 2019 Online).

Criticism over the limited age range continued over the years until a group of family activists submitted a written request to the Tokyo metropolitan government in July 2018 (Takashi K., & Shiori T., Asahi Digital 2019 Online), asking to remove the age restriction. The Cabinet Office responded to their request by conducting the third survey during December 7 - 24 2018 and released the results in March 2019. Once again, the survey followed the same pattern as the previous two surveys. It was sample-based, targeting 5000 randomly chosen households, but this time the age range was designed to be 40 – 65. They collected 3248 valid completed questionnaires, which represented 65% of respondents.

This time, reasons such as schizophrenia, pregnancy, giving birth, child rearing, nursing, or caring for people were not considered as indicators of *hikikomori*. The final number of *hikikomori* was 47, comprising 1.45% of valid responses. Same sub-categories (strict and quasi) were applied to calculate the total number of *hikikomori*, which resulted in 61.3 thousand, as the total population aged 40 – 65 was 42.35 million in 2018. Male *hikikomori* comprised 76.6 %. The largest age groups were 40 – 44 and 50 – 54, with 25.5 % each, making up 50.1% combined. Understandably, most *hikikomori* had graduated (91.5 %) and around 4.2 % were school dropouts. Interesting results emerged in the section about onset age, as the highest was the age range 55 – 59 (17 %), followed by 20 – 24 (14.9 %) and equally many in age ranges 15 – 19 and 35 – 39 (12.8 % each). This shows that not only did many *hikikomori* age, but people around the age of retirement and those in their late 30s are also vulnerable, as 28% of respondents chose retirement as the trigger, followed by 18 % for job-hunting and workplace adaptation failure, and 16 % for both human relationships at workplace and disease. School related triggers were only present in 8 % of cases (combined). This was also reflected in the results for the duration of withdrawal, where 57.5 % were *hikikomori* for 1 – 10 years, 34.7 % for 10 – 20 years, 29.7 % for 20 – 30 years and 6.4 % stayed *hikikomori* for over 30 years.

If we combine the estimates from the 2016 and 2019 surveys, which is 54.1 thousand 61.3 thousand respectively, we end up with a total estimate of 1.13 million *hikikomori* across Japan, aged 15 – 65. This number resembles Saitō's original non-factual estimate of one million from the early 2000s, however following the result of the third survey, Saitō

amended his own estimate to be as high as 2 million with more than half of *hikikomori* being elderly (Discuss Japan – Japan Foreign Policy Forum 2019 Online). These "unexpected" results prompted a new wave of a '*hikikomori* crisis' in Japan (NHK 2020 Online). One of the outcomes of the crisis is the emergence of the so called 8050 Problem (8050 問題, *hachijū-gojū-maru mondai/hachi-maru-gō-maru mondai*), which describes the subset of ageing *hikikomori* in their 50s, still being dependent on their parents, who are in their 80s (NHK 2018 Online). The issue of this family arrangement lies in the reality that once the parents die, it is not clear who will be responsible for the financial and material support of the *hikikomori*. Additionally, long-term withdrawn individuals often do not know how to report the death of their parents to authorities, which might lead to an arrest, since abandoning a dead body is considered a criminal offence in Japan.

In 2018, a 50-year-old man was arrested after the body of his dead mother was discovered by his younger sister, two weeks after the mother's death. He had been living as *hikikomori* for more than 40 years. The charges were later dropped after the investigation showed that the man tried to call the police, however due to selective mutism, a disorder he had been suffering from since childhood, he was unable to go through with the call (Takahashi, The Asahi Shimbun Online, 2019). In another similar case from 2019, a 46-year-old man who had been a *hikikomori* and lived with his mother, was arrested for abandoning his mother's dead body, who had died over a year ago. This specific case spurred heavy criticism from Japanese netizens, who condemned the crime and accused the man of hiding the mother's death in order to continue living off of her pension (Wilson, Japan Today Online, 2019). In 2018 the dead bodies of a woman in her 80s and her *hikikomori* daughter in her 50s, were discovered in Sapporo. The circumstances of their deaths are not clear, however, since money in the form of cash was found in the house, poverty is not considered the reason for the daughter's death, but rather she did not know how to take care of herself and died (Japan Today Online, 2018). As for some experts, they argue that the issue is going to gradually evolve even further and are talking of the 9060 Problem instead (9060 問題, *kyūjū-rokujū-maru mondai/kyū-maru-roku-maru mondai*), which refers to *hikikomori* in their 60s and their parents being in their 90s (Motoe, The Sankei News 2021 Online).

Finally, in March 2023, the results of yet another survey targeting children and youth, was released by the Cabinet Office. The survey was conducted during November 10 - 25

2022 and implemented a stratified two-stage random sampling method. The sample size was set to be 20 thousand men and women of ages 10 – 39, (sub-divided into 2813 men and women aged 10 – 14 and 17187 men and women aged 15 – 39, with the lower age category of 10 – 14 not considered for *hikikomori*) and 10 thousand men and women aged 40 – 69, covering the combined age range until now. The method of the survey collection combined submitting the responses by mail with submitting them online. The age group of 10 – 39 submitted 8555 valid responses (42.8%), out of which 4279 (21.4%) were submitted by mail and 4276 (21.4%) were submitted online. Here ages 15 – 29 had 7035 respondents (40.9%), where 3264 (19%) answered by mail and 3771 answered online (21.9%). Finally, the age group 40 – 69 submitted 5214 valid responses (51.2%), with 3708 answers (37.1%) submitted by mail and 1506 (15.1%) submitted online. Conditions that were excluded from being considered valid for *hikikomori* were schizophrenia and physical illnesses/disabilities, while pregnancy, nursing/caring for another person, giving birth or raising children, being housewife or a househusband, household help, as well as working from home were considered invalid if the respondent also answered "Sometimes we talked" to the question about having a conversation with someone outside of the family in the past 6 months.

The total number of *hikikomori* across both age ranges was 299, which comprises 2.4% of all valid responses, with 144 *hikikomori* aged 15 – 39 and 155 *hikikomori* aged 40 – 69. Interestingly, the survey states that 86 (55.5%) *hikikomori* were of age 40 – 64, meaning that the remaining 69 (44.5%) *hikikomori,* were aged 65 – 69. Additionally, 58 respondents of both age categories wrote that the reason for their current situation is the outbreak of the 2019 coronavirus infection. The survey also stated, that while it is difficult to construct a definition targeting children aged 10 – 14, since they are considered socially dependent on their parents, 63 respondents would satisfy the definition of *hikikomori* in the broad sense. A total estimate of 1.46 million *hikikomori* was presented by this survey.

Concluding this sub-chapter dedicated to the official survey we can see that Saitō was after all rather close with his estimates on the number of *hikikomori.* The results of the most recent survey also show that a substantial number of *hikikomori* might be aged 65 – 69, which supports the fears that the 8050 Problem and 9060 Problem might be the next pressing issue of contemporary Japanese society.

1.5 Theories on a culture-bound syndrome[12]

Various theories have been proposed as to why *hikikomori* emerged in Japan throughout the years, by both Japanese and foreign psychiatrists, researchers and specialists. Some attribute hikikomori to the 'unique' Japanese culture or the 'peculiarities' of Japanese society.

One of the earliest theories revolves around the lack of *amae* (あまえ, emotional dependency), which was suggested early on by Saitō and adopted by others. According to the initial theory, hikikomori lacked *amae* in early childhood, leaving them unable to cope with emotional confusion and burden, and vulnerable to withdrawal. *Amae* and its verb form *amaeru* (あまえる, to depend on, to act as a spoiled child) are commonly used in Japanese. *Amae* has often been propagated as a uniquely Japanese concept and thoroughly described by a Japanese psychologist Takeo Doi, who dedicated books such as The Anatomy of Dependence and Understanding Amae – the Japanese Concept of Need-Love. Interestingly, Doi does say that all human beings share the same need for emotional dependency, it is the concept of *amae* that is unique to Japanese and makes them more susceptive to the need to be emotionally dependent. Doi, however, is a well-known figure in the so-called *nihonjinron* literature (日本人論, theories on the Japanese).

Writers of this genre often propagate a uniqueness of Japanese culture, the people and their behaviour in contrast to the western cultures. These texts are not objective studies about Japanese society but aim to be received favourably by the wider population (Yoshino, 2007) as a form of pop-sociology. Yoshino (2007) notes, that *nihonjinron* has started to be produced ever since the Meiji era and according to Befu (2001) it started to spread especially after WWII, when the Japanese had to deal with a devastating defeat and the sudden loss of the emperor's divine ancestry and build an entirely new identity through literature and propaganda.

Zielenziger (2007), an American journalist, attributed *hikikomori* to, among others, Japan's collectivism, burst of the economic bubble, rigid education-to-employment transition and a lack of Christian values. When compared to South Korea,

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[12] This section on the culture-bound theories is based on the author's master's thesis (The Trend in the *Hikikomori* Problem and its Treatment in Contemporary Japanese Society) submitted to Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia.

he argues that the country does not have a *hikikomori* problem, due to the strong Christian influence, which aided Korea's process of modernization and thanks to that the society was able to adapt better than Japan. Moreover, South Korea's compulsory military service keeps the young men from becoming *hikikomori*. Unfortunately, as I will discuss later, his argument might easily be invalidated by the fact that South Korea is nowadays battling its own problem of young social recluses and *hikikomori,* not much unlike Japan (BBC 2023 Online).

Teo (2010) wrote one of the first articles in English that closely examined the nature of *hikikomori* being unique to Japan and discussed the various complexities that make it difficult to clearly define *hikikomori* as a medical condition. He then concluded that there is a severe lack of necessary documentation, such as accurate epidemiologic characteristics, as well as cohort studies that would examine the environmental and/or genetic factors in the causality of this phenomenon, and reliable clinical approaches to managing *hikikomori*. Moreover, he considered the phenomenon to be a uniquely Japanese form of social withdrawal, at that point in time, as reports of similar cases in other countries were very scarce.

Kawanishi (2009: 120) further suggests that the *hikikomori* problem should be researched from the viewpoint of interactions within the context of a Japanese family. Kawanishi (2009) argues that it is the family who has the biggest influence of a young person, and it is often the family, who choose to live with the secluded child well into their middle age. This is caused by the parents' belief that the child needs their support, and it is their responsibility to care for them, even if it is only covering the basic needs of the child. According to Saitō's reports (Kawanishi, 2009: 121), he identified that it is most often the eldest son, from a middle- or upper-middle-class family, with highly educated parents. The child is often well-behaved with initially good scholar performance. Overtly dysfunctional families, with cases of domestic abuse or parents divorcing do not seem to be the type of family, where a young person tends to become *hikikomori* (Kawanishi, 2009: 121). While Kawanishi agrees that there needs to be more investigation conducted in the form of international comparisons of clinical data to safely assume that *hikikomori* is unique to Japan, she leans towards the idea that experience of social withdrawal is shared among cultures, however the social and familial responses might bear characteristics that point at ongoing issues regarding mental health and social matters. Kawanishi draws attention to the fact that these aspects are highly stigmatised in the

Japanese society and people will avoid receiving any psychiatric labels with utmost effort. Mental health services are not readily available, which complicates the situation of affected families even more. Still, many people prefer dealing with the label of *hikikomori,* as it implies a temporary state, as opposed to a more definitive label, e.g., a personality disorder (Kawanishi, 2009: 121).

1.5.1 *Hikikomori* cases reported outside of Japan[13]

Hikikomori has long been considered a phenomenon unique to Japan, derived from the quirkiness of the cultural and societal traits that can be seen as a fertile ground for social recluses. However, modern societies of several other countries seem to struggle with the issue of (mostly young) social recluses. So much so, that the term *hikikomori* has also been adopted and used to describe the situation. It is necessary to keep in mind that there is insufficient data to make any definitive conclusion. However, I will briefly describe the situation in other Asian countries, followed by countries in Europe based on the available publications. The father is often absent due to work-related responsibilities or workaholism, causing the mother to become overprotective of the children.

One country that most recently appeared in headlines regarding the *hikikomori* problem is South Korea. In April 2023, several major news outlets (BBC 2023 Online; Lee, J., and KANG, S., The Japan Times 2023 Online) informed about the plans of the South Korean government to hand out 650 thousand won per month to qualifying young recluses, in order to support their recovery into society. According to the articles, approximately 3% (or 350 thousand people) of the South Koreans population of ages 19 – 39 has been identified as *hikikomori.* South Korea has been struggling with rising rates of youth unemployment as well as an ageing society and low birth rate, the latter two also largely affecting Japan's society. Unfortunately, there are not many studies published, or available in English, that focus primarily on the occurrence and prevalence of South Korean *hikikomori.* For further documentation, albeit limited, I would recommend reading Kato et al. (2011) and Wong et al. (2019), who have at least marginally touched on the occurrence and countermeasures applied in South Korea.

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[13] This section on *hikikomori* cases outside of Japan is based on the author's master's thesis (The Trend in the *Hikikomori* Problem and its Treatment in Contemporary Japanese Society) submitted to Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia.

The occurrence of *hikikomori* in Hong Kong was revealed by a study conducted by Wong (2009). Reports of social withdrawal cases closely resembling those of *hikikomori* have been extensively covered by the press since 2004. Wong's study consisted of three phases, spanning from October 2004 until May 2008, in which social workers were recruited to conduct interviews with the respondents. They assessed 252 cases of social withdrawal in individuals aged 13 - 24, where 80% of the studied individuals were male. Low education and a working-class background were the common denominators among the respondents. Other Asian countries that have been included in studies were also China, Singapore, Taiwan, Bangladesh, India, Oman and Thailand (Kato et al, 2011; Teo et al, 2014; Sakamoto et al, 2005; Wong et al 2019; Hu et al 2022).

Interestingly in Europe, Italy – a country whose culture is considered to be vastly different to that of Japan, if not directly opposing it, has been reporting issues with *hikikomori* throughout the recent years. There have been more than 100 thousand cases of socially withdrawn people between ages 14 – 25 reported in 2018. Marco Crepaldi, Italy's leading expert on *hikikomori*, founded a Facebook group called Hikikomori Italia, which then grew into a forum of its own. The forum provides a platform for parents, family members and withdrawn people alike, to seek and share help. According to Crepaldi (2017 Online) no specific culture is more prone to occurrences of *hikikomori*, however economically developed countries are more likely to be affected. A key point, he stresses, is the pressure of the so-called "social realisation", in other words the pressure to perform well in areas such as education, work, fashion, interpersonal communication, likeability and other. The main difference between Japanese and Italian *hikikomori* according to Crepaldi, is that socially withdrawn individuals in Italy are more likely to keep at least some close relationships, such as with their immediate family members. These relationships, however, are often strained by possible conflicts. On the other hand, the Japanese *hikikomori* often completely sever communication with everyone, even with their family members. Orsolini et al (2022) wrote an expert-guided opinion paper on *hikikomori* in the Italian context, studying the potential triggers for social withdrawal in young Italian people. Santona et al (2023) conducted a survey between September 2019 and February 2020 involving 72 volunteers, who identified as *hikikomori.* The survey's aim was to study the relationship between environmental sensitivity, interpersonal attachments and their psychopathology with anxiety and depression.

A number of *hikikomori* cases have been observed in Spain as well (Ovejero et al 2014 and Malagón-Amor et al 2015). A study conducted by Malagón-Amor et al (2015) included 164 cases of social withdrawal from 2008 to 2013 and 190 cases from 2008 to 2014. The evaluation took form of home visits, with patients being mostly male, of the average age of 36.6 years, and in case of females, the average age of 51. Most of the *hikikomori* resided with their families. In the majority of cases, the withdrawn individuals had a history of psychiatric disorders (psychosis, anxiety etc.) and in more than 50% of the cases, a psychiatric history in the family was present. The study also revealed that around 50% of the withdrawn patients had completed higher education. In three cases the withdrawal was not a symptom of a mental disorder, but a personal choice to not participate in society.

In Finland, Husu & Välimäki (2016) from the University of Jyväskylä published a study of Finnish youth identifying as *hikikomori* (hikky in Finnish). In their research they analysed an online discussion forum called Hikikomero (which in literal translation means 'sweat closet'). There, young adults shared their personal reasons for social withdrawal. As pointed out by the authors, previous studies on *hikikomori* usually lack a combined perspective of both sociology and psychology, which Husu & Välimäki considered to be important. This is mainly because they believe that social circumstances have a significant impact on the psychological state of an individual. Simultaneously, one's psychological state affects the choices made in everyday life, thus creating a complex set of interconnected relationships between society and the self. The study revealed that there were around 51.3 thousand young adults between the ages 15 – 29, who were socially excluded in Finland in 2010. A low socio-economic situation of the family, low education level, and insufficient availability of low-skilled jobs were found to be the main contributing factors that increased the likelihood of social withdrawal.

According to the authors, these factors often led to feelings of frustration and alienation. Moreover, three major themes were identified in the accounts of the forum writers. First was a feeling of inadequacy and powerlessness, which was a result of the high demands the society puts on individuals, combined with the individuals' inability to fulfil these demands. The withdrawn persons blamed the high standards set by society and the perceived lack of access to valuable resources. As the second theme they identified a sense of personal failure, where individuals suffering from various psychological ailments or neurodevelopmental conditions, were aware of their own mental health and they sensed

a feeling of inferiority, when comparing themselves to others. This was connected to the individuals having low self-esteem and a negative self-image, which adversely affected their chances of finding employment. In this case, the main cause of social withdrawal was attributed to mental health problems. The third major theme revolved around self-efficacy. Life events, which are out of one's control, often have a significant impact on the sense of control over an individual's life, such as a death of a loved one, bullying, various traumatic events, frequent moves because of parents' decision and even coincidences. Additionally, those in disadvantageous social situations (e.g., due to poverty or illness) may be more prone to find themselves in situations out of their control.

After the British public service broadcaster BBC aired a documentary about Japanese hikikomori in 2002, Saitō reportedly received a high volume of messages from distressed British parents (Furlong, 2008), who reported their child suffering from the same condition. Great Britain has since been struggling with loneliness to such extent, that it led to the creation of a new role for a 'minister for loneliness' (as referred to by the media) in 2018. Saitō later argued that the numbers of *hikikomori* are unlikely to be high in Great Britain, since the withdrawal of (young) people from society more often than not leads to homelessness (Saitō, 2019). According to the British tabloid Daily Mail (2019 Online), there were more than 40 thousand teenage 'hermit kids', who have become reclusive. Other European countries that have reported *hikikomori* on a limited scale include France (Furuhashi et al 2013; Hamasaki et al 2022 and 2023) and Poland (Adamski 2018).

1.6 Investigations into the potential of *hikikomori* as a medical diagnosis[14]

Since this topic reaches beyond the scope of this thesis, situated within the social sciences, I will not delve too deeply into this area, however I felt it was important to include at least a basic overview.

As previously hinted, the possibilities of *hikikomori* being a diagnosable medical condition were discussed at least since 2010 (Teo). Tateno et al (2012) conducted a survey to evaluate the possibility of using *hikikomori* as a clinical term. According to the study,

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[14] This section on *hikikomori* as a medical diagnosis is based on the author's master's thesis (The Trend in the *Hikikomori* Problem and its Treatment in Contemporary Japanese Society) submitted to Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia.

the majority of *hikikomori* are diagnosable by using existing psychiatric terms and implied that it might not be necessary to consider *hikikomori* a new clinical diagnosis, however they close the study with an encouragement for further research, especially in other countries, as the results of the existing research, is insufficient to make definitive conclusions.

Teo & Gaw (2016) then wrote a proposal to study whether the term *hikikomori* could be included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V). Their research consisted of a literature review of electronic and printed material available about *hikikomori*, however, in their findings they concluded that a general agreement is unreachable. Moreover, they emphasised the heavy stigmatisation of words such as depression and schizophrenia in Japanese society, which could lead to popularisation of terms such as *hikikomori*. They further argue, in accordance with Tateno et al (2012), that most *hikikomori* cases can be described by existing diagnoses and the remaining cases that do not fall in any category could then be considered a culture-bound syndrome. They specify the following conditions, which must be satisfied in such a case:

1.   The syndrome must be well defined and discrete.
2.   It must be recognized as an illness within the specific associated literature.
3.   It must be expected within the culture and at the same time sanctioned to a certain extent.
4.   It must be of higher prevalence in societies associated with the given culture, as opposed to other societies.

Finally, according to the authors the official Japanese definitions of *hikikomori* are vague and easily confusing, as psychological diagnoses are excluded as reasons for withdrawal, while offering no alternative approaches. They conclude that more research is necessary and therefore, including the term in DSM-V would be inappropriate.

1.6.1 Introducing the concept of 'primary *hikikomori*'

Another distinction that appears in psychiatric medical journals is the introduction of the so-called 'primary (and secondary) *hikikomori*' category.

In 2013, Japanese psychiatrists Suwa & Suzuki published a paper, in which they highlighted the lack of proper psychopathological discussions on the topic of *hikikomori* in Japan. In other words, *hikikomori* is used as an umbrella term for a wide range of situations, in some of which the withdrawn persons suffer from a multitude of psychological disorders, while in other situations there is no such occurrence. They then proceeded to introduce the concept of 'primary *hikikomori*', (一次性ひきこもり、 *ichijisei hikikomori*) established in 2005 (Suwa, 2005), which refers to the *hikikomori* state without the presence of any psychological disorder. The cases where *hikikomori* is caused, or accompanied, by a psychological disorder thus fall under the category of 'secondary *hikikomori*'、(二次性ひきこもり、 *nijisei hikikomori*). This is an important distinction, as secondary *hikikomori* are able to receive a diagnosis based on already existing diagnostic criteria, which in turn helps determine a treatment and a possible recovery path. On the other hand, primary *hikikomori* have no diagnosable condition, which excludes them from receiving any kind of medical treatment, yet, they are unable to function within society. Additionally, this kind of a classification might help in better understanding the sociological problems of contemporary Japanese society (Suwa & Suzuki, 2013: 194). A visual representation of this type of classification is shown in Figure 2 (on the next page), where the highest possibility for treatment lies with secondary *hikikomori* suffering from anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and affective disorder. Developmental disorders and personality disorders in secondary *hikikomori* have the lowest possibility for treatment and primary hikikomori, as mentioned before, have no possibility of treatment.

Figure 2: Classification of hikikomori
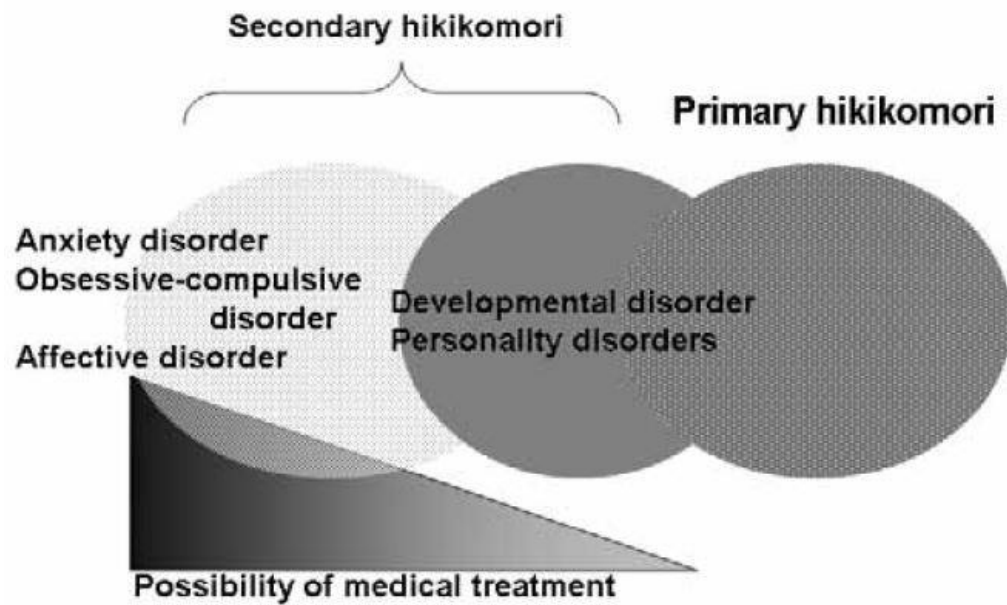
Source: Suwa, M. and Suzuki, K. "The Phenomenon of "Hikikomori" (Social Withdrawal) and the Socio-Cultural Situation in Japan Today". Journal of Psychopathology, 19, 191-198, 2013.

2. Putting the Pieces Together

This chapter illustrates the reasoning behind the chosen data set and methodology and provides an overview of the sense-making process of the available data. I will start with explaining the methodology and research design, followed by the introduction and analysis of the data. I will then present the research results in the following chapter.

2.1 Research context and research questions

Anyone interested in the topic of *hikikomori* is just a click away from an online English article explaining the phenomenon and providing at least one real-life or fictional example of what a typical *hikikomori* person is like. For those who read and understand Japanese, the options are even wider. Aside from online articles, there is a considerable body of literature written about this topic in both Japanese and English, and possibly in other languages as well. However, very few English sources include accounts of a wider array of *hikikomori* experiences and tend to focus on individual or limited-group accounts. This is true not only for (online) newspaper and magazine articles, but also for academic texts, research papers and expert literature. The vast majority of the research is of quantitative nature, based on so-called hard facts and revolves around the psychopathological potential of the *hikikomori* phenomenon, in order to create a clear-cut system of approach to this problem (Teo 2010; Tateno et al. 2012; Suwa & Suzuki 2013; Teo et al. 2015).

The situation is better when it comes to Japanese sources, as the phenomenon has been well-established in Japanese society, where more self-published *hikikomori* literature is available, albeit often locked behind a paywall. Still, a comprehensive overview in the form of qualitative research of a wider array of self-published *hikikomori* media has, to the best of my knowledge, been absent in the body of English language literature on *hikikomori*. This lack is perhaps understandable, given the fact that qualitative research does not provide hard facts and generalisable data. Therefore, by conducting qualitative research on the first self-published *hikikomori* media called *Hikikomori News* (ひきこもり新聞、*Hikikomori Shinbun*) in this thesis*,* I aim to answer the following research questions:

1. What information do *hikikomori* want to convey to the (real and metaphorical) outside world?

2. What messages do *hikikomori* want to communicate among each other, i.e. people with the shared experience of *hikikomori?*

Here, I would like to note that I have informed the Chief Editor of the *Hikikomori News* Naohiro Kimura about my position as a master's degree researcher and my intention to use the magazine for research purposes.

2.2 Methodology

One of the more daunting tasks when designing the research design of this thesis was settling on a suitable methodology. After collecting all the 10 existing issues of the printed/online magazine *Hikikomori News* and briefly familiarising myself with the contents, I came to the following conclusion.

Although the publishers decided to use the word 'news' in the title, it is more fitting to call this periodical a magazine due to its accessible language and due to the inclusion of interviews, personal narratives, stories and even works of creative writing. On the contrary, newspapers are aimed at the general public, utilising a formal, brief, and objective language.

Discourse analysis could have been one suitable way to study the material and research how *hikikomori* are using language to shape their reality and identities. During the reading process I grew increasingly interested in the repeating patterns found throughout the articles, whether these were personal stories of success and/or failure, interviews with *hikikomori* experts and supporters, presentation of available support, or creative works of fiction. However, reading through the articles published in the individual issues, I found that a different approach might be more fitting for this thesis and the available data, which were often very intimate accounts of *hikikomori* life. Due to this diverse data set, I found other methodological approaches to be equally difficult to apply. Narrative analysis is useful when analysing storied narratives, and it would have, in fact, suited some of the storied accounts written in the magazine. Storytelling has been an age-long practice of humans, but according to Lawless (2001: 6-7), telling one's own life story gives the narrator a perspective on their past and future, which helps them "rationalise and justify

[their] shortcomings and [their] bravery alike" (Lawless, 2001: 7). Telling one's own story can also make the person feel empowered. The narrator offers their story for consumption and a reader of the magazine receives it. Analysing the *Hikikomori News* through the lenses of storytelling as empowerment could have been one approach. However, at the same time, a lot of the content did not fit this story-focused approach and omitting the data to fit this method felt counterproductive. I have then started experimenting with content analysis and tried to see whether quantifying the presence of words can give a deeper understanding of the data. Once again, I felt it yielded no significant insight or understanding to this topic, however it did provide me a good overall understanding of the varied data.

Finally, I concluded that a form of thematic analysis might be appropriate for the aim of this research. Upon further consideration of all the possibilities thematic analysis brings to research, reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2022) was chosen as the most suitable approach for my research questions and the understanding of my data.

Reflexive thematic analysis is a theoretically flexible method to develop, analyse and interpret patterns across a qualitative dataset (2022, p.4). It places the researcher's subjectivity, situation, awareness and questioning into the forefront, acknowledges the researcher's active involvement in the knowledge-producing process, and treats it as a valuable asset to the research, which differentiates it from other versions of thematic analysis. For the purpose of this thesis, which is to provide an insight into the first-hand experience of *hikikomori* expressed in a self-published medium, I chose a broadly experiential approach to my analysis. Experiential qualitative approaches emphasise peoples' meanings and lived experiences, their perspectives, actions, and how they understand and make sense of their realities (Braun & Clarke, 2022: 159). Language in this approach is seen as a tool that allows us to see into the psychological and social worlds of other people.

In the domain of theoretical frameworks, I adopted a relativist/constructionist approach. The relativist ontological approach understands reality as a product of human action and interaction, which means that there is no ultimate truth or reality, but there are multiple realities, since they manifest from individuals' and societies' sense of reality. This type of research is not aiming to provide an absolute truth about a dataset, but rather offers an

account of the dataset, as understood and explained by the researcher's informed engagement with the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022: 174). This approach is then closely tied to the constructionist epistemology, which does not uncover knowledge hidden within the dataset, but produces this knowledge by implementing the researcher's skills, techniques, and cultural understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2022: 179-180). My position as a non-Japanese female Social Sciences researcher will inevitably affect the study and its outcome. I am fully aware that my own skillset and knowledge that I bring to this study, is shaped by my social identity, cultural background, and beliefs. It is impossible to accurately convey thought processes and sense-making of other individuals and it is not my aim to attempt that. What I wish to achieve with this study is a glimpse into another side of a phenomenon, a glimpse that I believe can at the very least spur further debates over this multifaceted topic.

2.3 Data

As I have already mentioned in the previous chapters, I conducted this research by analysing the existing ten issues of the first self-published *hikikomori* magazine in Japan called *Hikikomori News.* The periodical started operating as a bi-monthly magazine, with the first issue released in November 2016 and the eighth issue (concluding the bi-monthly release format) published in January 2018. After this, two additional issues were published in May 2018 and October 2018, followed by what could be described as a long-term hiatus, since there has been no official announcement that would confirm the definitive end of the magazine's publishing. The magazine has been accompanied by a website of the same name, releasing extra content in the form of blog posts. These blog posts have continued to be published throughout 2018, 2019 and finally, concluded with the last blog post published in July 2020. Similarly, there seems to be no activity after the last post and the reasons have not been disclosed.

The only way to acquire the issues was to order the printed or digital version of each issue through the designated online web shop of the magazine, which could be found by visiting the magazine's website. To complicate the situation, the purchase would not go through using a non-Japanese credit card, and the alternative payment methods did not work either. I managed to contact the Chief Editor Naohiro Kimura by email, introduced my research and explained that I would use the magazines for research purposes. He was under the impression that foreign credit cards and foreign addresses should work with the purchase.

Nevertheless, after unsuccessfully trying to purchase the magazine issues several times with the help of my friends and their credit cards, I had to conclude that it is not possible to purchase them without a credit card issued in Japan, and possibly a physical address in Japan might have also been necessary. Eventually, with the help of a contact person in Japan, I was able to get access to this data.

The digital version of the magazine came in the form of a full-colour PDF file, with each issue comprising eight full pages, making a total of eighty pages of condensed Japanese text considered for this research. I immediately started with briefly reading through the magazine and noticing the structure and layout of each issue. It was soon apparent that each issue was dedicated to a specific topic, which can be seen in more detail in Table 1, where I list each topic/title in its original Japanese version and provided romanization and an English translation, respectively.

After closer inspection, I determined that the textual data does not fit a definition of a newspaper, but rather a magazine, since there were many articles of personal accounts, narrated stories, and expressed opinions. These varied in nature, some had a positive, optimistic tone, while others were more pessimistic, even dark, and difficult to read without being heavily emotionally impacted (being the empathetic person that I am). These stories often reflected the everyday reality of *hikikomori*, their personal reasons that led them to withdraw and their struggles with employment, interpersonal relationships, education, finances, and mental health and well-being. Apart from stories, there were various interviews with experts, such as Tamaki Saito, Masaki Ikegami (a Japanese journalist focusing on the problem of female *hikikomori),* supporters who offer aid to *hikikomori*, and former *hikikomori,* who were able to overcome their situations and successfully reintegrated into society (and often end up becoming supporters themselves).

Some of the parts, such as the list of all available events across Japan complete with addresses of venues, I found to be irrelevant to the focus of this research and were thus omitted. I also omitted any possible advertisements that did not provide any relevant information. Other than that, I found every article valuable enough to be analysed, and omitted only the minimum of text.

Table 1: List of Available Issues of Hikikomori News		
Issue no.	Title (Japanese romanization) – English translation	Publication date
1.	創刊号 (Sōkan-gō) – First Issue	11/2016
2.	女性のひきこもり (Josei no hikikomori) – Female Hikikomori	01/2017
3.	中高年のひきこもり (Chūkōnen no hikikomori) – Middle-aged and Elderly Hikikomori	03/2017
4.	働くまでのハードル (Hataraku made no hādoru) – Pre-employment Hurdles	05/2017
5.	新しい支援 (Atarashī shien) – New Support	07/2017
6.	ひきこもりの可能性 (Hikikomori no kanōsei) – Hikikomori Potential	09/2017
7.	ひきこもりと家族 (Hikikomori to kazoku) – Hikikomori and Family	11/2017
8.	自助会 (Jijokai) – Self-help Associations	01/2018
9.	親子の溝 (Oyako no mizo) – The Parent-Child Gap	05/2018
10.	ひきこもり・ニートからの脱出 (Hikikomori-nīto kara no dasshutsu) – Escaping Hikikomori and NEET	10/2018

The next step was to ensure that the textual data is easily usable in the analytic process. It was not possible to avoid hurdles in this stage either, as most of the text was written in the traditional 'vertical writing' style called *tategaki* (縦書き) and only a few articles used the current standard form of 'left horizontal writing' *hidari yokogaki* (左横書き).

Using PDF readers did not work well with the files and the Japanese font, which in addition seemed to have a non-unified formatting, most likely to fit certain blocks of text into the desired space. This often resulted in difficulties when highlighting text to be coded or commented on. To simplify the coding process and unify the formatting styles, I copied all the text from the PDF files (which was luckily an option) and pasted them into MS Word files. Luckily, the text read in the horizontal style once pasted, so there was no need to find special converters, or manually change the orientation of the text. Some parts of the text, such as article headers were sometimes only images in the original files, therefore those needed to be manually written instead. The additional advantage to having the text in Word files was the option to add ruby characters (small annotative glosses) above Japanese characters I did not recognize, or which had an unusual reading. This made the Word files significantly more convenient to work with.

After a few initial attempts at coding following the rules for content analysis, which I later replaced with reflexive thematic analysis, I found that the amount of text I was working with quickly became daunting. I needed a tool, where I could have the files all in one place, categorised and easily available. This led me to acquire the NVivo coding software, which significantly simplified the coding process. One last complication I encountered was that NVivo had trouble importing text with ruby characters and ended up completely omitting Japanese characters which had them. Luckily, by creating and running a macro (series of commands and instructions to automate a task) which was designed to find and erase any ruby characters in the text, it was possible to fix the data so that all characters were properly imported into NVivo. Since it was very easy to copy text from NVivo and paste it into an online dictionary, I was able to check the meanings and readings of words I was not completely familiar with.

3. Analysis

After all the data was successfully imported into NVivo, I was able to proceed with the actual analysis following the six phases of thematic analysis designed by Braun and Clarke (2022: 34). These phases are:

1. Familiarising oneself with the dataset.
2. Coding the data.
3. Generating initial themes.
4. Reviewing and further developing the themes.
5. Refining themes.
6. Writing the report.

Following these phases, I first decided to re-read all the data, since my previous reading of the texts were somewhat unfocused. This time I had a clear vision of what the analysis process is going to be like, and I could focus more deeply on how I wanted to work with the data in the following phases.

Next, I proceeded with coding the data, for which I used the NVivo coding software.

3.1.1   Coding the data in NVivo

Creating the initial set of codes was probably the most challenging part of the process. As I did not have any initial theory to test with my coding, the approach was to use the theory generating (inductive) analytic orientation. In other words, the inductive (bottom-up) orientation does not start with an initial set of pre-developed codes. Rather, the codes are developed from the dataset. According to Braun and Clarke (2022: 56) this type of analytic orientation fits the purpose of a project, where e.g., the researcher is interested in experiences, perspectives, and meanings of participants.

However, approaching a set of data with no prescribed codes to look for meant that in the first few articles, I needed to create and revisit codes a few times, before I was able to refine my coding process. Once I became better at identifying meaning in the data, the coding process became faster and more reliable. This way, I created codes while working through each magazine issue, whenever I felt like I identified a new form of meaning. Sometimes, I was able to identify multiple meanings in a single article, while at other

times, large units of text were describable with a single code. Once I had coded all the text, I continued to the next phase of analytic process, which was the creation of initial themes. During this process, I was able to identify some codes that were not necessarily relevant for the project, or different from other existing codes in my code frame. I reviewed the coded text under some codes and, if necessary, re-coded them under a more appropriate or relevant code. This was an easy and straightforward process thanks to the NVivo software. Once I was happy with the final version of my code frame, I continued with the initial theme creation. Initially, I ended up with ten themes, which seemed slightly excessive for a project of this size. I then refined the themes and made some of them into sub-themes of other bigger themes.

Eventually, I narrowed down the number of themes to six, which touched upon the most frequently identified meanings within the dataset. These themes touch upon general narratives revolving around the experience of living as *hikikomori*, available and (un)desirable support, the relationships between *hikikomori* and other people, society or media, the most commonly mentioned reasons of becoming *hikikomori*, and the complicated nature of finding employment. The results of these findings are presented in greater detail in the following sub-chapter.

3.2 Themes

In this section I present the six themes developed from the analysed data, in order of their prevalence across the dataset. These themes reflect their views and their self-views identified from their own accounts. I will discuss each theme separately, providing data that illustrates each theme.

3.2.1 Messages from Behind Closed Doors – Accounts of the *Hikikomori* Experience

One of the most common types of articles across the dataset were the ones discussing the *hikikomori* experience and life. This was often in the form of a personal story, where the author shared their everyday reality living as *hikikomori,* or in other cases, the text consisted of describing emotions associated with the experience. It is important to note that both positive and negative experiences are grouped under this theme. The reason is, that in many cases, some aspects of one's *hikikomori* life were perceived as positive,

while others as negative. Moreover, two individuals describing a similar *hikikomori-*related situation (e.g., spending time home) might have had different emotional responses. Therefore, it did not make sense to divide these perceptions into different categories, as knowing that emotions are interlinked and the accounts of the emotions, feelings and experiences of *hikikomori* are intended to be shared, regardless of their nature.

Hikikomori often expressed the 'necessity for hope' and the 'meaning of the *hikikomori* experience'. There was encouragement to keep one's hope that better things may come their way and that eventually, one will understand the importance of their own experience of suffering, since negative emotions have been most commonly associated with *hikikomori* in this dataset. The following excerpts illustrate how *hikikomori* men saw the connection between suffering and hope, and the importance of a shared experience.

Excerpt 1. (Issue 06 / September 2017)

"Frankl [note: Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist, and a Holocaust survivor] observed two types of people in the concentration camp. There are those who have despaired and lost the meaning of life, and those who have held on to hope and found the meaning of life. The difference between life and death in a concentration camp was whether or not one was able to maintain hope even in a hopeless situation. (…) And in order to have hope, we must endure fear and uncertainty. This is because humans find hope in truly difficult situations. The experience of being a hikikomori is very painful and seems pointless. But the experience of enduring suffering is filled with meaning waiting to be discovered. (…) Just as there were people who shared their bread with their comrades in concentration camps, we should be able to share the meaning discovered through our hikikomori experiences. And I'm sure it will become someone's hope."

Excerpt 2. (Issue 01 / November 2016)

"I would like to make a request to those who continue to be hikikomori. I hope you never despair. The experience always has meaning. I can understand the pain of being a hikikomori because I have experienced being a hikikomori. It can become easier. That's why I would like to share [my] story (…). The experience of pain and suffering may heal someone else."

Furthermore, many *hikikomori* attempted to share advice that they felt helped them navigate life during and after their withdrawal and the process of recovery and reintegration into society, and to help others gain perspective of their situation. For many, the starting point is to accept their current situation, but not give in to pessimistic self-views. The following excerpt illustrates this.

Excerpt 3. (Issue 03 / March 2017)

"I'm sure those involved [in hikikomori] understand that being lonely isn't a bad thing, and it's better to start by thinking that you're not a criminal or a bad person. I don't think you have to go outside, but if you want to change the situation, you have to look at yourself objectively and do it at your own will."

A common accompanying pattern was describing one's own experience of *hikikomori* with no apparent intention that stood out, other than just sharing the individual's story. There were many individual stories about the *hikikomori* life that involved but was not limited to self-values, sharing of voices, attitudes within the *hikikomori* community, family members who were also *hikikomori,* and an appeal to be respected for who they are and the situation they are in. Here are some examples.

Excerpt 4. (Issue 03 / March 2017)

"By the time I first developed hikikomori at the age of 23, just before graduating from university, I had already moved out of my parents' home and was living independently. Since then, I have been a hikikomori on and off in various ways, but the turning point in my life came at the age of 33, when I became a hikikomori for four years starting in 1995. Unable to bear the light and stimulation of the world, I closed the shutters on the windows and retreated into a dark, cave-like room."

Excerpt 5. (Issue 07 / November 2017)

"My [beloved] grandmother passed away. My younger sister surpassed me in school years. I couldn't go back to the fun home I had before I stopped going to school... that kind of despair. I lived a hikikomori life, just going back and forth between my grandmother's room and my own small room. I had food delivered to my room, where the tatami mats had rotted, and I was on the online bulletin board until 7 a.m. I would wake up around 4 o'clock in the evening, play a cruel game, place zombies in the image of my classmates [who bullied me], and deliberately shoot them in the head with a shotgun to vent my anger. That meagre pleasure was all there was to look forward to."

Excerpt 6. (Issue 09 / May 2018)

"The room with the curtains closed gradually became dilapidated, and I went months without taking a bath. My hair, which grew freely, became as heavy as butter, and my body became fatter and fatter."

Excerpt 7. (Issue 02 / January 2017)

"It is important for those providing assistance to respect the "narrative of chaos" and to become a witness to the "narrative of chaos," rather than immediately pulling the [hikikomori] person out of the "narrative of chaos"."

A slightly different form of sharing their own story was focusing on the emotions and feelings that they have experienced while being hikikomori. These were usually negative, however in some cases, positive feelings were attributed with the act of withdrawal.

Excerpt 8. (Issue 01 / November 2016)

"As soon as I woke up in the morning, I began to feel hopeless, consumed by anger, and found it difficult to control my emotions."

Excerpt 9. (Issue 04 / May 2017)

"The experience of being a hikikomori, the condition itself, is embarrassing. I'm worried about what people will think of me."

Excerpt 10. (Issue 10 / October 2018)

"I think it's a good thing that I have a developmental disability and experience being a hikikomori. If I didn't have that experience, I wouldn't be in my current job. Even a frustrating experience can become a story, and the person who hears the story may be saved. I feel happy when I realise that there was a meaning to even the hardships I suffered."

Hikikomori-produced art was featured in several issues. There were poems, comic drawings and fictional stories. Some *hikikomori* managed to direct their experience into art, which helped them feel empowered, bring other *hikikomori* to attend exhibitions and even involve other *hikikomori* in the art itself.

Excerpt 11. (Issue 09 / May 2018)

"Two years after I returned to work as an artist, I held a solo exhibition (...) which was inspired by my own experience as a hikikomori. (...) I made a concrete structure in the shape of a 1-tatami mat-sized house [note: approx. 1.62 m2], sealed myself inside for a week, and then smashed it open from inside with a chisel and a hammer. I put on a gruelling performance. It's an act that could even endanger your life if you make a mistake. During the event, eating, drinking, defecating, and sleeping were all done in that small space. Surrounded by a 5cm-thick, cold, colourless box of concrete, the situation even threatened my life, and it was an expression that conveyed the sense of ownership I experienced as a hikikomori"

Finally, I included two sub-themes under this theme:

(a) Sub-theme It's Not Just Young Men, which included accounts of *hikikomori* who are female, elderly, or identify as LGBTQ.

(b) Sub-theme Future prospects, which focused on the perception of future from the viewpoint of *hikikomori,* which was either hopeful and described a drive to achieve one's dreams, or there were feelings of uncertainty about what is to come.

These sub-themes did not necessarily constitute a large part of the analysed data. However, the significance of the topics made them stand out in comparison to other topics, which were raised throughout the magazine. The sub-theme Not Just Young Men still contained mainly stories or messaged, however the people who communicated these messages, confirmed, that *hikikomori* is not limited to only adolescent males. This is important, since many *hikikomori* are still hidden and left to suffer without access to necessary help. Here are some examples demonstrating the hardships or female *hikikomori,* elderly *hikikomori* and a *hikikomori* person identifying as a member of the LGBTQ community.

Excerpt 12. (Issue 02 / January 2017)

"It is said that women have a community, but in reality, once they are rejected from that community, they have nowhere else to go, although it is not (exactly) a form of bullying. For example, when a woman gets married, she worries about being forced to quit her job and having to give up on the dreams and goals she had envisioned in life because of the man's convenience. After failing at her "debut in the park," [note: bringing one's child to a local park to play for the first time] she becomes scared of the group of mom friends who have children around her age. A woman may (also) become a hikikomori because she follows her husband to a new job and has no friends,

or she is alienated by the Japanese community she is working in overseas and is too scared to go out."

Excerpt 13. (Issue 03 / March 2017)

"When hikikomori of my generation gather the topic that almost always comes up is "Is it okay or not to be found rotten?" In my case, although I am a hikikomori, I do not live with my parents, so I do not have the 80-50 problem, but instead I have the problem of being an elderly person living alone and at risk of dying alone. In fact, there are more and more stories that people of the same age group were found days after death. In some cases, such as death by hanging, we can clearly conclude that the death was suicide, while in other cases, such as death by starvation or overdose, one wonders if the person may have wanted to live. If the hikikomori becomes too extreme, one's physical strength will deteriorate, and one will no longer be able to go to the convenience store to buy food. This is even more urgent in rural areas where you have to drive to a convenience store. Then, the thought of "When will I be discovered?" flashes through my mind."

Excerpt 14. (Issue 10 / October 2018)

"If you gather around a sign that says "Hikikomori," many men who do not belong to sexual minorities tend to gather. If a group of men gather together, a space of communication and relationships between men will be fostered, even if they share the same experience of hikikomori. Simply put, this creates a ``male's society." Women and sexual minorities who have a history of being withdrawn may find it difficult to participate and feel uncomfortable. On the other hand, at gatherings with "sexual minority" and "LGBTQ" signs, people often say, "It's hard to say that I'm a sexual minority," or "I live my life pretending to be a cisgender heterosexual person." Students and working adults who share common concerns but are able to lead daily lives come together. However, although we can talk about the state of sexuality here [note: at ``QueerLoungeH," a community cafe dedicated to sexual minorities and hikikomori alike], it becomes difficult to talk about being a recluse or being unemployed for a long time. Therefore, we needed places, spaces, and gatherings that are designed to be for a combination of sexual minorities and hikikomori."

As for the sub-theme of Future Prospects, each hikikomori individual had their own views, fears and hopes about what future can bring. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of this thesis it is impossible to include all, however, I have chosen two that I felt best demonstrate these sub-themes.

Excerpt 15. (Issue 02 / January 2017)

"In the end, I hadn't "recovered" from being a hikikomori, nor had I gotten over my past. Even if I take medicine, nothing changes except my consciousness becomes blurred. What should I do now? If you would be willing to accommodate me in a "separate (employment) quota" based on my experience as a hikikomori, I would be happy to do so, as I am already tired (of searching for a job)."

Excerpt 16. (Issue 02 / January 2017)

"In the future, I hope to continue holding meetings of hikikomori in places where there is no such organization. On the other hand, I also want to "continue what I have pioneered." I would like to continue "Hikizakura" [note: hikikomori organisation focusing on casual meetings and peer support] and would like to hold it as long as it is deemed necessary. The same goes for the Hikikomori Peer Support Seminar. The future outlook is clearly for "peer support to become widespread." The ideal is to promote recovery for yourself, your partner, and those participating in the party, support each other in the form of peer support, and think about what you can do together. I hope that we can live in a society where such activities become more popular in various places."

3.2.2   A Help in Need, is Not Always Help Indeed

The second most common theme is revolving around support. There are many forms of *hikikomori* support available. As we learn from the stories and interviews, not all support is equally welcome, effective, or desirable by *hikikomori*. Many *hikikomori* expressed that they became disillusioned with society, feeling that they are not seen as an important part of it, but a problem. If this feeling continues in the context of support, it is unlikely that the *hikikomori* situation will improve. In fact, it might strengthen the feeling of alienation in an individual and discourage them from seeking and following further help.

The most common form of available support comes from individuals, who have either experienced *hikikomori* and successfully recovered, or knew someone who was a *hikikomori*. The articles describing where *hikikomori* can turn to for help in need, were often interviews with representatives of support centres and associations, *hikikomori* experts, and former *hikikomori*. Since there were complaints raised that information about available support is not always easily accessible, including various regional and specialised associations together with their contact information, might be a valuable

resource for those seeking help, but who do not know where to start and might not know about help available in their region of residence. Moreover, due to the rising 8050 Problem, which I introduced in the first part of this thesis, there is also information on what are the possibilities for *hikikomori* who remain alone after the death of their parents. These include detailed instructions and an overview of the law regarding inheritance and claiming property of a deceased relative.

Despite a substantial number of options that are available, many *hikikomori* voiced dissatisfaction regarding the currently available support and suggested ways in which these can be improved or changed. In many cases, the advantages of *hikikomori* themselves being the part of the solution has been placed into the forefront of the discussion, due to the fact that they have experience with the condition and the recovery, so their knowledge might aid the successful recovery of others. Additionally, since many of them understand the difficulties of dealing with a rigid societal structure, they might be the ones who will drive societal changes in Japan in the future.

Excerpt 17. (Issue 07 / November 2017)

> *"When a child becomes hikikomori, parents tend to think that it is the child's problem or they blame themselves, but it would be impossible for the family alone to try to solve the problem of hikikomori, which includes problems of today's world. Social problems are originally something that needs to be solved by society as a whole, so families don't have to take responsibility and try too hard. For this reason, I believe that understanding the background behind hikikomori, finding people who can cooperate with you, and thinking about it with as many people as possible will lead to a solution."*

Many *hikikomori* have agreed that a lot of the available support is heavily geared towards finding employment. The support that is desired by *hikikomori* is currently not available. Furthermore, there seems to be no follow up support and long-term withdrawal might put these individuals at a disadvantage compared to their colleagues, which many employers do not tolerate. This way, even though *hikikomori* who end up finding a job, often struggle to keep it, or face various challenges, such as workplace harassment, decrease in working hours, or a termination of their work contract. The difficulties knowing about and understanding Japan's welfare system, as well as the likelihood that *hikikomori* do not fall into any welfare category have been criticised. There were, however, also individuals

who said that they would like to continue the *hikikomori* life, so they would see support other than work to be beneficial.

Excerpt 18. (05 / July 2017)

"Support that follows your path and does not change your heart as much as possible. After receiving consultations on various cases, I felt that this was a common necessity. Traditional support involves changing people's minds to adapt to society."

Excerpt 19. (05 / July 2017)

"A way to stay connected to people in the same place without making going out or working a goal. Even after I started working, I continued to feel intense pressure because I had no outside experience, and I found myself unable to continue working, which led me to become a shut-in again. At my workplace, I suffered from incomprehensible comments about hikikomori, as well as power harassment and sexual harassment. If it's a matter of skill, we can be motivated to strengthen our skills, but this kind of discrimination is intolerable. Even if you have never experienced hikikomori, there are probably many people who are suffering in the same way.".

Due to the insufficient or undesirable support options, many *hikikomori* have started to explore the idea and possibilities of self-help-oriented peer-lead support. *Hikikomori* Anonymous, drew inspiration from the world-known Alcoholics Anonymous and even adopted and adapted their 12-step recovery program material to the needs of *hikikomori.* Moreover, self-understanding has been mentioned as a substantial change for some *hikikomori,* who were able to better control their circumstances, once they accepted their state and became more conscious about how they thought, reacted, and interacted with situations and other people. The next excerpt tells the story of a man, who was able to cure his symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) after he took the time to analyse his own wants and needs, while in the state of *hikikomori*. The excerpt suggests that the man's symptoms were a reaction to the pressures he felt from other people and the society, which drove him to become *hikikomori*.

Excerpt 20. (Issue 06 / September 2019)

"Having come to this conclusion, I took certain steps in a cave-like hikikomori space to confirm my true desires. Due to the limited number of characters, I cannot write about it in detail this time, but after this procedure, the obsessive-compulsive symptoms that had tied up many aspects of my life began to deteriorate, as if they were a lie. It

took less than three days for all the obsessive-compulsive symptoms that had bothered
me for 36 years to disappear. In this way, life became eight times easier to live."

Lastly, forms of support that were absolutely undesirable by *hikikomori* included the following: proposals to getting married (as a woman) to escape *hikikomori,* dealing with the *hikikomori* issue based purely on statistical data and ignoring individual circumstances, using both kindness and abusive language to persuade *hikikomori* to obey rules set by society, pointing out individual failures but not providing any concrete measures, support groups that use detention and violence to discipline and rehabilitate *hikikomori.*

3.2.3   It Takes Two to Tango – Every coin has two sides

It might sound like common sense to say that an individual rarely becomes a *hikikomori* without a reason. More often than not, that reason is another actor in the equation. This actor can be a person, but also society or societal standards at large. The *hikikomori* problem can then be further worsened if mass-media (which is a form of human communication) takes part in creating potentially damaging discourses around the topic of *hikikomori.*

By large and by far, and perhaps not surprisingly, the most commonly mentioned issues regarding interpersonal relationships were those with the parents and family members of *hikikomori.* This is true to such an extent that this topic deserved a sub-theme which I named Parents in the 'main' side role. As many experts have documented, parents often bear a considerable responsibility with their children becoming *hikikomori.* However, it does not end there. This was demonstrated in the stories that *hikikomori* shared throughout this magazine. Stories in which parents exhibited a wide range of behaviours towards their withdrawn children. Some might silently tolerate the situation, while others will go out of their way to find a solution, and others might become abusive or violent. The most common pattern I identified in the data was that of bad relationships between the *hikikomori* and their parents.

Excerpt 21. (Issue 02 / January 2017)
   "In addition, I was always compared to my superior siblings at home. My mother
   praised my siblings who were good at studying, and my father only hung out with

siblings who were passionate about his hobbies. As for me, I was only an upper-middle school student, and no one in my family showed much interest in it. Even so, I kept thinking, "I have to be a good girl".'"

Excerpt 22. (Issue 07 / November 2017)

„I was given a strange mission: "You should get into Hitotsubashi University," and I began studying for middle school entrance exams in the third year of elementary school. If I slacked off in the slightest, my mother would immediately slap me and scream. "If you're lazy, Mom is going to die!" (...) [M]y mother's daily threats of "I'm going to die" drove me to [develop] obsessive-compulsive disorder."

Excerpt 23. (Issue 07 / November 2017)

"My father pretends not to care about the family. Even when my mother is hysterical and throws dishes, he doesn't do anything. I'm grateful that they work and feed me, and that I'm not kicked out, but they don't teach me emotionally and don't take family seriously. I once broke my father's work-computer with a baseball bat, but he only grumbled and didn't fight with me. I wanted him to respond when I expressed my feelings seriously."

However, these kinds of dysfunctional parent-child relationships usually mean that both sides suffer in some sense. This is not to say that any form of violence or abuse is acceptable or explainable, however, as a researcher I do not judge the circumstances of the researched subjects. The fact that parents also suffer either due to their child's *hikikomori* state, or due to their own past or present issues, has been acknowledged in several articles. It is also necessary to keep in mind that *hikikomori* often exhibit violent behaviour towards their parents as well (Except 21).

Excerpt 24. (Issue 07 / November 2017)

"My mother was extremely upset after I stopped going to school completely. She read many books on truancy, and took me to hospitals, counselling sessions, diversionary trips, and other places. Also, she was so worried about me that she couldn't even swallow her food anymore, and she lost a lot of weight. When I saw my mother's smile disappear and her mind and body weaken, I regretted [becoming hikikomori]."

Excerpt 25. (Issue 09 / May 2018)

> *"The day I complained to my mother and broke down the door [to the living room], I actually encountered her weakness. There were many unfamiliar books piled up in the living room. She had read books specialising in hikikomori, and she was trying to understand my mind in her own way. Through that, I also became aware of my mother's pain that existed on the other side of the door. This is "another sense of ownership" as a parent of a hikikomori child. Around that time, I also became aware of her emotional scars as a wife of a husband with whom she could not get along."*

Excerpt 26. (Issue 07 / November 2017)

> *"One day, when I told my father that I wanted to live alone, we got into a fight and he said, "If you want to live alone, get a part-time job and make some money." I avoided my father's gaze and punched him in the chest repeatedly. Normally, I don't hit other people. But I couldn't give up on this moment."*

This kind of mutual suffering is often a symptom of the inability to understand and listen to each other, where both parties want to be heard, but neither is willing to listen. When the parents develop depression or their judgement becomes impaired due to the long-term psychological burden, they resort to often very radical approaches (e.g., violent support organisations). In many cases, *hikikomori* are able to acknowledge this themselves.

Since the parent-child relationship plays such an important role in the development of the *hikikomori* problem, recommendations for parent-child relationships and personal accounts with examples of how this type of relationship improved are offered throughout the individual issues of the magazine.

The second topic which I decided to make into the second sub-theme was The Collective Having Power over the Individual. Here, the outside parties – the society, the government and mass-media have been criticised for having an undesired impact on *hikikomori*. In fact, as the Chief Editor of the *Hikikomori News* wrote on the front page of the first issue, one of the reasons for publishing the magazine was the false image produced by the mass-media, as shown in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 27. (Issue 01 / November 2016)

> *„There are two reasons to share [Hikikomori News] with the world. One reason is that I feel that the mass media is not properly conveying the true picture of hikikomori. The*

hikikomori shown on TV are deliberately portrayed as problematic. As humans who are rampaging around, incompetent, lethargic, and who make no effort. This type of reporting will focus the public's hatred on hikikomori, pushing them even further into a corner. (...) The other reason is that when providing support to hikikomori, I would like to hear more from the people involved. Some media outlets talk about forcing hikikomori out as if it were a good solution. However, the problems faced by hikikomori are not problems that others can force them to solve, but rather problems that should be solved by taking into account the person's way of life and their feelings. Reporters should take seriously the fact that a violent support organisation caused a death. Therefore, in Hikikomori News, we would like to convey the voices of those involved so that support that respects their wishes can be expanded."

Society and societal structures often do not support individuals who fall out of the established educational and professional models. In addition to that, mass media are able to pick up on problems and by using sensational titles and fearmongering can negatively affect and inflate the perception of a problem. When the problem becomes pressing enough, the government might intervene by conducting various surveys and research, in order to find solutions. However, if done hastily and without proper consideration, these fail to achieve any beneficial outcome.

Excerpt 28. (Issue 04 / May 2017)

"It is said that there is no concept of mistouch in jazz. Even if the music is not played according to the score, the difference is the taste, and the same goes for the singing voice. If that is the case, even if you deviate from society and live in different ways, it's not a mistake, it's a human taste, and I want society to change to a place where each person can say," There are different correct answers"."

3.2.4   Sometimes it Starts with a Bang, Sometimes with a Whimper – Not all *hikikomori* start out the same

Some *hikikomori* endure severe psychological trauma prior to withdrawing from society. Reading through their stories one can easily understand their desire to hide from the painful reality, especially if they have no access to adequate support. In other cases, the reason behind one's *hikikomori* might seem trivial and less impactful when compared to other stories. Yet, it almost never depends on the intensity of the negative experience that precedes the *hikikomori* onset, and the result can be the same.

In an interview included in the first issue of *Hikikomori News,* Tamaki Saitō, the 'father' of the more modern version of *hikikomori* who has played an important role in the recognition and treatment of the issue in Japan, revealed that he thinks that what leads an individual to become *hikikomori* is "just a coincidence".

Excerpt 29. (Issue 01 / November 2016)

„[...]"**Interviewer"**[15]: *What is the difference between people who can't shut themselves in even if they want to and those who shut themselves in?*

Saitō: *I think it's just a coincidence. (...). The trigger might be that you happened to get into a bad school, or that you happened to be bullied there, or that you just happened to fail an entrance exam. I think it's a small trigger. Even after a child finds themself caught (in hikikomori), if their parents don't understand them and they keep nagging them every day or pushing them into a corner, [the child] can't get out of it. However, I think there are many cases where, if you show understanding and give them enough rest and encouragement, things may not get serious. (...) [I]t's a combination of many factors, such as the attitude of my parents, what kind of school I went to, what kind of place I was in, etc., so to put it simply, it can only be described as a coincidence. I don't think that my childhood experiences have an influence on me at all. Although it is statistically true that there are many introverts, it is common for people to be sociable. Therefore, there is no way to raise a child without [them possibly] becoming withdrawn. Honestly speaking, if your parents knew the concept of hikikomori and told you every year when you were around 2nd or 3rd year of junior high school that they would only take care of you until you were about 25 years old, I don't think you would have become a hikikomori."*

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word coincidence as "the occurrence of events that happen at the same time by accident but seem to have some connection".[16] The Cambridge Dictionary defines coincidence in a slightly more nuanced way as "an occasion when two or more things happen at the same time, especially in a way that is

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[15] The name of the interviewer was omitted due to my personal policy, which I follow consistently.
[16] Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Coincidence. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved November 09, 2023, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coincidence

unlikely and surprising".[17] If becoming *hikikomori* is only a coincidence, then that means that there is no pre-existing pre-disposition in people; no one is born to become a *hikikomori*. Hikikomori can happen to anyone and all it takes is just (a series of) unfortunate coincidences. Some *hikikomori* might find solace in knowing this, while for others, acknowledging this reality, does not change it. This is illustrated in the following example written by a Japanese *hikikomori* living outside of Japan.

Excerpt 30. (Issue 02 / January 2017)

"I have lived overseas for about 20 years. Living in another culture is fundamentally different from travelling [there]. As long as you are a visitor, you can be forgiven [for mistakes], but when you step into the same arena as the locals, in other words, when you become a resident, it is a different story, and a harsh reality awaits you. Although I had to overcome many small ups and downs, I never thought I would become a hikikomori in the middle of my life, having lived my daily life without having to suffer from any major cross-cultural adaptation problems. I'm not particularly talented, I'm just an ordinary person, and I didn't move to this area with any ambitions. Long story short, I drifted away and found myself living in a place far away from Japan, but considering how unprepared I was, I was able to adapt to life in a foreign country surprisingly well. I'm basically an introvert, but I was also able to act extroverted. Where on earth did my younger self, so curiously and bravely taking on life, go? I can't believe that the person I am now is an extension of who I was then. My current self is just trying to protect myself, like an injured animal retreating to the depths of the forest. That's why I was deeply convinced by the interview with psychiatrist Tamaki Saitō in the first issue of Hikikomori News. The difference between becoming a hikikomori and not being a hikikomori is the phrase "coincidence". In my case as well, a number of "coincidences" came together. Three miscarriages, domestic violence from my husband, separation, estrangement from my mother, work stress, interpersonal relationships at work, being a minority, losing a close friend, power harassment at work, etc. All these things are intertwined to create the current situation. If this was the result of "coincidence," then if there had been at least one person at work with whom I could express my true feelings, would I have ended up that cornered? If my husband wouldn't comment on me at that time, would it have been such a big deal? …Maybe. Maybe it wasn't. What is clear is that even if it was this way or that way, it doesn't change anything."

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[17] Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Coincidence. In Dictionary.Cambridge.com dictionary. Retrieved November 09, 2023, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/coincidence

The coincidences in life can take on different forms for different people and what causes distress to one, would not necessarily trigger the same result in another. The following individuals experienced very different paths before they became *hikikomori*. From a combination of a disability and an inability to adjust to work-life to suppressing thoughts of extreme violence to finding oneself in a whirlpool of a natural disaster, an act of domestic terrorism, loss, and betrayal. The spectrum is wide, but the outcome is the same.

Excerpt 31 (Issue 10 / October 2018).

"I became a hikikomori after I got a job. Due to my developmental disability, I had trouble adjusting to my company and work, and for the first time, I became a hikikomori. Until then, I had believed that I had nothing to do with hikikomori, and that I was a strong person. So, I never even imagined that I would become a hikikomori."

Excerpt 32. (Issue 03 / March 2017)

"The main reason for my withdrawal was to suppress my murderous intentions towards my grandmother. It was the day before the National Centre Exam for University Admissions. My grandmother fired the first shot by saying "I was afraid to be with you,". All of her long-held grudge against my late grandfather [note: her husband] was poured onto me. I became the living dead to prevent that murderous intent from running out of control."

Excerpt 33. (Issue 06 / September 2017)

"From the outside, I appeared to be a man who was very active and moved around a lot. However, the interior was in such disarray that if there was just one more trivial trigger, it would collapse immediately. Eventually, 1995 came. After receiving four consecutive blows: the Great Hanshin Earthquake, the sarin gas attack on the subway, the death of my mentor, and my fiancée's affair, I sank into the ring of life and developed full-scale depression for the third time. I was too scared to go out, couldn't answer the phone, and completely isolated myself from society."

Sometimes, life circumstances that are out of control push people into developing psychological disorders. Other times they are born with them. In the case of *hikikomori,* their withdrawal was often triggered by disorders, which according to them can completely overtake one's mind and actions and cause them to be blind to anything else.

Excerpt 34. (Issue 09 / May 2018)

"At first, I lied [to my boss] and said, "my child had a fever" and was absent from my job. That lie didn't last long either. After that I became unwell and could no longer see my children. I didn't want to admit that I had "childcare neurosis" even though I was told so. My husband said I should go to a psychiatrist, so I went to the hospital with my mother. I was diagnosed with "manic depression" and took several days off from work. I was no longer able to work as a nurse and became a shut-in at home. I returned to my parents' home, where I remained in agony for four and a half years."

Excerpt 35. (Issue 06 / September 2017)

"After my obsessive-compulsive symptoms were cured, I realised that the mental illness I had been suffering from for many years was not my illness, but a family illness caused by the mother-child relationship and family structure, so I decided to consult a psychiatrist who specialises in family therapy. However, another thorny road awaited me from there. I am still fighting."

Lastly, traumatising experiences from school years contribute as a trigger to many cases of *hikikomori,* as well. Being the target of attacks, bullying, and even sexual harassment has caused a lot of damage to some individuals, who shared their stories. Unfortunately, a lack of proper reaction and support from the necessary actors did not alleviate the traumatic experience at all and, in fact, made it worse.

Excerpt 36. (Issue 09 / May 2018)

"When I was in the 6th grade of elementary school, each group had to divide up the preparation of ingredients for a cooking class. However, a friend of mine from the same group ordered me to buy all the materials. (...) I was unable to express my feelings to my friends, so in the end I ended up being the only one buying the materials. When my mother complained to the school about this, I was harassed by the home economics teacher. He told me in a strong tone, "Don't tell your parents everything about what you're doing at school! Do you know what will happen if you do?" and he locked me in the home economics room to "reflect." After I got home, I cried in my grandfather's room. My mother heard about this from grandfather and contacted my teacher. However, the school only replied, "That is not true." After that incident, I didn't want to go to school."

Excerpt 37. (Issue 10 / October 2018)

> *"I think I've been scared of people and timid ever since I was little. I did not fit in well in (...) kindergarten and school. When I was in the 5th grade of elementary school, a classmate touched my lower body in the bathroom during forest study. I think I told my mother about it the night before the next seaside school or something. As I kept crying and saying, "I don't want to go," my mother asked, ``What happened?'' and I eventually pointed to my lower body. I don't remember saying anything that seemed to acknowledge anything, but I think the crying got stronger at that time. All my mother said was, "I see." (...) That was the only time I ever talked to my parents about anything related to sex."*

This theme has demonstrated that *hikikomori* can be triggered by a lot of different circumstances, in vastly different settings and it can happen to people of various backgrounds and ages. It can even happen outside of Japan, far away from the society, which has been deemed as the source of *hikikomori* by some (Zielenziger 2006). There is no single starting point and perhaps the generalising of the triggers is one of the reasons that *hikikomori* cannot receive adequate and necessary help.

3.2.5   No Longer Human

One distinct aspect that appeared in several articles, was the feeling that *hikikomori* are not seen as human beings, since they do not contribute to the society. This can be seen when their existence is erased by their family in order to avoid negative judgement, or when questionable support groups emerge and under the pretence of solving the problem of the individual and the society, resort to violent approaches, that often balance on the edge of denying basic human rights from *hikikomori*.

Excerpt 38. (Issue 01 / November 2016)

> *"Some private organisations that claim to "definitely make hikikomori independent" use violent methods such as barging into a room with their shoes on, forcibly taking the person out, and locking them up in a facility's dormitory for work training."*

Excerpt 39. (Issue 03 / March 2017)

"[…]"Interviewer"[18]: Some organizations that support hikikomori by violence often visit the hikikomori, drag them out of their rooms, force them do some work, and call it ``participation in society.'' Don't you think it's a nuisance?

[…]"Respondent"[19]: This problem is more than just a nuisance. If that happened to me, I would choose death to escape. In order to escape from such a situation, and I'm not joking, I'd think ``I have no choice but to die.'' Just thinking about it scares me."

However, this can also be an internal feeling of a withdrawn person, who feels that there is no meaning to their own life and the only reasonable thing is death. Suicide attempts and suicide ideation have been mentioned in several articles. One might feel that they fundamentally failed as human beings and members of the human society and therefore, they do not deserve to live a life.

Excerpt 40. (Issue 06 / September 2017)

"Since I don't go out, I don't get hungry much. However, when I stand up, I feel dizzy, so I know that my physical strength has weakened. Still, I don't feel like taking any action. If I'm going to weaken and die like this, that's fine. Whether I become homeless and thrown out on the street, or am found dead and rotting, it's all fine either way."

Excerpt 41. (Issue 07 / November 2017)

"My health was getting worse and worse. I was always cold and shivering, and my world was spinning due to nausea and dizziness. On bad days, I had difficulty walking and had to crawl on the floor. Several illnesses, including polyps, were also found in my body. I felt hopelessly anxious every day, my desire to commit suicide grew stronger and stronger each day, and I felt that death was getting very close."

Several *hikikomori* have been living hidden away, either by their own families, or by the fact that their circumstances were not considered to be *hikikomori,* as I have mentioned in the chapter discussing the official surveys, which excluded people doing housework and child-rearing. Living isolated can cause a lot of emotional (and physical) pain by itself, as documented by several examples until now. However, having one's existence hidden and forgotten brings another layer of suffering to the table.

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[18] The name of the interviewer was omitted due to my personal policy, which I follow consistently.
[19] The name of the respondent was omitted due to my personal policy, which I follow consistently.

Excerpt 42. (Issue 07 / November 2017)

"While I was a hikikomori, I was made to swap rooms with my brother and was given a smaller room. I was told not to open the shutters so that the neighbours wouldn't notice, and I gradually lost all desire to go outside. If I had changed my environment sooner, I might not have become a hikikomori for so long."

Excerpt 43. (Issue 02 / January 2017)

"In the first place, she was hidden from her family as a "household help", and she herself was unable to realise that she was in a "hikikomori" state. I couldn't see the hardship and pain these women were experiencing."

When it comes to society and interacting with others, being (potentially) perceived as less than human was not an uncommon occurrence throughout the articles. This feeling might have been sparked by knowing that one is not fulfilling the expectations of society, but also when these "expectations" were being fulfilled at a much later age than what is considered conventional. These situations can further lead to feelings of existential dread, being of no value, or having to hide one's real self and pretending to be following the conventional route. And it seems that their fears are often grounded in truth, as we can see from many problematic practices that were done to some of the *hikikomori*.

Excerpt 44. (Issue 04 / May 2017)

"Paradoxically, no one is in a better position to understand the high value of labour than a hikikomori. I have been under so much pressure from society that if I don't work, I am not a human being. Working is more than just earning money; it depends on whether you are recognized as a member of society. Labour acts like an invisible family register, and those who are not working are treated as if they were lower-class citizens."

Excerpt 45. (Issue 08 / January 2018)

"I somehow thought that once I entered university, I would become normal. I hadn't attended school since elementary school. There were carefree questions directed at me, who was nervous right after I entered the school. Just your regular funny guys and straight guys. It was a healthy world filled with bright laughter. My friends often asked me questions like, "What was your time like in high school?", "What do you want to be in the future?", "What do you like?" If you tell them your age, they'll start talking about the past. I kept my background a secret and talked to them like everyone else. I pretended to be healthy."

Excerpt 46. (Issue 04 / May 2017)

"The thoughts that I was no longer a normal person, that I was truly the worst kind of person, and that people like me would live and die without anyone looking back at me, were running around in my head."

Excerpt 47. (Issue 08 / January 2018)

"The most common problem faced by mentally ill people and hikikomori is the lack of an advocate (rights defender). Just as mentally ill people who were hospitalised without their consent have remained incarcerated due to the detention system since the 1950s, there are cases in which hikikomori individuals, who escape from the facility where they were detained, are brought back and continue to be incarcerated."

Many (if not the majority) of *hikikomori* in this dataset feel the pressure of having to work. However, does the reality of searching for a job reflect the desired outcomes? With this question, I introduce the final theme of this analysis.

3.2.6 A Wild Work Chase

Among other problems that *hikikomori* are often paired with is their non-partaking in work life. One of the most pressing issues presented by Japanese policy makers is the potential burden on the welfare system, that will soon have to take care of *hikikomori* whose parents will die of old age (Saito, Discuss Japan – Japan Foreign Policy Forum Online 2019). Without any help, these *hikikomori* face what is called 'lonely death' in Japan. One of the many ways to combat this, is to reintegrate *hikikomori* into society and help them find employment. However, finding employment is not the same as staying employed and various circumstances might make it difficult or even impossible for *hikikomori* to find stable employment. The rigid recruitment system and distrustful nature of employers often drive *hikikomori* who wish to find employment to questionable employers, where they are not protected from further bullying, harassment, or other forms of discrimination.

Excerpt 48. (Issue 04 / May 2017)

"I'm worried about whether there will be violence while working. I have actually experienced physical and mental violence. This often happens in the restaurant industry. I once had a basket of dishes thrown at me."

Excerpt 49. (Issue 02 / January 2017)

"No matter how hard I tried, nothing changed... Time passes. Like when I was a shut-in. At that time, the year just passed quietly in my room. But even as I work, things pass by without me seeing anything. Almost every day, people yelled at me, ``You don't remember anything! You're terrible as a working adult!'' and I was shaken to the core. To make up for the pain, I would drive an hour to Shinjuku after work and grab a beer at a coffee shop just before it closed."

Many *hikikomori* have spent so much time in isolation from the outside world, that their social skills and ability to interact with other members of society are often noticeably reduced compared to their peers (or compared to a level that is expected of a person of a certain age). This can create further difficulties as long-term *hikikomori* have a disadvantage and are vulnerable to the forces of the outside world. Not only can the self-esteem and self-value of *hikikomori* be severely damaged, but it is also when *hikikomori* individuals try to reintegrate back into society, that they often find themselves disillusioned by the encountered hardships. Searching for a job itself can cause distress to *hikikomori* and it does not seem to guarantee that the surrounding people are able to provide the necessary support and acceptance. As we can see from the following examples.

Excerpt 50. (Issue 04 / May 2017)

"The hiatus of withdrawal makes you lose confidence. I couldn't go to work because I felt intimidated by the challenge of being placed on the same level as someone who had worked a lot."

Excerpt 51. (Issue 04 / May 2017)

"" What have you been doing so far?" the manager asked during an interview for a part-time job at a convenience store. "I was a hikikomori for seven years," I answered honestly, and the expression on his face was a little strange. It was like the facial expression in the moment you pull out the Old Lady card in the Old Lady (card game) [note: the one who's left with the Old Lady card at the end of the game loses]. Even when I told him that I seriously wanted to return to society, he became more suspicious. Even if you consult with a dispatched career counsellor, the result is still the same. As a career counsellor, they offer superficially positive words such as, "Please look forward to being hired." However, they speak in a way that sounds like they have

something stuck in the back of their teeth, and their face looks like they had bitten a bitter insect. The results are obvious."

Power harassment experienced in the workplace had a detrimental effect on a number of *hikikomori,* who shared their stories about the various hurdles on the road to employment. Their vulnerability, inexperience and possible disability has been used against them, possibly even intentionally. Long (power harassment) story short, the end is rarely happy.

Excerpt 52. (Issue 04 / May 2017)

"One day, when my first instructor made a mistake, he used someone else to put the blame on me. In response, he said, "No matter how hard I try, it's always going to be my fault!" He couldn't stand it anymore and became angry, which almost caused a problem. Even if something is wrong, you can't give your opinion, you just get scolded one-sidedly. I think it's because of my background, and I feel even more isolated. After this happened several times, the company told me to either become part-time or resign. I couldn't think of anything else but to retire."

Excerpt 53. (Issue 06 / September 2017)

"Regarding employment (quota) or persons with disabilities, I had been working in that (quota) capacity for nearly five years. I quit because I was subjected to power harassment. (…) After the shock of power harassment, I felt suicidal and wanted to jump under a train. I couldn't even get up from the bed anymore. My body felt heavy. It's like the gravity works different for me."

What if there is no harassment or bullying after *hikikomori* with disabilities join a workplace, but the workplace itself does not acknowledge this, or accommodate the needs of a disabled person? Can the person in question truly be expected to perform as well as any other member of the same workplace? Japan is generally known for having a very demanding work life, where overwork is not uncommon. However, it is also generally known that prolonged or frequent overwork can cause serious health issues even in healthy individuals. Take the following excerpt.

Excerpt 54. (Issue 10 / October 2018)

"After I started working, I suffered from panic attacks due to overwork. Panic disorder is when, when you find yourself in a situation where you cannot escape immediately, such as riding a train, you are attacked by a strong sense of anxiety, such as heart palpitations, chest pain, and difficulty breathing, as well as thoughts such as, "I can't

escape. I'm going to die." (Panic attacks) are a type of mental illness. After I retired, my symptoms went into remission for a while, and there was a time when I was able to work again."

Luckily for this person, removing themselves from such an environment seemed to alleviate the symptoms of panic attacks. However, this again demonstrates that *hikikomori* are subject to severe instability when it comes to employment. There is never a guarantee that a job found is a job kept, therefore the job hunt seems like a never-ending cat and mouse chase. Or perhaps it's like an Ouroboros, the ancient symbol of a snake eating its own tail representing the eternal circle of destruction and rebirth, where the snake (*hikikomori*) eternally biting its tail (permanently trying to find a job) is a positive sign. However, we fail to ask the snake whether it is in pain. On the positive side, there are occasions when *hikikomori* were able to find a job they were happy with. Just recall the example of the man with a development disorder in Excerpt 10 who was happy to have experienced *hikikomori,* as it led him to his current job. Unfortunately, the stories of unsuccess still outweighed the happy stories.

4. Discussion

In this thesis I aimed to analyse the own voices of *hikikomori* presented in the self-published magazine *Hikikomori News* and to answer the two research questions posited at the beginning of this research, which were:

1. What information do *hikikomori* want to convey to the (real and metaphorical) outside world?

2. What messages do *hikikomori* want to communicate among each other, i.e. people with the shared experience of *hikikomori?*

I will discuss the results of the analysis in the context of the status quo in the following subchapters. I will also discuss specific areas, where including *hikikomori* voices have the potential to bring improvements.

4.1 Where do *hikikomori* stand in their own play?

The reality around *hikikomori* has come a long way since the initial observations by Tamaki Saitō in the mid-90s. The phenomenon was once considered a problem involving mainly Japanese males trapped in a circle of never-ending adolescence (Saitō, 1998). It did not catch the attention of the public and mass-media until the beginning of the 2000s when a series of reports about *hikikomori* men committing crimes surfaced throughout Japan. The public was shocked and the fearmongering spread by the media created a fear of young mentally ill and unemployed men, who could be a danger to society (Horiguchi, 2012). As expressed by *hikikomori* in their analysed stories, the fear of being considered a criminal or a bad person, based on this media-created fear of *hikikomori*, had substantially hindered their willingness to reintegrate back into society. Mass-media have been criticised in *Hikikomori News* by both *hikikomori* and Tamaki Saitō for failing to provide an accurate depiction of *hikikomori.* The lack of including *hikikomori* and their own voices in the early discourse was criticised already in the early 2000s (Horiguchi 2012) and by reading the self-published magazine, it is clear that one of the main aims of the magazine, was to bring forth their own voices and offer them a channel to express their views, emotions and individual circumstances. Interestingly, Saitō seems to have a strong trust among *hikikomori,* being mentioned and referred to by several individuals accounts throughout the magazine.

4.1.1   The Absent Lead Character

In 2010, the MHLW of Japan responded to the public outrage by issuing an official definition and guidelines on how to tackle the rising problem. This moment cemented the *hikikomori* phenomenon as one of Japan's new social problems (Horiguchi, 2012). Soon, private-sector youth support organisations started to appear on the scene, with many having their own ideas about curing these so-called dangerous young men. Parents, self-proclaimed experts, and even non-experts tried to take matters into their own hands and find a solution for this 'shameful' phenomenon. However, especially in these early stages, the voices of *hikikomori* were ignored, and often cruel and violent tactics have been used to remove *hikikomori* from their homes and forcefully rehabilitate them (Horiguchi, 2012). The violent support organisations especially, were condemned by *hikikomori* in the analysed materials, as they felt these organisations have failed to handle them with respect and dignity, when forcefully removing them from their homes. Based on the accounts of *hikikomori,* private sector youth support organisations, no matter how good their intentions, often seem to fail to fully understand the needs of *hikikomori* when assisting them with their reintegration. While there might be exceptions to this, it seems to be dangerous that they are largely unregulated, and free to adopt almost any form of rehabilitating techniques. Several leaders of such organisations were found to lack any knowledge or skills necessary to qualify as an adequate expert on this issue (Horiguchi 2012). Surprisingly, while there seemed to be a strong opposition towards these organisations expressed in some issues of the magazine, not many *hikikomori* who were featured in *Hikikomori News* have had personal experiences with such organisations, but often referred to known medialised cases. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that for a small percentage of *hikikomori,* such interventions might have "helped" them to turn their situation around. Still, violence is a highly questionable approach, which cannot be left unaddressed forever.

In 2010 the first official survey on *hikikomori* aged 15 – 39 conducted by the Cabinet Office saw the light of day and quantified the problem, which only saw estimates of up to 1 million *hikikomori* being thrown around by some of the experts on the topic (Saitō, 1998). The first survey revealed that 69.6 thousand people were living a reclusive life amidst the Japanese society. Six years later, the second survey was conducted, following the same procedures for the most part. Initially, the second survey brought positive news, as the number of *hikikomori* aged 15 – 39 was found to have decreased to

54.1 thousand. These results were, however, followed by fierce criticism, as the survey creators failed to acknowledge that in 6 years, many *hikikomori* simply aged out of the surveyed age-range and were thus forgotten. *Hikikomori News* featured an article which addressed this problem as "erasing their existence". However, since the magazine was actively issued only between 2016 – 2018, there were no more reflections on the official surveys.

In 2019, a follow up survey was conducted, which focused exclusively on *hikikomori* of ages 40 – 65. The survey resulted in 61.3 thousand middle- and old-aged *hikikomori,* which not only confirmed the initial estimates of 1 million but brought a new side to the entire problem – ageing *hikikomori.* This was further reflected in the results of the most recent survey released in March 2023. Meanwhile, criticisms that the surveys ignored individuals who perfectly fit the criteria to be *hikikomori* but were engaged in housework and child-rearing (mostly women in Japan), started to be raised instead. Reflecting this, the second issue of *Hikikomori News* was dedicated solely to female *hikikomori* and accounts where housewives with children found themselves feeling lonely and completely disconnected from society were not uncommon. Women in this issue in general seemed to have struggled with the label of *hikikomori* more than men, since it is not as widely discussed. Additionally, women are still expected to selflessly take on housework and child care in Japan, so having their suffering overlooked is not surprising.

4.1.2   *Hikikomori* Goes (Inter)National

The fact that Japan is struggling with the *hikikomori* phenomenon was slowly getting noticed in other countries at least since 2005 (Sakamoto et al) and discussions whether this could be considered a phenomenon bound to the Japanese culture and society were being held (Zielenziger 2007; Teo 2010). However, similar cases of social withdrawal were observed and documented outside of Japan (Kato et al 2011; Teo et al 2014; Malagon-Amor et al 2015; Husu & Välimäki 2016; Wong et al 2019; Hu et al 2022; Orsolini et al 2022). Additionally, in at least one case described in the analysed magazine, a Japanese national became *hikikomori* after leaving Japan for an unspecified foreign country. This kind of a report regarding Japanese *hikikomori* has, to my knowledge, not been mentioned in any English publication and was an interesting new observation of this phenomenon. It is therefore suggested that there are other factors at play, than just the Japanese society in and of itself. Instead, a set of circumstances in combination with one's

culture, societal background, current location and family situation, might lead to individual social withdrawal. However, whether Japan has a stronger pre-disposition than other countries or cultures, is subject to further research.

4.1.3 No Miracle Pill (Yet)

Another branch of discussions that spanned alongside the aforementioned timelines, was the possibility of recognising *hikikomori* as a medical diagnosis. The existing research was, however, unable to fully confirm or refute this proposal and instead, more research into this area has been recommended (Teo 2012; Tateno et al 2010; Teo & Gaw 2016). On the other hand, the *hikikomori* individuals who do not suffer from any accompanying psychological disorder were proposed to be considered the so-called primary *hikikomori,* in order to improve the diagnostic and rehabilitating process (Suwa & Suzuki 2013). Some articles in the magazine did emphasise, that *hikikomori* is not an illness, however, illnesses developed after *hikikomori,* or existing before the onset of *hikikomori* have been disclosed. It is therefore no surprise that these discussions were initiated, however it is more likely that there are sometimes two coexisting realities that influence each other. One reality is an illness describable with existing diagnoses and the other is the state of *hikikomori.* Thus, there does not seem to be a need for a separate diagnosis.

4.1.4 Can Work Set Them Free?

The mid-2000s saw a new actor step into the stage – the introduction of the concept of NEET and discussion on idle youth not engaging in work life gained a lot of traction (Toivonen 2012) and *hikikomori* has not been spared of this development. In many accounts which were analysed, *hikikomori* raised the issues of employment instability, various forms of workplace harassment, belittling, bullying, violence, and other forms of verbal and physical discrimination. These can constitute a burden to any member of a society, not only *hikikomori.* In addition, it should be acknowledged that their disadvantaged position makes them immediately vulnerable to such occurrences. Yet, as many *hikikomori* expressed, they would like to work, but their fear of mistreatment holds them back. Finding a job, which seems to be the end-goal of employment-focused support, does not seem to solve the *hikikomori* employment problem. *Hikikomori* individuals would in addition to that need tools to re-develop their social skills, improve, or retrain their existing (and non-existent) knowledge and skillset, and availability of

environments, which are able and willing to accommodate their individual needs. Such an approach might have a higher chance to increase the long-term employment rate of *hikikomori*. It is of course a possibility that *hikikomori* can find or create self-employment by focusing on helping other *hikikomori* or finding other niches on the job market. Several issues of the magazine featured success stories of *hikikomori* individuals who were able to find employment, create one for themselves, or have serendipitous encounters with their current employers. While it is good to share success stories to show that change is possible, it is important to keep in mind that the same or even similar outcome cannot be expected from every single individual, as there are often circumstances involved which are out of the individual's control.

On the other hand, when *hikikomori* were lucky to find a well-tailored opportunity, not only were they able to escape the confines of their own world, but they became an asset in the *hikikomori* support sphere. Many former *hikikomori* became peer-supporters, counsellors, advisors, or therapists focusing on helping other *hikikomori*. Their advantage when compared to supporters without the experience, is that they can understand the problem from its core. Additionally, they have much higher credibility thanks to their experience, as it is easier to share a painful truth with someone who understands that experience on a fundamental level. As with everything, there are always pros and cons. However, I believe that involving *hikikomori* in the process of reintegration, based on the outcomes of this analysis, yields more positives than negatives.

4.2 Strengths and Limitations of This Research

To the best of my knowledge, the focus on the self-published *hikikomori* media has not been researched in the body of available English language literature, which strengthens the position of this analysis. This thesis contains translations of excerpts of authentic accounts of *hikikomori* found in the *Hikikomori News* magazine. A limitation to this study is the dataset's relatively small size that cannot represent the full reality of the *hikikomori* phenomenon. This is due, in part, to the scope of a master's thesis, which cannot by itself encompass such a multi-faceted topic. Further research involving the own voices of *hikikomori* is therefore warranted.

Conclusion

This master's thesis offers the first research into the own voices of *hikikomori* in Japan published in English language. The research was done by analysing the first self-published *hikikomori* magazine called *Hikikomori News,* which was issued in Japan between November 2016 and October 2018 in a total of ten issues. The results of this analysis add a new layer of discourse to the discussion of the reality and possible future treatment of the *hikikomori* phenomenon, which places their own perceptions and desires into the forefront.

Today, in 2023, *hikikomori* is still an unresolved issue and considering the multitude of layers this problem seems to have had since its emergence as a social problem proper, a single all-encompassing solution is highly unlikely to be found. Criticism of experts, parents and *hikikomori* themselves, has helped shape the trajectory of available support and there has been some progress. On the other hand, many mistakes and assumptions have complicated the treatment of this issue and brought upon new areas that need to be tackled.

This study broadly examined the sphere of the personal voices of *hikikomori*, by establishing the initial research questions, which focused on what kind of stories are *hikikomori* eager to share and what do they want the outside world to know and be aware of. By conducting a reflexive thematic analysis of their accounts, this study presented six themes, which reflect the views of *hikikomori* on some of the most important aspects surrounding the discourse around *hikikomori* and areas involving triggers of the condition, support, and employment situation.

Many stories shared by *hikikomori* directly addressed the issue, that the support they have been offered has been unable to adequately tackle their individual circumstances and often resulted in further disappointment and traumatic experiences. I believe this is a crucial finding, since there are many *hikikomori,* who have suffered through severe traumatic events that led them to shun society, and often their families, in order to protect themselves from the painful experiences they were subjected to. However, if the support offered is unable to provide them with a safe environment, where they can feel respected as human beings and members of the society, can that be considered support in the first place?

Working with individuals, who have fallen off the pre-designed life tracks, lost years of their time, and who might be disadvantaged in several crucial areas of living life as a member of a society, will require more than just an initial opening of doors to employment, without a properly developed follow-up plan and continuing support processes. It is now also clear that social withdrawal is not a condition unique to Japan and it is therefore necessary to keep this in mind when assuming that the phenomenon is strictly a pathology of the Japanese society. Furthermore, the initial stereotypes which described *hikikomori* as adolescent males are being gradually challenged, as accounts of female, elderly *hikikomori* and *hikikomori* belonging to communities, such as LGBTQ are surfacing. Most importantly, discussing *hikikomori* without involving them and their own voices in the process, undermines the efforts that have been made to find a working solution.

This thesis also discusses the possibilities and areas of improvement when *hikikomori* voices are considered. However, keeping in mind the limitations of a master's thesis, it is necessary to acknowledge that the scope of this research cannot fully and adequately represent the voices of the entire *hikikomori* population. Still, stirring the discussion with new ideas can initiate further discussions and research of this topic, which are needed with the focus on the own voices of *hikikomori.* Since Japan has more self-published *hikikomori* media available, this territory remains vastly uncharted and can constitute a source of valuable information and insights for the coming years.

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Appendix

Presented excerpts in their Japanese original.

Excerpt 1

フランクルは、強制収容所の中で二種類の人間を見ることになった。絶望し、生きる意味を失った人と、希望を持ち続け、生きる意味を見出した人だ。強制収容所で生死を分けたのは、絶望的な状況にありながらも、なお、希望を持ち続けることができたかどうかだった。(...) そして、希望を持つためには不安や不確実性に耐えないといけない。人間は本当に苦しい状況の中でこそ希望を見出すからだ。ひきこもり経験はとてもつらく、無意味に思える。しかし、苦悩に耐えた経験の中には、発見されることを待っている意味がたくさん詰まっている。(...)苦難の中にも希望はあり、苦悩を抱えてもなお、人は意味を見出す。強制収容所の中で自分のパンを仲間に分け与えた人がいたように、ひきこもり経験から発見された意味も、分かち合うことができるはずだ。そして、きっとそれは、誰かの希望になるだろう。

Excerpt 2

私から、ひきこもり続けている人にお願いしたい。決して絶望しないでほしい。その経験には必ず意味がある。ひきこもった経験があるからこそ、ひきこもりの苦しみを理解できる。優しくなれる。だから、人生を賭けて紡ぎだした物語を共有させて欲しい。痛みや苦しみの経験は、他の誰かを癒すかもしれない。

Excerpt 3

当事者の方は分かってるとは思うんですけど、孤独になる事は悪い事では無いし、別に犯罪者でも悪人でも何でもないと、まず思った方が良いという事ですかね。外に出て行かなくても良いと私は思うのですが、もし状況を変えたいと思うのであれば、自分で自分を客観視した上で、自分の意志でやっていくしかない。

Excerpt 4

二十三歳で大学卒業を控えて最初のひきこもりを発症したときには、すでに私は実家を出て生活は自立していた。以後、さまざまな形で断続的にひきこもってきたが、人生の曲がり角とな

ったのは三十三歳、一九九五年から四年間のひきこもりである。世の中の光や刺激に耐えられ

なくなり、窓という窓に雨戸を閉てて、洞窟のような暗い部屋にひきこもってしまった。

Excerpt 5

祖母が亡くなった。妹は、ぼくの学年を越えた。もう、学校に行かなくなる前の、楽しかった

家には戻らない……そんな絶望。祖母の部屋と、自分の小さな部屋を行き来するだけの、ひき

こもり生活。畳が腐った自分の部屋に、ごはんを運んでもらい、朝の七時までネットの掲示

板。夕方の四時頃に起きて、残虐なゲームで、ゾンビに同級生のイメージを重ねて、わざと頭

にショットガンを撃ち込んで、怒りを発散させていた。そんな貧弱な快楽が、楽しみの全てだ

った。

Excerpt 6

カーテンを締め切った部屋は徐々に荒れ果て、風呂に何个月も入らない生活が続きました。伸

び放題の髪の毛はバターを含んだように重たくなり、体型はどんどん太っていきました。

Excerpt 7

援助者は、とっさに当事者を「混沌の語り」から引きずり出してしまうのではなく、「混沌の

語り」に敬意を払うこと、混沌の物語の証人になることが大切だとする。

Excerpt 8

朝、目が覚めた途端に、絶望的な気持ちに襲われるようになり、怒りに飲み込まれて感情をコ

ントロールすることが難しくなった。

Excerpt 9

ひきこもりという経験、状態自体が恥ずかしい。人にどう思われるか不安。

Excerpt 10

僕は、発達障害やひきこもり経験があってよかったと思います。あの経験が無ければ今の仕事

には就いていない訳ですからね。挫折した経験も物語になって行くことがあって、その物語を

聞いた人が救われるかもしれないじゃないですか。苦しかったことにも意味があったんだなと

思えると幸せです。

Excerpt 11

美術家として復帰してから更に2年後、私は自身のひきこもり経験を発端とした個展(...)を開催しました。(...) コンクリート製で1畳サイズの家の形の造形物を作り、その中に私自身を1週間密閉させたのち、自力で中からカナヅチとタガネを使い叩き割って出てくるという、過酷なパフォーマンスを決行しました。それは一歩間違えれば命に危険が及ぶ行為でもあります。会期中、飲食も排泄も睡眠も全てその小さな空間の中で行いました。コンクリートの5センチにもなる厚さ、ひんやりと色彩のないその箱に囲まれ、生命のリスクすら及ぶその状況は、私が経験したひきこもりの当事者感覚を表した表現でした。

Excerpt 12

女性たちはコミュニティがあるといわれますが、実際は一度そこからはじかれてしまうと、いじめの構図じゃないですけど、行くところがなくなってしまいます。例えば、結婚すると、女性のほうが男性の都合によって仕事を辞め、自分が思い描いてきた人生の夢や目標もあきらめざるを得なくなることに思い悩む。「公園デビュー」に失敗し、同じくらいの年齢の子どもを持ったママ友集団が怖くなる。夫の転勤で見知らぬ土地に付いて行って誰も友人がいなくなってしまったりとか、海外赴任先の日本人コミュニティで疎外され、怖くて外出できなくなったりとか、そういうきっかけでひきこもり状態に陥ることもあります。

Excerpt 13

私の世代のひきこもりが集まると、必ずといってよいほど出る話題は「腐って発見されるのは是か非か」である。私の場合は、ひきこもりといっても親と暮らしているわけではないから、80-50問題もないのだが、そのかわり独居老人と孤独死の予備軍であるという問題がある。じじつ、同じ年代の仲間が「死後何日で見つかった」といった話が伝わってくることも多くなった。縊死のように、はっきりと自殺と断定できるものもあれば、餓死や過剰服薬のように、「本人はまだ生きたかったのではないか」と首をかしげるケースもある。あまりにひきこもりが度を過ぎてしまうと、体力の衰えもあるので、コンビニに食べ物を買いに行くこともできなくなる。コンビニまでクルマで行かなくてはならない地方だと、なおさら切実である。する

と、どうしても「自分が発見される時」が脳裏をかすめるのである。

Excerpt 14

「ひきこもり」の看板のみで集まると、性的マイノリティではない男性が多く集まってくる傾向があります。男性が多い形で寄り集まれば、ひきこもり経験では共通していても、男性同士のコミュニケーション空間や関係性が醸成されていきます。簡単に言ってしまえば「男社会」を形成してしまうのです。女性や性的マイノリティで引きこもった経験のある人達は、参加しづらく、居づらくなります。一方、「性的マイノリティ」「LGBTQ」の看板での集まりでは、「普段じぶんが性的マイノリティであることを言えない大変さ」「シスジェンダーの異性愛者を装って暮らしている」といった、切実な悩みは共通しても、日常生活を営めている学生や社会人が集まって来ます。しかし、ここでは性のありようについては話せても、引きこもっていることや、長く無職であることは話しにくくなるのです。そのため、性的マイノリティとひきこもり、2つのかけ合わせの想定がなされた場所・空間・集まりが必要でした。

Excerpt 15

結局、僕は「ひきこもり」から「回復」してなかった」し、過去を乗り越えてもいなかった。薬を飲んでも意識がぼやけるだけで、何も変わらない。これから、僕はどうするのかな？もし、ひきこもり経験を理由に「別枠」で対応してくれるなら、もう疲れたから、喜んでお願いする…。

Excerpt 16

今後も当事者団体のないところで当事者会を開催していければと思っています。一方「開拓したことを継続する」のもやりたいです。「ひき桜」は継続していきたいですし、必要だと思われている間は開催したいなと。「ひきこもりピアサポートゼミナール」も同様です。今後の展望はずばり「ピアサポートが普及していくこと」です。その理想は自分や相手や当事者会に参加している人たちのリカバリーが促進していき、それをピアサポートという形で支え合い、出来ることを皆で一緒に考える。そんな活動が各地で盛んになるような社会になっていけばいいなと思います。

Excerpt 17

子どもがひきこもると、親は本人の問題と考えたり、自分を責めたりしがちではあるが、今の世の中の問題も含めたひきこもり問題を、家族だけで解決しようとすると無理が生じてしまう。社会の問題は本来、社会全体で解決しないといけないことであって、家族が責任を負って、無理して頑張らなくてもいいのだ。その為にひきこもる背景をよく理解し、協力してくれる人を見つけて、より多くの人で考えることが解決の糸口になると、僕は考えている。

Excerpt 18

自分の歩みに沿った、心のかたちが極力変わらない支援。色々なケースの相談を受け、共通して必要なことだと感じた。従来の支援は、社会に適応するように心のかたちを変えるもの。

Excerpt 19

外出や就労をゴールにせず、同じ場、人とずっと関われる形。就労してからも、外での経験がないため、強いプレッシャーが続くし、就労が続けられなくなり、再びひきこもる事があった。就労先で、ひきこもりへの理解のない発言や、パワハラ・セクハラに苦しんだ。技能の問題なら、力をつける気にもなれるが、こうした差別は耐えられない。ひきこもり経験のない人でも、同じように苦しんでいる人は多いはず。

Excerpt 20

このような結論に達した私は、洞窟のようなひきこもり空間で、自分の真の願望を確認するために、ある手続きを踏んだ。字数の関係から、今回は詳しくその内容を書けないが、この手続きを境に、生活のあちこちを縛っていた強迫症状はまるで嘘のように頽落（たいらく）していったのである。三十六年間、悩んできた強迫症状がすべて消えるのに、三日とかからなかった。こうして人生は、八倍生きやすくなった。

Excerpt 21

加えて、家庭内ではいつも優秀な兄弟と比べられていた。母は勉強のできる兄弟を褒め、父は自分の趣味に熱心な兄弟とばかり行動を共にしていた。私はと言えば、勉強は中の上くらいのもので、家族の誰もさして興味を示してくれることはなかった。それでも私は「いい子ちゃんでいなくちゃ」という思いを持ち続けていた。

Excerpt 22

「一橋大学に入るべし」という奇妙なミッションが課せられた私には、小学校三年生から中学受験勉強が始まった。ちょっとでも手を抜くと、母はたちまち私を叩いて叫んだ。「怠けたら、お母さん、死んでやるからね！」日常的に突きつけられる母の「死んでやる」という脅迫が、私を強迫性障害へ追いやっていったことは(…)。

Excerpt 23

父が、家庭のことは見ないふりをする。母がヒステリーで皿を投げている時ですら何もしない。働いて食べさせてくれるし、追い出されないのは感謝しているが、精神的に教えてくれないし、家族にまじめに向き合わない。父の仕事用パソコンをバットで壊したことがあるが、ぶつぶつ言うだけで殴り合いもしてくれない。真剣に気持ちを向けた時に、応えてほしかった。

Excerpt 24

私が完全に不登校になってからの、母の狼狽ぶりは凄まじかった。何冊もの不登校の本を読み、私を病院やカウンセリング、気分転換の旅行など、あちこちに連れて行った。また、私のことで悩むあまり、食事も喉を通らなくなり、ガリガリに痩せてしまった。笑顔が消え、心身ともに衰弱していく母を見て、私は後悔した。

Excerpt 25

母に不満をぶつけて扉を壊した日、実は私は母の弱さに触れてしまいました。居間には見慣れない本が何冊も積んでありました。母はひきこもりについての専門書を読み、私の心を知ろうと自分なりに努力していたのです。私はそのことで、扉の向こうに存在する母の痛みにも気づいたのです。それはひきこもりの子を持つ親としての「もう一つの当事者性」です。またその頃、意思の通い合えない夫を持つ妻としての心の傷についても改めて気づきました。

Excerpt 26

ある日、独り暮らししたいと思い、父親に話したら、「独り暮らしするなら、バイトして稼げ」と父親と喧嘩になった。僕は父親の顔を避けて、胸部をボコボコに殴る。普段僕は、他人を殴ることはない。しかしこの瞬間は譲れなかった。

Excerpt 27

世の中に伝えていく理由は二つある。一つは、マスメディアがひきこもりの実像をきちんと伝えていないと感じるからだ。テレビに映るひきこもりは、ことさらに問題のある人間として取り上げられている。暴れまわり、無能で、無気力で、努力をしない人間として。このような報道の仕方は世間の憎悪をひきこもりに向けることになり、より一層ひきこもっている者を追い詰める。(...) もう一つは、ひきこもりを支援する場合はもっと当事者の声を聴いてほしいからだ。一部のメディアは、ひきこもりを無理やり引っ張りだす方法を優れた解決策かのように取り上げる。しかし、ひきこもりが抱える問題は、他者が強制的に解決する問題ではなく、本人の生き方や気持ちに寄り添って解決していくべき問題だ。報道する側は、暴力的支援団体（※2面に詳細）によって死亡事件が発生したことを重く受け止めるべきだ。したがって、ひきこもり新聞では当事者の意思を尊重した支援が広がるように当事者の声を伝えていきたい。

Excerpt 28

ジャズにはミスタッチという考え方はないと言われます。楽譜の通りに演奏されなくても、ズレこそが味で、歌声だってそう。だったら社会一般から外れて、いろいろな生き方があっても、それはミスではなく人間の味で、それぞれ『別の正解』と言えるような社会に変わってほしい。

Excerpt 29

──こもりたくてもこもれない、という人と、こもってしまう人との違いは何でしょうか

偶然しかないと思います。(...) きっかけは、たまたま変な学校に入っちゃったとか、たまたまそこでいじめられちゃったとか、たまたま受験に失敗しちゃったとかね。ちょっとしたきっかけだと思います。ハマった後も、親御さんがそれを理解しないで毎日小言を言ったり、追い詰めたりしたら抜けられなくなってしまいます。しかし、そこは理解を示しほどほどに休ませてくれ、ほどほどに励ましてくれれば、深刻化しないかもしれないというケースはよくあると思います。(...) だからそういう親の態度とか、どういう学校だったとか、どんな所にいたとか様々な要素の積み重ねなので、一言でいったら偶然としか言いようがないです。幼少期の体験が影響するというのは全然考えていません。内向的な人が多いなどと統計的にはあるけれども、社交的な人はいないのかというと普通にいますしね。だから、ひきこもらない育て方とか

はありません。しいて言えば親がひきこもりという概念をちゃんと知っていて、中２、中３く らいの時にあなたの面倒は２５歳位までしか見れないなど毎年言われていたならひきこもれな いと思いますよ。

Excerpt 30

20年ほど、海外に住んでいる。異文化に住むということは、旅行することとは根本的に違う。 お客様である限りは甘えも許されるが、現地人と同じ土俵にたったら、つまり同じ生活者とな ったら話は別、シビアな現実が待っている。数々の小さな凹凸を乗り越えたり迂回したりはあ ったものの、特に大きな異文化適応障害に悩まされることなく日々暮らしてきた自分が、人生 半ばにしてひきこもるとは考えてもみなかった。特に優秀でもなくごくごく平凡な私は、大志 を抱いてこの地に移り住んだのではない。早い話、流れ流れて気がついたら日本から遠く離れ たこの地で暮らしていましたとさ、という感じなのだが、出たとこ勝負の割には異国での暮ら しに案外上手く馴染んだ。基本は内向的だが、外向的に振舞うこともできたし、好奇心も旺盛 で、果敢に人生に挑んでいた若かりし頃の私は、一体どこへ行ってしまったのか。あの頃の自 分の延長線上に今の自分がいるとは、どうしても思えない。傷ついた動物が森の奥へ避難する ようにただ守りに徹している今の自分が。だから、ひきこもり新聞創刊号の精神科医斎藤環先 生のインタビューに深く納得した。ひきこもりになるかないかの違いは「偶然」という一節で ある。(…) 私の場合もいくつもの「偶然」が重なっている。三度の流産、旦那のＤＶ、別居、 母親との疎遠さ、仕事のストレス、職場の人間関係、マイノリティ(少数派)としての存在、親 友を失くしたこと、職場でのパワハラなどなど。これら全てが絡み合って現在の状況が生まれ ている。「偶然」が導いた結果なら、あの時職場に一人でも本音を吐き出せる相手がいたらあ そこまで追い詰められずにすんだのか。旦那の、あの時の一言がなければ、大事に至らなかっ たのか。…そうかもしれない。そうじゃなかったのかもしれない。ハッキリしているのは、あ の時ああだったら、こうだったらと考えても何も変わらないということ。

Excerpt 31

僕がひきこもりになったのは就職してからです。発達障害の関係で会社や仕事にうまく馴染め ず、はじめてひきこもりになりました。それまでは、自分はひきこもりとは無関係の不良で、 強い人間だと思い込んでいました。なので、ひきこもるなんて全く想像すらしていませんでし

た。

Excerpt 32

ひきこもった一番の決め手は、祖母に対する殺意を抑えるため。センター試験の前日。「あんたと一緒にいるのが怖かった」と、祖母が口火を切る。亡くなった祖父に対する積年の恨みが、全部僕に押し寄せる。殺意が暴走しないように僕は生ける屍となった。

Excerpt 33

外から見れば、私は旺盛にあちこち飛び回り、活動的に仕事をする男であった。ところが内部は、あと一つ些細なきっかけさえあれば、すぐに崩落するほどボロボロになっていたのである。やがて一九九五年。阪神淡路大震災、地下鉄サリン事件、恩師の死、婚約者の浮気という四連発のパンチを受けて、私は人生のリングに沈み、三回目の本格的なうつ病を発症した。怖くて外出ができず、電話にも出られず、社会から完全に隔絶した。

Excerpt 34

最初は、「子どもが熱を出した」と嘘を付いて、仕事を休む。その嘘も長く続かなかった。今度は自分の体調が悪くなって、子どものことが見られなくなった。「育児ノイローゼ」と言われても、認めたくなかった。「精神科に行った方が良い」と主人に言われ、母と病院に行った。「躁うつ病」と診断され、仕事を何日か休む。看護士の仕事ができなくなり、家でひきこもるようになる。実家に帰り、4年半悶々としていた。

Excerpt 35

強迫症状が治った私は、長年悩まされてきた精神疾患は、私の病ではなく、母子関係と家族の構造から来る家族の病であったことがわかったため、家族療法を専門とする精神科医につながった。しかし、そこから先には、また別の茨の道が待ち構えていた。現在も格闘中である。

Excerpt 36

小学6年生の時、各班で分担して調理実習の材料を用意することになりました。ところが、同じ班の友達が「お前が材料を全部買ってこい」と私に命令してきたのです。(...) 私は自分の気持ちを友達に上手く伝えることができず、結局、私だけが材料を買うことになりました。そのことを母が学校に抗議したことで、私は家庭科担当の教師から嫌がらせを受けました。「学校

での様子をいちいち親に言うな！言ったらどうなるかわかっているのか！」と強い口調で言われ、「反省するため」と称して家庭科室に閉じ込められました。帰宅後、祖父の部屋で泣きました。その話を祖父から聞いた母は担任に連絡を取りました。しかし学校側は「そのような事実はありません」と答えるだけでした。その出来事がきっかけで私は学校へ行きたくなくなりましたが。

Excerpt 37

私は幼い時から人が怖く、おどおどしていたように思う。幼稚園、学校(...)ではうまくなじめなかった。小学5年生の時に、林間学習の時の風呂場で、同級生に下半身を触れられた。それを母親に伝えたのは、次の臨海学校か何かの前夜だったように思う。ひたすら「行きたくない」と泣いている私に、母は、「何があったの？」と聞き、やがて私の下半身を指差した。何か認めるような言葉をとくに言った覚えはないが、その時、確か泣き声は強くなったように思う。母は「そうか」と言ったきりだった。(...) 性にまつわることを親に話したのは後にも先にもそれきりだ。

Excerpt 38

「ひきこもりを必ず自立させます」などとうたう民間団体の中には、土足で部屋に押し入って当事者をなかば強引に連れ出し、施設の寮などに監禁して就労トレーニングをさせる、といった暴力的な手法をとるところもあります。

Excerpt 39[20]

Bさん：ひどいひきこもり支援団体になると、どんどんひきこもりを訪問したり、部屋から引っぱりだして、何かの作業をさせて「社会参加」だ、なんて言っている所がありますけど、ああいうのは迷惑ですよね。

Sさん：迷惑以前の問題ですね。もし私がそういうことをされたら、逃れるために死を選ぶでしょう。そういう状況から逃れるために、冗談ではなく「もう死ぬしかない」って思います。想像しただけで怖いです。

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[20] The names of the interviewer and respondent were shortened to their surname's initials.

Excerpt 40

出かけないから、あまり腹も減らない。しかし、立ち上がるとふらつくので、体力が衰えているのがわかった。それでも行動する気にならない。このまま衰弱死するなら、それでもいい。ホームレスになって路上へ投げ出されようと、死体となって腐って発見されようと、もうすべてはどうでもよくなってきた。

Excerpt 41

私の体調はどんどん悪くなっていった。いつも寒くて震えが止まらず、吐き気と目眩で世界がグルグル回っていた。ひどい時は歩くことも困難になり、床を這いずって移動した。体にポリープなど、いくつか病気も見つかった。毎日どうしようもないくらい不安で、自殺したい気持ちが日に日に大きくなり、死がとても近くに来ているのを感じた。

Excerpt 42

ひきこもっているうちに、兄弟と部屋を入れ替えられて、小さい部屋にされた。近所に分からないように雨戸も開けるなと言われて、外に出たいという感情がどんどん無くなった。早く環境が変わっていたら、長くひきこもらなかったかも知れない。

Excerpt 43

そもそも「家事手伝い」として家族から隠され、本人も自分が「ひきこもり状態」にあることを自覚できずにいる。そんな彼女たちの抱えるつらさや痛みが見えてなかった。

Excerpt 44

逆説的になるけれど、引きこもりくらい労働の価値の高さが分かる立場もない。私は、働かなければ人間ではないと言わんばかりのプレッシャーを社会から受けてきた。働くことは単にお金を稼ぐこと以上に、社会人として認められるかどうかにかかっている。労働は見えない戸籍のように作用して、働いていなければまるで下等市民のような存在にされてしまう。

Excerpt 45

大学に入ったら普通になれる、なんとなくそう思っていた。私は学校というものに通うのは小学生以来だった。入学早々、オドオドしている私に向けられる屈託のない質問。普通に行われ

るボケやツッコミ。明るい笑いが飛び交う健康な世界だった。仲間うちでは「高校時代どんな感じやった？」「将来何になりたいん？」「好きなものなんなん？」といったことがよく問われた。年齢を話せばそこから過去の話に飛んでしまう。経歴を伏せて皆と同じように話を合わせた。健康なふりをした。

Excerpt 46

もう自分はマトモな人間じゃない、本当に自分は最低の人間で、こんな人間は誰からもかえりみられず生きて、死んでいくんだろうなという思いが、頭の中をぐるぐる回ってました。

Excerpt 47

精神障害者とひきこもりに共通する一番の問題については、アドボケーター（権利擁護者）がいないことを挙げました。昭和30年代からの収容主義により非同意入院の精神障害者が収容されたままなのと同様に、ひきこもり当事者が収容された施設から逃げ出しても連れ戻され収容され続けるケースがある。

Excerpt 48

働く時に、暴力があるかどうか不安。実際に精神的、肉体的な暴力を受けた経験がある。外食産業ではそういったことが多かった。食器の入ったかごを投げつけられたこともある。

Excerpt 49

必死にやってきても、何も変わってなかった…。時は過ぎていく。ひきこもっていた時のように。あの頃は、1年がただ静かに部屋の中で過ぎていた。でも働いていても、何も見えないまま過ぎていく。ほぼ毎日「全然覚えてない！社会人としてやばいよ！」と怒鳴られ、心から震え上がっていた。苦痛を埋め合わせるため、仕事上がりに1時間かけて新宿まで行き、喫茶店の閉店ギリギリでビールを飲んでいた。

Excerpt 50

ひきこもった空白期間が自信をなくさせる。たくさん働いた経験のある人と、同じ土俵に立たされる厳しさを感じて、怖じ気づいてしまって、仕事に行けなかった。

Excerpt 51

「これまで何をされていましたか？」と、コンビニのアルバイトの面接で店長から質問。「7年ひきこもっていました」と、正直に応えると微妙な表情だった。ババ抜きでババを引いた瞬間の表情のようだ。社会復帰したいことを真剣に伝えても、かえって怪しまれた。派遣のキャリアカウンセラーに相談しても、やはり結果は同じ。キャリアカウンセラーだけに「採用を楽しみに待っていてくださいね」と、表面的には明るい言葉をかけてくれる。しかし奥歯に物が挟まったような言い方で、苦虫を噛み潰したような顔。結果は言うまでもない。

Excerpt 52

ある日、最初の指導者だった人がミスをしたとき、他人を使って二人がかりで、ぼくに責任を押しつけた。それに対して「どう頑張ったって、ぼくが悪いことになるんだ！」と、耐え切れずに怒ってしまい、問題になりかけた。おかしいことでも意見はできず、一方的に叱られるだけ。ぼくの経歴のせいだと思い、ますます孤立してしまう。何回かそんなことが起こったあと、会社に「パートになるか、退職するかどちらかにしなさい」と通告された。ぼくは退職する以外、考えられなくなっていた。

Excerpt 53

障害者雇用にかんしても僕はその枠で五年近く働いていたんだ。辞めたのは、パワハラにあったから。…パワハラショックのあと、自殺願望が出てきちゃって電車に飛び込みたくなったんだ。布団から起き上がれなくもなったよ。体が重くてさ。自分のところだけ重力がちがっているみたいなんだ。

Excerpt 54

私は、就職してから過労でパニック障害になりました。パニック障害とは、たとえば電車に乗るなど、すぐに逃げ出せない状況に身を置いた時に、動悸や胸の痛み・呼吸困難などとともに「逃げ出せない。このまま死んでしまう」といった強い不安感に襲われる（パニック発作）、精神疾患の一種です。退職後、一時は寛解し、再び働いていた時期もありました。