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THE NAIL THAT STICKS OUT GETS HAMMERED IN— A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL IN JAPAN AND TAIWAN

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Abstract

This undergraduate senior thesis analyzes the phenomenon of social withdrawal and the conditions that foster it in Japan and Taiwan. I argue that hikikomori, which is the infamous lifestyle of young Japanese men who isolate themselves in their rooms, is not unique to Japanese culture. My findings indicate that hikikomori is a social disease that arises from socio-economic circumstances. I believe the presence of hikikomori in Japan is due most to postmodernity combined with a foundation of Confucian familial values. Taiwan shares the same history of Confucian familial values but is not considered a postmodern society. There is little research shared on specific Taiwanese hikikomori cases, but I argue that the inklings of it can be found in the general social withdrawal of the youth. The leading forces that foster extreme social withdrawal are pressures to reach an outdated and impossible form of success and the fear of failing. This thesis brings Japanese and Taiwanese youth social withdrawal into conversation in order to address the currently poorly defined hikikomori phenomenon.

Introduction

The narrative around Japanese hikikomori in the past thirty years tends to frame the lifestyle as unique to Japan, as a culture-bound syndrome (Jones 2). Hikikomori is the Japanese term for "social withdrawal," and is used to refer to a lifestyle where young people, typically men, decide to confine themselves to their room and cease social interaction with the outside world. Hikikomori is not a psychiatric diagnosis, and what it is classified as typically varies from one scholarly work to another. The term is applied both to the lifestyle at large and to the people who live that way. The decision to stay confined in a room as an adult, relying on parents for housing and other support, is extremely taboo in Japan and most other places. While hikikomori translates directly as social withdrawal, what it entails is much more severe and specific. The peculiar lifestyle of hikikomori has attracted major interest from the world, as stories published often highlight the individuals' length of time spent alone in a small space.

In this thesis, I argue that hikikomori is not a culture-bound syndrome that exists only in Japan. To prove this point, I will be comparing social withdrawal of youth in Taiwan to those in Japan. Unlike those who label hikikomori as a Japanese phenomenon, I believe the lifestyle to be attributed to postmodern society and societal pressure to succeed. A country's socio-economic situation, peer rejection, and the foundation of familial values are the most pivotal causes for people to turn towards social withdrawal. This is true in both Japanese and Taiwanese contexts, albeit amplified to a greater degree in Japanese cases, seen by the existence of the specific term "hikikomori".

The historical and cultural contexts surrounding Japan and Taiwan are vastly different. Yet, there are similarities in that they have societal values heavily influenced by Confucianism and did share a colonial relationship for fifty years, with Japan being the colonial power. Despite

having different backgrounds, Japan and Taiwan are suitable for a comparative study on hikikomori and social withdrawal. Japanese hikikomori are extreme cases of social withdrawal, and frequently the circumstances surrounding an individual leading up to the point of withdrawal include other experiences and affinities toward isolation. While it has been recorded that Taiwan has its own hikikomori cases, these cases themselves are difficult to locate and examine. Instead, the comparison between Japanese and Taiwanese social withdrawal will be conducted based on the external and internal factors in each respected place that encourage isolation from society. Japanese hikikomori cases will be treated as the ultimate amplification of social withdrawal as a result of crushing feelings of rejection and the unwillingness to continue living in the existing societal system.

In the following sections, this thesis will examine the similarities and differences in causes of social withdrawal in Japanese and Taiwanese youth. Beginning with a detailed review of existing hikikomori literature, the literary review section will introduce different approaches to understanding hikikomori. Each case study provides historical background and how social withdrawal in youth is influenced in each respected country. The comparative analysis section places both of these contexts in conversation to form a reason why hikikomori is much more prevalent in Japan but still inklings are beginning to form in Taiwanese social withdrawal. Japanese hikikomori is an extreme form of social withdrawal, while Taiwanese social withdrawal in youth is not to the degree of self-isolation for years at a time, it also begins with an individual feeling a sense of failure to meet parental goals and rejection from peers. The context of a dull economy and lack of opportunity combined with an inability to communicate worries and receive support from others are the building blocks of social withdrawal.

Methodology

Importance of Case Studies Chosen

Japan is the obvious choice for a study on social withdrawal and hikikomori. As the epicenter of hikikomori cases, interest, and studies, the scholarship surrounding hikikomori there is vast. Taiwan was chosen as the other case study to contrast with the abundance of research Japanese hikikomori has. In the literature encountered for this thesis, Taiwan hikikomori are only mentioned in works as existing, but never expounded on. While hikikomori translates as "social withdrawal" in English, the term refers to the specific condition of isolating oneself in a room and feeling unable to leave and move on with life. During research, the circumstances that create extreme social withdrawal were often paralleled between Japanese and Taiwanese youth.

As mentioned and will be argued deeper in the later part of this thesis, socio-economic development plays an important role in determining individual to group dynamics. Peer rejection and a sense of failure are often cited as key elements to feeling like participation in normal life is useless. In Japan, this feeling is intensified from the strict work expectations of young people, particularly young men, that linger from the Bubble Economy and age of the salaryman. Taiwan is not a postmodern society, as Japan is considered, and because it did not undergo the same erasure of traditional social values after World War II, Taiwanese youth still have a value system that for the most part is understood by everyone.

The lack of research on Taiwanese hikikomori cases or potential future cases and the absence of an in-depth comparative analysis of Japanese and Taiwanese socially withdrawn youth give this thesis a chance to bring new insights to the academic community. Especially considering some of these two countries shared pasts, the divergence and convergence of events that have shaped each society cannot be minimized in how it effects social withdrawal.

Method of Research

Collecting information for this thesis was conducted mainly through the Fordham online library database. At the start, the focus was on finding Japanese hikikomori works that explained what hikikomori is at its root and introduced historical information on the social disease. Locating scholarly articles or general articles on Taiwanese hikikomori proved to be much more difficult. Instead, searches for social withdrawal reaped more information that ultimately helped shape this thesis to argue that hikikomori in Japan are a potential fate other societies may face as they transition from modernity to postmodernity.

In this thesis, to prove the argument that hikikomori is not a culture-bound syndrome but one linked to socio-economic development, there will be two major portions to each country's case study. The first is historical background, which contributes to understanding how the society has been shaped. The second is an analysis of social withdrawal in that country, including behavioral studies done on the effects of adolescent bullying, the role of parents in enabling prolonged social withdrawal, and cultural interpretations of shame.

The literary review focuses on the topic of hikikomori alone to provide context for the rest of this thesis. While locating sources on hikikomori, a balance had to be found between the more scientific and informational writing on the social disease/lifestyle and the actual stories of individual hikikomori. Experts in scholarly articles provided most of the existing analysis on the overarching causes of hikikomori to paint a big picture of its implications. To get the granular details of individual hikikomori is crucial to incorporating real stories that humanize the lifestyle. Much of the time, individual stories reify the overarching causes and character archetypes found in scholarly research. Fitting together both of these perspectives is important to presenting a fair and real image of hikikomori lifestyle and the individuals who live it.

Limitations

There were two major limitations that face this thesis. The first major limitation is the language barrier to accessing information. Since most of the hikikomori cases are in Japan, many sources are written in Japanese. These sources were unable to be used due to the author's inability to understand Japanese. This posed a frustrating problem for accessing primary resources on blogs and social media, which are assumed to be places where insider hikikomori information might be shared. The second major limitation is the scarcity of Taiwanese hikikomori sources. No Taiwanese hikikomori case studies of individuals were found. While this is a limitation, it also supports the argument that Taiwan would not see many documented and published hikikomori cases because that extreme of social withdrawal is not a common problem under the current socio-economic conditions facing the island.

Theoretical Framework

There are a few key terms that should be defined in order to completely understand the subject of hikikomori and where it fits into a broader social context.

Terms that are labels for groups of people are as follows. "Otaku" refer to people who are obsessed with pop culture manifestations, typically anime and video games (Todd 143). "Parasaito", which translates to "parasite single", is a young woman who lives with parents to save on rent and other living expenses but has a job. Money saved from living expenses is spent on extra luxuries (Todd 145). Parasaito is not a derogatory term and is a common and acceptable state of living. Although mostly applied to women, men can also be considered parasaito. A "freeter" is someone who does not have a permanent job but switches between temporary work, otherwise called an "irregular worker" (Suwa and Suzuki 197). Ikeida had mentioned in the second installment of "The Odyssey of a Hikikomori" that in the 1980's, while in college, the

concept of doing temporary work to support yourself while pursuing another passion was unheard of. The term "freeter" was unfamiliar to him and unavailable to claim as an identity (Ikeida 6). Another term for a person who does not have stable work is "precariat", which is a combination of the words "precarious" and "proletariat" (Suwa and Suzuki 197).

One theme crucial to understanding the societal context around hikikomori is postmodernism. Postmodernism is a state where absolute values and a feeling of being lost because of that occurs (Todd 137). In Japan, the ultra-nationalistic attitudes of pre-WWII were dropped, and the country shifted towards a reliance on situational identities and moral codes (Todd 137). Without a reliable, concrete framework to operate off of, Japanese society is in a state of alienation and uncertainty. This lack of mutually understood communication and sense of togetherness contributes to the alienation of individuals who feel they cannot connect with other people and that it is not safe to break the social facade and reveal true feelings. Related to this concept is that of "orphanism", which is the feeling of isolation from others due to lack of orientation towards a group to identify as a part of (Suwa and Suzuki 196). Meanwhile, Taiwan does not experience the ills of postmodernism which plague Japan.

Literature Review

In a 2006 *New York Times* article, "Shutting Themselves In", author Maggie Jones speaks with Dr. Tamaki Saito, who originally applied the name "hikikomori" to describe a type of social withdrawal he was encountering. Jones writes, "Saito […] views the problem as largely a family and social disease" (5). Since the 1990s, when hikikomori caught the attention of Japan, understanding what it is has taken many different approaches. Some view hikikomori as a socio-cultural phenomenon (Suwa and Suzuki 191), while others see it as a response specifically to postmodern society (Todd 141). Definitions of what hikikomori lifestyle entails are equally

varied. Typically, the definition presented in a work conflates with the approach the author is using to study hikikomori. The Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare states hikikomori is "a phenomenon where one stays inside one's home for more than six months without any (physical) social participation, such as school, work, and other forms of social interaction outside of the home" (Ishikawa 37). There are three major approaches taken when studying hikikomori: societal, psychological, and familial.

Societal Approach

The societal approach is defining and understanding hikikomori as a withdrawal in response to societal influences. Author Elif Batuman chronicles Japanese people involved with the rent-a-family (and a choice of other roles, like rental wedding attendants, supervisors, etc.) industry, interviewing both renters and the actors/owners at the companies doing the acting. Batuman covers the circumstances surrounding such an industry, much of which is rooted in historical changes that have re-shaped Japanese society since the end of World War II, which is also related to the emergence of hikikomori. Existing hikikomori literature cites the shift from extended, close-knit networks of family and friends to more solitary existences in smaller, urban family units as one of the major social culprits to fostering social withdrawal. M. Suwa and K. Suzuki examine the hikikomori phenomenon from both a psychiatric perspective and socio-cultural perspective. The latter approach will be discussed here. The authors note in their study that hikikomori are frequently afflicted with other pathologies, such as schizophrenia and developmental disorders. This is not to be confused with a person who becomes hikikomori and then as a result from that develops something like depression from being isolated. The authors write that hikikomori "is not a diagnosis, but a condition in which young adults avoid social activities" (Suwa and Suzuki 192). They also distinguish primary hikikomori as being those who

had “no lifetime experience of a psychiatric disorder” (Suwa and Suzuki 192).

Suwa and Suzuki name three societal changes that have contributed to the hikikomori phenomenon, which are: “changes in the societal foundation, changes in communication, and changes in the labor system” (196). The disintegration of traditional Japanese social structures, norms, and values after the end of World War II were not replaced by any other set. Kathleen Hunter Lea Todd touches on this point as a major cause of hikikomori as well in her article “Hikikomania: Existential Horror or National Malaise?”. Todd takes the argument one step further and includes the lack of concrete social values as an attribute of postmodernity. She writes, “Postmodernity involves the loss of absolute values and the pervasive sense of alienation” (137). Changes in communication that contribute to social disorientation is mainly in the vein of conformism and lack of individualism (Suwa and Suzuki 196). This pertains to the lack of allegiance or sense of belonging to a group and preference to interacting with distant people over digital platforms than those that are in a physically close proximity to us (Suwa and Suzuki 197).

The last societal change Suwa and Suzuki reference is a change in the labor system. During Japan’s most rapid economic growth period in the 1970s and 1980s, the average male life path was as follows. If after intense studying a man passed university exams and was accepted into a high-ranking school, the next move would be to continue to excel academically then look for employment. Finding employment in a corporate company after graduating meant lifelong employment, where the corporation would, to an extent, act as a family/community unit. The man could expect to retire from that same company at the end of his career. The Japanese Bubble Economy burst in the 1990s, and from that time forward the career path of the 1970s/1980s salaryman has mostly disappeared. Finding a company that can offer lifetime employment is rare. The term for young people who float between temporary job positions in order to make a

living is called "freeters", and they have been on a steady incline since the 90s. In 2010, 34.4% of the Japanese workforce were temporary/irregular workers (Suwa and Suzuki 197).

In addition, Japanese society has an understanding of each person having two separate selves: *honne* (true feelings) and *tatamae* (façade) (Todd 137). Batuman writes, "… the concealment of authentic *honne* behind conventional *tatemae* is often constructed as an act of unselfishness and sociability, rather than of deception or hypocrisy" (15). Todd adds that one of the most powerful understandings in groups is that maintaining *he* (harmony) is imperative (138). Not only is there a lack of honesty of people's true thoughts, but there is encouragement to conceal inner feelings in an effort to avoid disruption in the overall group. Todd writes that bullying is a pervasive problem in Japan that is tolerated more by adults since it's believed that bullying sets straight individuals who have an apparent flaw (139). Bullying can be a contributing factor to school refusal, which is avoiding going to school, and can then influence official withdrawal from schooling and later adopting a hikikomori lifestyle.

Psychological Approach

The psychological approach seeks to look within the individual themselves in order to find an explanation as to why they would become a hikikomori. Sumie writes, "[The Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare] states that the hikikomori phenomenon is commonly associated with a long list of mental health 'disorders' such as anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and pervasive development disorder (PDD)" (37). Again, hikikomori and mental health disorders are not always connected, and if present, the differentiation needs to be made between what was existing before hikikomori withdrawal and what may have developed during that time.

Suwa and Suzuki's socio-cultural approach to hikikomori was covered in the previous

paragraphs. The second approach in their research was psychiatric. They pinpointed five different pathological features of primary hikikomori, which again, are hikikomori who did not have a history of psychiatric disorder prior to becoming socially withdrawn. The five pathological features are: episodes of defeat before a struggle, an ideal self-image created based off of others' expectations of them, maintaining the ideal image during time as hikikomori, have parents' who also preserve the vision of the ideal self, and avoidant behavior to preserve the opinions others have of them (Suwa and Suzuki 194-195). Hikikomori itself is not a psychiatric diagnostic concept, as sometimes it is misconceived as being (Suwa and Suzuki 194). The mystery surrounding hikikomori phenomenon revolves around this ambiguity about diagnosis—since the direct translation of hikikomori is "social withdrawal", some writers claim that it is a lifestyle decision made consciously or unconsciously by those who see Japanese society as broken and lacking opportunity. This does not totally make sense because those who are hikikomori often report feeling trapped, and as if the power to leave their bedroom and lead a normal life is gone. They convey that the ability to leave and live a normal life is desirable, but the more time spent in isolation the more it feels like it is too late to start again.

Scott Wilson is author of the article "Braindance of the *Hikikomori*: Towards a Return to Speculative Psychoanalysis", which primarily addresses the question of compatibility between Japanese people and psychoanalysis. Interestingly, Wilson uses as his definition for hikikomori "middle-class Japanese youths who have withdrawn from all conventional social contact to indulge exclusively computer-based interactions" (392). This definition is the only encountered in the research for this thesis to include what occupies hikikomori's time in isolation. In addition, the definition presented is closer to describing *otaku*, those who are obsessed with anime and video games, and prize spending time on those things over anything else. Todd addresses this

mix-up in her article, writing "There is a necessary level of intelligence and social awareness involved in the decision to become a *hikikomori*, on which basis I propose a distinction between the two" (143). Hikikomori implies a social withdrawal that is filled with self-reflection and consciousness that could even be related to the Japanese hermit tradition, an admirable act of reflection and understanding the self and your position in the world. Unlike the traditional hermit tradition, hikikomori invoke fears of resource drains and an excess of people who exist without contributing.

Familial Approach

The last of the three approaches towards understanding hikikomori is through the perspectives of hikikomori parents. Jones writes that, "…children commonly live with their parents into their 20's, and despite the economic downturn, plenty of parents can afford to support children indefinitely" (4). Pervasive through hikikomori parents' narratives is a sense of guilt and shame about their child's hikikomori existence. These feelings arise from feeling like they have failed their children and are bad parents. Together with the shame is a willingness to continue to support the child financially and let them stay in the home where daily necessities are taken care of (i.e. meals). On average, there is a one year gap between when a child becomes a hikikomori and when a parent reaches out to a support group, organization, or professional for help (Jones 12). Programs such as New Start are dedicated to hikikomori rehabilitation that begins with dispatching a "rental sister" and ends with the hikikomori moving into a dorm and receiving job training so they can re-enter society (Jones 7).

The enabling from Japanese parents is established through the concepts of guilt and shame mentioned above, and also through *amae*. Kato et. al tackle amae in the study "Does the 'Hikikomori' Syndrome of Social Withdrawal Exist Outside Japan? A Preliminary International

Investigation". Amae is a word used to describe a kind of dependent behavior that usually occurs between a parent and child. The child will act selfishly because they know their parents will forgive them and it will be safe to repeat the behavior in the future (Kato et. al 1072). The study also notes that in Asian societies, young people stay at home and are economically dependent on their parents for longer periods of time than their Western counterparts (Kato et. al 1072). According to a study by Akiko Funakoshi and Yuki Miyamoto titled "Significant Factors in Family Difficulties for Fathers and Mothers Who Use Support Services for Children with Hikikomori", fathers are less likely to utilize support services. This is due to two possible reasons, either the father does not have a close relationship with the child/process of raising the child or a busy work schedule prevents them from attending resource centers, which are typically closed on weekends and holidays (Funakoshi and Miyamoto 215).

The subject of parent-child relationships is most vividly demonstrated in the first-hand hikikomori account, "The Odyssey of a Hikikomori", written by Vosot Ikeida on the website Hikipos. Hikipos is a Japanese website that focuses on hikikomori news and stories. Part of the site is written in English, while the majority is in Japanese or Chinese. Ikeida's written account has 4 parts published with no definitive end. Each part chronicles his experiences leading up to becoming a hikikomori and during the period of withdrawal. Ikeida explains that the word choice of "odyssey" is to convey to outsiders that hikikomori do not decide to socially withdraw overnight, and their feelings do not feel the same throughout. He describes his experience as a personal journey of discovering how after graduating university, the work life that was the next logical step seemed meaningless.

There are two instances where Ikeida mentions his parents. In "The Odyssey of Hikikomori, Round 2: 'The Japanese Hikikomori in 1980's'— Not Allowed to Live on with

Doing Nothing?", he writes about accepting a job offer but then not being able to go through with starting there. Instead, Ikeida has to go back and reject the employment offer on the false ground that he does not have enough credits to graduate on time. He decides to stay in school, but this means that his parents will not help financially contribute for this extra school time. Ikeida tries to apply for a "working student" status but his parents won't sign to confirm they are not supporting him anymore out of embarrassment, they don't want to be viewed as bad parenets. He is then forced to pay the full tuition price because of this (5). In the next installment, Ikeida writes that as a child his mother forced him to study until the early hours of the morning since the age of 9 to make sure he would be prepared for future entrance exams. He notes his mother would threaten to kill herself if he didn't study, and writes that in this victimization she left him no choice but to do as she wanted (5).

Case Study of Japan

Historical Overview

After the Meiji Restoration in the late 1860s, a new civil code was drafted, and inside was embedded a new formal family system that was to dictate Japanese societal organization. This new system was heavily influenced by the Confucian social hierarchy, and was based off the Japanese house (*ie*). Society was then seen as an extension of family— a large family system with the emperor at the top (Batuman 13). World War II brought a shake up to this familial societal structure, western influence and rapid economic growth contributed to the typical family turning from interconnected and extended to nuclear and separate (Batuman 13). Traditional Japan is understood as lasting until World War II, after which commenced a push to modernity and then what Todd calls a transformation into postmodernity (137).

The feeling in the air of Japan just before the Meiji Restoration is best summed up in the

term e*ijanaika*, which translates roughly to “why not” or “isn’t it good” (Gordon 58). The volatility leading up to the restoration incited confusion and uncertainty into how society would be ordered and represented. Ultimately, the restoration meant a return to traditional values, including having the emperor restored at the head of the country and gender roles that particularly limited women from having roles other than homemaker, mother, and wife (Gordon 110). During the period between the first and second world wars, Japan again saw a major shift in societal norms. Obtaining a high school education became commonplace and women were entering the workforce, however these positions were part time and it was still expected that upon having children they would leave their positions to become full-time house wives. One New York Times headline from the World War II period reads, “Children of Japan’s ‘Broken Family’; Events of Recent Years Have Had a Devastating Effect on Japanese Youth. They Reject the Values of the Old, Established Order Yet Miss the Security to be Found in Them.” (1959). The headline demonstrates the turbulence Japanese society was undergoing from rapid change.

The loss of a universal set of values which this article headline alludes to is the same argument Todd makes by calling Japan a postmodern society following the end of World War II. Surely, this is not the single factor that accounts for the phenomenon of hikikomori in Japan. The loss of values, combined with an economic downturn that disrupted career security and an individual’s existing affinity towards isolation creates the opportunity for hikikomori. “The nail the sticks out gets hammered in” is a popular Japanese saying. What is revealed is deeply ingrained conformity and a commitment to enforcing correction on those that do not conform. As mentioned in the literary review of this paper, bullying in Japan is understood as a way a group corrects an individual it understands as in some way sticking out. Therefore, it is a natural good and not something that should be necessarily stopped by superiors (Todd 139). What has

happened starting after the Bubble Economy burst in the 1990s is an idealized life path has remained while the means to reach it has disappeared. Hikikomori can be considered as people who are unwilling to go along with the motions of an outdated life expectation and instead withdraw into their bedrooms, relinquishing responsibility towards their families and selves.

Social Withdrawal

Hikikomori is itself not a psychiatric disease. Primary hikikomori elude diagnosis of any psychopathology because they do not display any symptoms of existing psychiatric disease and usually do not have problems adapting socially until they withdraw from society in their late teens to 30s (Suwa and Suzuki 193). Hiromi, a woman in her late sixties, recounts some of the thoughts she had while living as a hikikomori around age 27 (Ishikawa 43). After moving back to her childhood home from Tokyo, Hiromi became consumed with the fear that her high school classmate's father, who owned a small neighborhood shop across the street, would see her. There was an immense sense of shame in being seen and him gossiping with others about her situation. She assumed that being seen would equate to thinking she had given up on her dreams in Tokyo and now was a failure who did not work. For Hiromi and other hikikomori, staying inside is a way to prevent others from knowing they are not working or going to school. If others were to find out they aren't working at a job or in school, this would be very shameful. Hiromi eventually left her apartment without any concerns of being seen after she had acquired a job and began regular work.

Ikeida gives a different explanation for what led him to become a hikikomori. After failing class in university on purpose to buy time before having to join the workforce, he comes to the realization that a life sentence to working is not for him. Ikeida fears living in society without a title—like "student" or "office worker"— and so he remained a student. Knowing he

can't stay in university forever, the question of what comes next is daunting ("Odyssey Round II"). Pursuing the life of an office worker is seen as giving up on living and dedicating every moment to exclusively work. At this time in the 1980s, the concept and term "freeter" had not entered popular discourse, and so Ikeida's fear of having no identity in society remained overbearingly oppressive. Like in Hiromi's story, feelings of shame in not fitting in any respectable role in society further pushed isolation and hiding.

The most common hikikomori narratives follow a path that more resemble Takeshi's (Jones 1). Hikikomori are typically male, and usually begin a life of social reclusion towards the end of high school after dropping out. Reducing interaction with family members to a bare minimum, they typically emerge from their rooms on a nocturnal schedule that involves runs to convenience and DVD stores. Takeshi became a hikikomori at 15 and spent four years in isolation before joining the hikikomori rehabilitation program New Start. Hikikomori are sometimes incorrectly combined with otaku (Todd 143). Takeshi shared that he mostly listened to music during his days, and it was actually a Radiohead lyric that ultimately motivated him to find the strength to re-enter society. Otaku are people who may choose video games and anime over socialization. Hikikomori, on the other hand, choose to withdraw from society from a lack of will to operate within the rigid framework of a normal life. While isolated, what they do to pass the time varies, but hikikomori are often seen as a more thoughtful and sometimes even "silent rebels" (Todd 135).

When a hikikomori either decides to get help themselves, or has a family member that seeks help for them, they reach out to a variety of hikikomori rehabilitation services. One of these is the organization Takeshi contacted, New Start. Within this program, counselors dubbed "rental sisters" visit hikikomori at their homes and initially through the door try and coax the

hikikomori to come out (Jones 7). According to Jones, the typical price for entering the program and receiving a rental sister is about $8,000 per year. “Rental brothers” also work for New Start. but hikikomori seem to respond better to women counselors. In 2013, there were an estimated 500,000 to one million hikikomori living in Japan (Suwa and Suzuki 192). Jones writes that “30 percent of rental sisters' clients won't leave their rooms and another 10 percent of those who do join the program eventually return to the hikikomori life” (Jones 11). Success of each client varies, and while some revert back to the hikikomori lifestyle others are able to enter the workforce through job training and re-enter the workforce (Jones 7).

Japanese hikikomori are typically part of the middle-class and have parents that are near retirement age. Parents have the ability to support hikikomori children almost indefinitely, as long as they themselves continue to work. The family is one of the crucial factors in hikikomori because often parents act as enablers for children who go into isolation. In Japan, the stigma mentioned previously of being abnormal and needing help further encourages parents to support their hikikomori children to hide the fact that they have a problem (Todd 144). The hikikomori and parents are stuck in a cycle of embarrassment and shame that continues isolation of the hikikomori. Most of the time, parents do not interact with their child save for preparing them meals and leaving them in front of their bedroom door.

Hikikomori have become a topic of interest in Japan, and one of the interpretations of their situation is romanticized to fit into the tradition of the hermit. Some authors, like Todd, see hikikomori as individuals who recognize that Japanese social system is failing them and retreat in solitude to discover a high level of self-awareness (141). The hermit tradition in Japan is rooted in Zen Buddhist and Confucian practices, where isolation is praised for its rewarding reflective effects. While this could be true in some instances, the outlook is too ideal and ignores

the fact that hikikomori do not withdraw to contemplate societal ills. Hikikomori develops out of feeling inadequate and like a failure, and the result is a great shame so strong that they must hide.

Popular Culture

Hikikomori have captured the attention of Japan, and often the image of them in popular culture is more sensationalized than accurate (Jones 5). One example is the case of Nobuyuki Sato, who made national headlines after it was found he had kidnapped a nine-year-old girl and kept her hidden in his room for 10 years ("Man Who Held Girl for Nine Years to Serve 14, Supreme Court Rules"). Sato was ultimately sentenced to 14 years in prison by the Japanese Supreme Court. This is an extraordinary case that does not represent the experience of most hikikomori. Another example is the *Welcome to the N.H.K.* anime series by Tatsuhiko Takimoto, which began as a manga novel and then picked up as an anime series. The plot of the show follows a main character who is a hikikomori, Satou, and convinced that the national broadcasting service N.H.K is actually a front for an organization attempting to convert more people into hikikomori ("Welcome to the N.H.K.").

There is overlap in *Welcome to the N.H.K.* between hikikomori and otaku. While hikikomori isolate themselves out of an unwillingness to participate in society, otaku are people who are addicted to media, usually anime cartoon shows, and choose to watch those programs over socialization with others in real life. Hikikomori are ostracized for their unusual lifestyle choices and reliance on parents into adulthood, especially since Japanese parents rely on their children to care for them in old age (Jones 5). A third identity touched upon in *Welcome to the N.H.K.* is lolicon, which is the eroticization of young girls ("Welcome to the N.H.K."). The purpose of introducing how otaku and lolicon are also incorporated in the series is to highlight that hikikomori is grouped together with other subversive behavior. All three identities are not

seen in a positive light, they are fringe groups whose members are not part of normality.

Case Study of Taiwan

Historical Overview

Taiwan first became a territory of China in 1683, during the period of the Qing Empire. Before that, the island experienced "colonial endeavors" from Spanish and Dutch entities in the early 1600s (Alsford 79). Chinese interest in Taiwan stemmed from attractive natural resources, like sulfur, and also the island climate's ability to procure a double harvest, so rice could be cultivated twice a year and sold on mainland China (Alsford 82). Migration from China to Taiwan consisted mainly of male migrant workers from Southern China, as well as Hakka families (whose name in Chinese translates literally as "guest people"). Hakka people originated from the central Chinese plains and were migrant, often ostracized by other Chinese ethnic groups (Alsford 88). As immigration of Chinese migrant workers increased over the next two centuries to Taiwan, some conflicts emerged between them and the native "aborigines" (a term Alsford uses in his book). Aborigines were seen as savage and in need of civilizing by Chinese government workers. Those who were converted to Christianity by the previous European entities on the island or complied with new Chinese rule were considered civilized (Alsford 87).

Almost exactly two centuries after Taiwan was officially deemed a territory of the Qing Empire, in May 1895, Governor Tang Jingsong declared Taiwan's independence. Taiwan was now a free, democratic government with a president at its head (the first president being Tang (Alsford 156). The new government didn't have much credibility though, and within 11 days it fell, leaving Taiwan in a governance limbo and too weak to defend itself from Japanese invasion, which had been a serious lingering threat since earlier that year in March (Alsford 161). President Tang Jingsong fled the country, and Japanese occupation officially began on the first

day of June in 1895 (Alsford 167). After losing the Sino-Japanese war in 1895, China relinquished its protection over Taiwan since the primary concern was protection of Beijing from Japanese invasion (Alsford 161). This began a 50-year imperialist occupation that ended in 1945, after Japan lost World War II and was forced to give up its imperial and colonial holdings. Still, the influence from the period of occupation is seen in Taiwanese language, culture, and history.

Taiwan's relationship with Japan under Japanese rule was full of contradictions. Eskildsen writes, "Japan did not export modernity to its colonies after it had accomplished its own modernization but, rather, that Japanese colonialism happened concurrently with and contributed much to Japan's modernization process" (389). In a study done on immigration patterns and motives from Okinawan islands to Taiwan, Matsuda investigates some of the impressions Taiwan left on Okinawans searching for non-farming employment. He writes, "migrants who have Okinawan background were recognized as 'the second class national' while mainland Japanese were 'the first class' and Taiwanese were 'the third class' (117). Even with that, Taiwan was recognized as more modernized and hosting more economic and social opportunities for advancement than back in the Okinawan islands (Matsuda 109). In an interview with an Okinawan man who migrated to Taiwan for employment, he cites seeing people from his neighborhood returning from Taiwan in Western-styled dress and looking elite as one source of inspiration to also go to Taiwan (Matsuda 117). During Japanese occupation, Taiwan was regarded as a civilized and established place with its own culture brought from mainland Chinese immigrants.

Social Withdrawal

The presence of hikikomori in Taiwan is eluded to in quite a few scholarly articles, but no examples are given and scholarship that focuses on Taiwanese hikikomori is extremely

limited. Instead, this case study will focus primarily on the social withdrawal studies done in Taiwan. Hikikomori is a form of social withdrawal, with the term formulated for the particular cases found in Japan. Hikikomori is now being applied to instances of social withdrawal in other nations where an individual with no prior pathology withdraws from society out of the fear of failure and also feeling inadequate. The trigger for social withdrawal is the same, where there is an expectation that an individual will follow a standard school to career path and become a successful contributor to their family and greater society.

Wei and Chen write that Taiwanese social norms are, like Japan, influenced by Confucianism (19). There is a hierarchy within families and other social settings and each individual is responsible for fitting into that chain of command and doing their part. In the family, this is illustrated through the parent-child relationship, where the child has the responsibility to listen to their parents and then later take care of them when they become elderly. Before the urbanization and modernization of the twentieth century, it was common for extended families to live in close proximity and for three generations of family to live in the same home: grandparents, parents, and grandchildren. After modernization and urbanization, families moved further apart and it became normal for nuclear families only to live in the same home. Presently, with a lackluster economy, it is becoming common again for adult children to stay living with parents almost indefinitely.

Wei and Chen write, “local culture emphasizes compliance with authority, avoidance of peer conflict, interpersonal relationships, and group orientation” (19). There is an emphasis on thinking collectively rather than individually, and cooperation with the status quo is valued over potentially disruptive individuality. The evidence from a study conducted on peer rejection in Taiwanese middle schools showed that although shyness and timidity are valued culturally as

positive traits, they are still associated with personalities that lack. The lack is a fall below normalcy and therefore a deficient personality behavior. One reason as to why these traits are not favorable in a social situation is "rapid modernization and westernization of Taiwan during the past decades, which has made both individualism and collectivism influential in Taiwanese culture" (Wei and Chen 27). The results of the study indicated that Taiwanese youth's behavioral expectations were growing closer to standards applied to their Western counterparts. Therefore, Taiwanese youth are expected to fit behaviorally somewhere in between the dichotomy of traditional Confucian ideals that promote collectivism and Western individualistic ideals.

With that being said, Chinese parenting style is another aspect of the expectations Taiwanese youth are expected to meet. As mentioned in the literary review section of this thesis, Japanese parenting styles can include shame as a weapon to persuade children to follow their parents' wishes. In a study comparing parenting styles and the effects that style has on children's mental health in Taiwan, Huang et al. find that Chinese youth see authoritarian parenting as an act of love (6). While findings indicate tactics like shaming can help build a child's emotional intelligence (Huang et al. 6), which is the ability to gage other's emotions and respond to their own, it can also threaten a child's self-esteem (12). Chinese parenting in Taiwan is understood as a style that mixes authoritarian parenting with shame that focuses on the parent. For example, on the questionnaire in this same study, one of the response answers to a question that reflected Chinese parenting was, "Tell child that I get embarrassed when he/she does not meet my expectations" (Huang et al. 7).

In a study investigating the existence of hikikomori outside of Japan, Kato et. al collected data from hikikomori cases abroad, which included 19 diagnosed hikikomori from Taiwan. The observations included the following. In Taiwan specifically, hikikomori are more common in

urban areas (Kato et. al 1064). While in Japan the recommended method of recovery for hikikomori is through rehabilitation programs, in Taiwan psychiatrists prescribe self-help as the best mode of intervention (Kato et. al 1071). In Taiwan, as mentioned, adult children tend to be more dependent on their parents economically for longer than Western counterparts. Taiwanese hikikomori may be enabled by the amae between parent and child. Amae is a term that also originated in Japan. Again, this is closely related to the idea of parasaito, adult children who stay living with their parents in order to use extra income on luxurious self-pampering.

Taiwanese internet behavior developed in the 1980s off of a bulletin board system (BBS) model (Ishii and Wu 95). Unlike Japanese youth counterparts, Taiwanese youth who use this system are more accustomed to online collaboration. Taiwanese youth also responded as preferring direct, face-to-face communication rather than mobile texting (Ishii and Wu 113). A demand for direct communication and also a more established trust online encourages a kind of unity and identity. Ishii and Wu write, "An extreme and abnormal form of conflict-avoiding behavior is called hikikomori (long-term withdrawal from society) and has become a serious social problem in Japan." (113). While the tendency towards open communication in Taiwanese youth encourages building connections and openness, it also makes occurrences of hikikomori even more abnormal.

Popular Culture

The overwhelming parental pressure to succeed in education and career is popular in Taiwanese media. Most notably, the theme of parental control comprises the central theme to the Nexflix original Taiwanese series *On Children* (你的孩子不是你的孩子). This is an anthology series, and the episode that best encapsulates the theme of parental guidance to an excess is the first, titled, "Mother's Remote". The episode follows a mother and son, Chen Shu-Li and Chi

Pei-Wei, as they navigate who is in control of Pei-Wei's future. An outgoing boy who enjoys the company of his friends, Pei-Wei has let his grades in school fall and now decided to fake his report card so his mother will let him attend the middle school graduation trip. His mother discovers the plan, and while sitting at the bus stop encounters an advertisement offering to help the parents of underperforming children.

The result of the encounter is a remote control that literally controls her son. Each time he messes up, or does something to make his mother upset, she rewinds his day and keeps doing so until his actions are satisfactory. Pei-Wei lives in constant fear and anxiety, and isn't able to pursue his artistic dreams because his mother wants him to earn high marks for future university applications. What this episode demonstrates is the authoritarian parenting tactics that plague Taiwanese parents. The mounting pressures youth face in trying to please their parents and have success in the education system contributes to the perceived obligation of children to listen to their parents' wishes (Wei and Chen 19). The negative effects are the child feeling depressed and unwilling to keep living in this way, which in "Mother's Remote" is demonstrated by Pei-Wei's repeated suicides.

Analysis

Four main categories will be used to compare the Japanese and Taiwanese case studies in a comparative analysis. These categories are societal pressures, inadequacy and response, fear of failure, and societal system. Further, comparing the help available for hikikomori in Japan and Taiwan will also be discussed, since the resources vary so greatly. An answer as to why it is claimed that hikikomori is only an amplified version of the same social withdrawal found in Taiwanese youth will also be offered. Each of the subsections in this analysis contribute to supporting the thesis statement that hikikomori is not a uniquely Japanese problem.

Societal Pressures

The pressure to achieve academic success in order to later find a secure career is common between Japanese and Taiwanese society. Suwa and Suzuki write that one common trait of hikikomori in Japan is the preservation of an ideal self-developed based off parental expectations of them. In addition, part of the avoidant behavior of staying out of sight in their rooms is to preserve the opinions others have of them (Suwa and Suzuki 194-195). It seems in both contexts, pressure for success can be traced to Confucian ideals of parent-child relationships. In Japan, Confucian social hierarchies formed the base for societal organization during the Meiji Era, which emphasized the empire as a large family system (Batuman 13). In Taiwan, these ideals were transplanted during Japanese colonialism, then further reinforced after 1949 when the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) fled to Taiwan and put in place a system that valued mainland culture over local Taiwanese culture (Hsiau 94).

Confucian parent-child relationships dictate that children have the responsibility to care for their parents when they become older. In Japan and Taiwan, dull economic opportunities leave little room for adult children to find secure careers that can pay them enough to move out of their family home, let alone support elderly parents. From this situation arises instances of parasaito and hikikomori. In these countries, youth are more likely to be economically dependent on their parents compared to their Western peers (Kato et al. 1072). Since Japanese and Taiwanese youth are more inclined to abuse the amae from parents, already the Confucian standards of caring for elderly parents is reduced. Amae, when a child acts selfishly because they know parents will forgive them regardless (Kato et al. 1072), can also in part explain the difference between hikikomori and parasaito children. Non-hikikomori children exhibit this parasaito behavior of staying at their childhood home in order to save money to spend on

indulgent trips and shopping (Todd 145), while hikikomori children also rely on their parents' guilt and sense of duty towards them to remain non-contributing hikikomori.

Inadequacy and Response

Besides the pressure to succeed, group acceptance is a major influence on an individual's self-assessment of how well they integrate into society. A sense of rejection by the majority of classmates during school ages, from elementary to middle school, combined with blatant instances of bullying, plants the seed that an individual does not fit in and is abnormal. Bullying in Japan is not necessarily considered a societal ill (Todd 138). As the title of this paper demonstrates, "the nail that sticks out gets hammered in" actually refers to individuals who stick out and are corrected by their fellow group members. Similarly, in Taiwan, bullying is concluded to stem from withdrawn personalities that do not reach new standards of public interaction set by traditional Confucian ideals and new Western expectations (Wei and Chen 19).

Taiwanese youth who are rejected by the group are seen as shy and abnormal by their peers who reject them (Wei and Chen 19). In Japan, bullying that results in *futoku*, otherwise known as "school refusal syndrome", is seen as the first step towards becoming a hikikomori (Adams 175). At the root of both contexts is the understanding that the group homogeneity is important to preserve and rejection from the group originates in a problem within the rejected individual themselves. Japanese children are raised to be co-dependent on groups for stability and also lack the tools to overcome obstacles due to an inadequate upbringing with disjointed parents (Adams 174). While Taiwanese children do not face the same "poison system" Adam illustrates as being the case in Japan, where children are raised primarily by a mother who feels resentful towards her husband for not being more active in the child raising process (174), they remain dependent on group mentality. Westernization has introduced a force of individualism

while still collectivist thought remains influential and popular (Wei and Chen 25), so there must be some more leeway for children to express themselves without being ostracized.

Fear of Failure

Shame motivates part of a hikikomori's choice to stay to themselves in their room. Taught through bullying that they are abnormal and inadequate, a rejected youth may turn towards hikikomori to hide their inadequacy. In some instances, bullying creates school refusal syndrome, which is then a stepping stone to hikikomori. Dropping out of school begins a series of missed societal milestones, including moving along to college, getting a job, and eventually starting a family. The main group association for Japanese people after graduating from school is with peers in the workplace (Todd 140). Fear of failure is only half of the equation, the other and more dominating fear is that other people will be able to see personal failings. This was the case with Hiromi, who avoided her classmate's father so he wouldn't see she had moved back home (Ishikawa 43). Ishikawa concludes, "These insiders' stories show how their active prevention of unwanted judgements by actively preventing themselves from being seen by others came with a great sacrifice, which is extreme social isolation" (43).

Preventing judgement from others means isolation is a means of self-protection from outside critique. The Chinese words used to express what is translated as "embarrassment" actually summarizes this feeling very well. The two characters 丢脸 (diulian) translate into English directly as "throw face". When expressing embarrassment, there is the option to use either this phrase or a two-character word 尴尬 (ganga). Ganga is more accurately used to express what we call "embarrassment" in English, while diulian implies an embarrassment rooted in shame so intense that it hurts the face, the public facing image, of an individual. The

popular use of "throw face" in Taiwan in place of "embarrassment" implies the importance of preserving the image of oneself in front of others. In the same vein, the Japanese phrase *hikeme* is applied to embarrassment felt when compared to others and being clearly inferior (Ishikawa 42). These concepts of embarrassment that can harm the perception others have of an individual, whether they are really inferior or not, is part of a hikikomori's fear of failure. In Japan and Taiwan, a fear of being embarrassed to the point of shame is so embedded in society that individuals who perceive themselves as at risk of this happening may take measures to avoid it. Clearly for some people, the solution is to find solace in becoming hikikomori.

Societal System

An explanation for why hikikomori cases are not as well documented in Taiwan as Japan could be because Taiwan has not reached the same economic success as Japan yet. Todd writes, "Existential questions of meaning and identity traditionally manifest themselves in wealthy societies as focus shifts from self-preservation to introspection" (140). In Japan, the economy is exhibiting indicators one hikikomori advocate/parent calls "system fatigue" (Todd 142). As previously mentioned, after the 1990 Bubble Economy burst, Japan has not seen the tradition of the salaryman proliferate. One theory presented is that hikikomori are young men who have chosen isolation in response to the pressure to succeed in the salaryman system that no longer exists— this returns to the ills of postmodernity and decreased economic growth (Todd 141).

Taiwan is a former Japanese colony, which the latter occupied from 1895 to 1945. Uniquely, Eskildsen writes one argument is "Japan did not export modernity to its colonies after it had accomplished its own modernization but, rather, that Japanese colonialism happened concurrently with and contributed much to Japan's modernization process" (389). When Todd argues that Japan has a rising hikikomori problem due to the ills of postmodern society, this

further supports that hikikomori is not a problem unique to Japan but unique to the particular circumstances currently facing Japan. In a place like Taiwan, a society that is not labeled as a postmodern society, inklings of hikikomori are present in cases of social withdrawal. Hikikomori is an advanced state of social withdrawal, as Adam writes commonly referred to as a "social disease" (174). It begins to occur significantly after a society has lost the glory it once had and signs point towards the fact that the peak of economic and social prosperity will never return (Todd 142).

Seeking Outside Help

While Japanese hikikomori have an increasing number of rehabilitation programs, like New Start, and experts, like Dr. Tamaki Saito, Taiwan lacks these resources. As Kato et. al discovered in their study of hikikomori outside Japan, Taiwanese psychiatrists often recommend self-help as the best method for hikikomori recovery (1071). An explanation for this discrepancy of resources and recommended modes of rehabilitation most likely stem from familiarity with hikikomori itself. In Japan, there are an estimated 500,000 to one million hikikomori (Suwa and Suzuki 192). As noted earlier, Japan is recognized as the epicenter of hikikomori studies and receives national and international attention for the peculiar lifestyle. Saito himself was the first to name the lifestyle and begin defining and studying it (Jones 5).

Since hikikomori are perceived as a threat to the Japanese national economy and birthrate (Jones 3), there is a higher sense of urgency in dealing with the problem. This explains why there is more attention and resources dedicated to hikikomori rehabilitation. In Taiwan, hikikomori cases are not popular enough to garner the same push for development of programs, as seen also from the lack of research available on specific Taiwanese hikikomori cases. Taiwanese youth are definitely facing the same pressures to find scholastic and economic success but are not yet

taking up hikikomori lifestyles. One potential explanation could be economic, that Taiwanese parents cannot afford to fully support adult children indefinitely. Another is that social connections in Taiwan are stronger between individuals, as seen in the study of bulletin board system internet behavior that encourages collaboration and a preference for face-to-face contact (Ishii and Wu 113).

Amplification of Japanese Social Withdrawal

Returning to the original thesis statement, this paper has aimed to demonstrate that Japanese hikikomori is an amplified version of social withdrawal that is found in other countries, namely Taiwan. Clearly, socially withdrawn youth present in both Japan and Taiwan withdraw due to the same reasons: societal pressures to succeed, an emphasis from parents to succeed particularly in the realms of education and careers, the expectation that adult stability is necessary to fulfill the future role of caring for aging parents, and a feeling of rejection or disconnection from peers. Why then, in Japan, is social withdrawal morphed into hikikomori, the total refusal to interact with others and fulfill an expected life path of educational and career success?

The best explanation formed using the research for this thesis is that in Japan, all these pressures are felt even greater and so is the shame when failing under them. As mentioned, hiding away so others might not discover that life is not going as it was expected is one of the driving forces of becoming a hikikomori. Also, hikikomori are using the time in isolation in thought, as opposed to otaku who are people addicted to anime and videogames and prefer not to interact physically with others. The Japanese hermit tradition has looked at isolation and self-reflection admirably, and authors like Todd view hikikomori as silent rebels that reflect on themselves and Japan's educational and career expectations as following to an extent in this

tradition (143). I argue that hikikomori is not nearly as valiant an act of rejection of society, but instead a self-inflicted punishment that is rooted in anxiety and fear. Economic circumstances in Japan decrease opportunity for youth to find steady, full-time employment but parents are still willing and able to financially support them.

Overall

Combining the analysis in each of these four sections, the original thesis statement is supported. The presence of hikikomori is not due solely to Japanese cultural values. The hikikomori phenomenon arises from high competition in the education and work spheres and an inability to reach the expectations of success from parents. High competition and a limited amount of positions is related to a weakened Japanese economy, also tied into postmodernity. While there is an understood social value of educational and economic success, the loss of other mutually understood societal values, another hallmark of postmodernity, makes it difficult to navigate relationships with others. In Japan, the distinction between *honne* (true feelings) and *tatamae* (facade) discourages honesty (Todd 137), which also conceals internal struggles to meet expectations.

Part of the ills of postmodernity discussed by Todd is "the loss of absolute values and the pervasive sense of alienation" (137). Combining the information that Japanese youth tend to be more conflict avoiding than their Taiwanese counterparts (Ishii and Wu 113) with the duality of true feelings and façade (Todd 137), it is deduced that a lack of emotional availability contributes to hikikomori. A shame that goes beyond embarrassment pushes hikikomori to hide away their perceived failures instead of letting others discover it. Instead of an unwillingness to talk to others about what they may be going through mentally, hikikomori are navigating the absence of tools and opportunities to express their anxieties and frustrations. There is a binary in Japan of

either success or failure, with no room in between for gray areas. This relates to another binary, that between full-time work or no work at all. Ikeida had mentioned in his account of his hikikomori odyssey that when he was graduating college in the 1980s, the term "freeter" and the concept of temporary part-time employment to support yourself while pursuing another passion was unheard of (6).

Further Research

Further research into the causes of hikikomori should definitely continue in the direction of understanding hikikomori as not being a culture bound syndrome. The research of this thesis demonstrates that hikikomori can be more linked to a country's socio-economic circumstance than solely cultural factors. Granted, there is an important connection between a country's socio-economic circumstance and existing cultural values, still hikikomori cannot be linked solely to Japan as a Japanese phenomenon. Missing from this thesis was insight from Taiwanese hikikomori cases, this was due to a lack of availability of individual case studies recorded in articles or scholarly journals. Taiwanese hikikomori definitely do exist, as cited in the Kato et. al study (1064), but insights from the individuals effected should be heard and presented in future studies.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the findings in this thesis indicate hikikomori are for now unique to the social, psychological, and economic circumstances that envelop Japan. However, this is not the same as saying the hikikomori lifestyle is innately unique to Japan. With proof from surveys conducted by Kato et al., it's seen that hikikomori cases do exist outside of Japan (1064).

Societal pressures that contribute to the decision for individuals that do not have pre-existing mental pathologies to adopt a hikikomori lifestyle are primarily sense of failure and

rejection (Suwa and Suzuki 195). Apparent through research on Japanese and Taiwanese social withdrawal is the crucial role peer rejection in school aged children plays in encouraging withdrawal. In Japan and Taiwan, the benefits bullying has in the eyes of parents and authority figures allows peer ostracizing to continue (Todd 139). A view of self as abnormal from peers and a sense of failure to fit in and be like everyone else is a main culprit to school refusal, which later leads to more extreme hikikomori. School refusal translates later as societal refusal when the child grows up and feel jaded from success.

Todd argues that the Japanese societal pressures that create the stage for hikikomori to flourish and spread are in large part due to postmodernism. The loss of consistent values and an overarching feeling of alienation (Todd 137). This outlook refutes the claim that author Jones writes in her *New York Times* article, "Like anorexia, which has been largely limited to Western cultures, hikikomori is a culture bound syndrome that thrives in one particular country during a particular moment in its history" (2). Hikikomori is not a culture bound syndrome but a result of societal, psychological, and economic factors that has the potential to occur in any country. Not only does this mean hikikomori studies will of course be more robust in Japan, where the condition flourishes, but treatment and understanding by medical professionals will also be advanced.

As mentioned in the case studies portion, Japanese and Taiwanese professionals differ in the suggestions they have for hikikomori rehabilitation. Dr. Saito, considered a pioneer in hikikomori and credited with coining the word himself, tells Jones, "I offer them [hikikomori parents] three choices: 1) Come to me for counseling; 2) Kick your child out; 3) Accept your child's state and be prepared to take care of him for the rest of your life. They choose Option 1." (12). Meanwhile, Kato et al. write "Taiwanese psychiatrists choose self-help as the most

preferable intervention for adult hikikomori" (1071). The existence of rehabilitation programs and the push from leaders in hikikomori studies for hikikomori to enter these programs signifies a belief that the condition is not able to be conquered alone. This conclusion comes from a drastically more informed area on the hikikomori condition.

Weak economies discourage adult children from moving out of their parents' homes either because cost of living is too high or because they would rather use extra savings to pamper themselves (Todd 145). Lack of steady full-time work and a stigma against temporary part-time work act as forces against those who are ashamed that they haven't landed anything permanent (Ikeida 6). The most integral role shame plays in turning social withdrawal into hikikomori is that the individual's failure/perceived failure is too much to bare other people also finding out. Without being accepted into the workforce as an active contributor, hikikomori think they are left only with the option of hiding away. In conclusion, if the nail that sticks out is not hammered in, it is then only able to be hidden away somehow from the critical eyes of others.

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