Those Quirky, Shy Kids:
A Comparison of Hikikomori in Four Types of Japanese Media

An Honors Thesis (HONR 490)

by

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Abstract

Since the term was first created in 1998, Hikikomori has been a fascinating aspect in the discussion of Japanese culture. This mental disorder describing those who shut themselves away from humanity for extended periods of time has been frequently used as a trait among characters in various forms of Japanese media. The analysis of four different characters, one each from film, literature, graphic novels, and animated television shows, begins to display how Hikikomori is portrayed within Japanese culture. I compare these four characters to discover any comparisons and contrasts as well as similarities among them and then relate the characters to real-life studies about Hikikomori.

Acknowledgements

First I would like to thank Dr. Sadatoshi Tomizawa for assisting with the creation of this thesis. The fact that he showed just as much interest in this topic as me really motivated me to research for not only my benefit but for his as well.

A huge thank you also goes to my mother who works harder than even I could ever know to make sure no obstacle could impede my path towards the bright future where I can someday repay the endless kindness, love, and support she has shown me.

I will also never forget the lessons I learned from my Grandma Tom. Her passion for learning and dedication to showing me the wonders and mysteries of the world throughout my childhood is easily the most significant factor in how I came to be the person I am today. Though she may no longer be on this earth, the lessons I learned and the passion I gained from her will always live on in me.

I would also like to thank Madeline Gardner. My fellow Japanese soul mate who has accompanied me throughout my entire career studying Japanese language and culture. Plus her grammar editing was appreciated as well.
Introduction

Tokyo, Japan on July 23rd, 1989, a girl screams as a naked man attempts to insert a camera underneath her dress ("Kobe Murder," 1997). The girl's father chases after the man, who is eventually captured when he returns for his car ("Kobe Murder," 1997). The capture of this man, named Tsutomu Miyazaki, brought about the end of a series of murders carried out by the infamous "Otaku Killer." Until his incarceration, Tsutomu Miyazaki killed and then molested four girls from four to seven years old ("Kobe Murder," 1997). Among the plethora of mental issues the man suffered from, he also fit the characteristics of a growing group of the Japanese population known as Hikikomori. This form of acute social withdrawal involves people shutting themselves away from others for months or even years at a time. Unfortunately, Miyazaki is only one of many Hikikomori whose notorious actions brought worldwide attention to this condition.

This topic has been something very near and dear to my heart for quite a while now. I first heard of the disorder back around 2004 when I was a freshman in high school. The method of discovering the topic was rather unusual since it came from watching a movie called Nobody Knows. While the movie itself has nothing to do with Hikikomori, the plot revolved around the true story of a group of children left to live alone in their home after their mother left them. The heart-wrenching movie motivated me to research the back-story, which lead to researching of problems within the Japanese society. Hikikomori was one of the disorders that came up and I developed a fascination. The stories of people who
suffer from Hikikomori, were almost surreal in the level of delusion that the people suffered. The topic was so captivating that I chose it as the subject of my speech in Academic Decathlon, a nationwide academic competition in various fields of study such as mathematics, history, and even speech. After making the speech and winning a gold medal for best speech in the state, I felt it became evident that others might be interested in this topic of Hikikomori. Even now I still occasionally look into newer cases of people with Hikikomori or if there is any new findings about this mental disorder.

Since the term was first created in 1998, Hikikomori became a fascinating aspect in the discussion of Japanese culture (Dziesinski, 2011). The term gained popularity to the point of being featured in a variety of Japanese media. From animated shows, to films, to literature, Hikikomori has increasingly become popular as a character type. While some are relegated to supporting roles, others are central to the plot. The presence of these characters in media is a reflection of the culture that demands them and is having a recursive effect, creating new perceptions of the mental disorder. Through analyzing various examples of Hikikomori in media, one can observe how the public seems to perceive this condition and the message the creators of the media wish to characterize Hikikomori.
Problem Statement

Hikikomori is a general new phenomenon within the realm of mental health. Tamaki Saito originally coined the term Hikikomori in an academic paper discussing the disease (Dziesinski, 2011). In that document he claims as much as 20% of all male adolescents or around 1% of the total population of Japan suffer from this disease (Saito, 2002). A statistic like this set the Japanese media on fire that if such a problem was so large, how could it go unnoticed until now?

The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare even took notice of his paper and defined Hikikomori as those who fit within a certain set of criteria:

1. The person shuts himself or herself at home for at least six months.
2. The person has no intimate relationships with other than family members.
3. The social withdrawal is not a symptom of other psychotic disorders.
4. The social withdrawal refers to not taking part in any social activities, such as school and work settings (Itou, 2003).

The term itself literally translates to “pulling away” or “withdrawal” which might be a proper way to describe the people with this disorder (Dziesinski, 2011). They pull away from humans and withdraw themselves into their rooms for months or even decades for most of the day. Those outside of Japan also use this term as other psychologists identify people in their own countries that seem to suffer from the same affliction. These places may also call the condition “acute social withdrawal” instead of the Japanese term (Saito, 2002). A study by the
Department of Neuropsychiatry at Kyushu University sent questionnaires to nearly 250 psychiatrists throughout the world and the results concluded that “patients with the hikikomori syndrome are perceive as occurring across a variety of cultures” (Department of Neuropsychiatry, 2011).

This disorder is often used interchangeably with agoraphobia but there are some key differences. Agoraphobia involves the fear of being out in the open and around others but Hikikomori display this as well as dissociative identities, fear of humans, and emotional numbness (Hattori, 2006). Though the primary identifier of a Hikikomori is voluntarily shutting oneself inside for long periods of time, other identifiers are also noticeable.

Yuichi Hattori conducted a case study on thirty-five Hikikomori in order to discover some other factors that might be common with Hikikomori. He discovered that among his clients, all of them displayed a distrust of humans, 71% showed signs of having dissociative identities, 66%, depression observed in 46% of those observed, and even 23% had some form of amnesia (Hattori, 2006).

In his case study, Hattori also looked into factors that could have contributed to the clients becoming Hikikomori, particularly through similar experiences of childhood trauma. He discovered a particularly high amount of emotional neglect by the client’s parents. The vast majority, 91%, admitted to emotional neglect and 54% also noted they experienced emotional abuse from their parents through a form of discipline known as “mushi” (Hattori, 2006). When a parent uses “mushi,” they deliberately ignore and shun their child for extended
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periods of time (Hattori, 2006). For example, if a child were to misbehave, the mother would lock the child out of the house for hours and refuse to allow the child back inside. This form of discipline is meant to encourage proper behavior by showing that misbehaving would result in being removed from the group and not being accepted by others. The clients also noted that bullying was a common factor in their childhoods, particularly in the form of "ijime" (Hattori, 2006). Classmates would bully others often through "mushi" or physical violence (Hattori, 2006). The clients even mentioned that parents and teachers would not even attempt to mitigate the bullying, only saying the child must have a reason for being bullied and to just "stay away from them and they will not harm you" (Hattori, 2006). The Hikikomori take this advice to the point of staying away from not only the bullies but also humanity in general.

The collection of these factors create a prime situation for a Japanese person to shut himself off from the world as his only option to feel safe in a world that he feels is consciously out to hurt him emotionally and physically.

Research Questions

There are three primary questions for this research: (a) to determine what are the common characteristics among Hikikomori in various Japanese media? Besides the common characteristics, (b) what differences can be observed among Hikikomori in various media? Finally, (c) how do the analyzed characters compare to the clinical definition of Hikikomori?
Research Tool

For this research, four types of Japanese media categories were observed for their depictions of Hikikomori. The four types of media are literature, Manga (serial graphic novels), films, and Anime (animated television shows). For each type of media, one character was chosen to represent the category. Tatsuhiro Sato from the novel Welcome to N.H.K. was chosen to represent the literature category. For Manga, Kiri Komori from Sayounara Zetsubou-Sensei was selected. Densha Otoko (Train_Man)'s Hirofumi was designated to represent film. Finally, L from Death Note was selected to represent Anime.

In each of these cases, the works were observed in a translated form. For the manga and literature the English translations were read. However for the Anime and film, the original Japanese versions were used with English subtitles. In all cases, professional translations were used in order to keep as closely to the original interpretation as possible.
The research produced the following information and characteristics for each of the four characters, which could determine the possible variables for comparison for analysis.

**Novel:** Tatsuhiro Sato from *Welcome to the N.H.K.* (Takimoto, 2007)
- 22 years old
- College Dropout
- Unemployed for four years
- Believes Hikikomori is part of national conspiracy
- Seeks help for his condition
- Casual user of legal psychedelic drugs
- Paranoid
- Hallucinates “agents” are out to get him
- Lives alone
- Supports himself with parent’s allowance
- Must be coaxed to leave home
- Thinks about suicide

**Manga:** Kiri Komori from *Sayounara Zetsubou-Sensei* (Kumeta, 2012)
- 17 years old
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Hikikomori Senior Thesis

- Pale complexion
- Carries around a safety blanket
- Usually curled up or hunched over
- Paranoid
- Absent from school frequently
- Seeks treatment from counselor
- Thinks about suicide
- Falls in love with her teacher
- Easily scared
- Lives away from family
- Lives first at home then at school, rarely leaving either

Film: Hirofumi from Densha Otoko (Kaneko, 2007)

- High school age
- More comfortable with online persona
- Has a pet bunny
- Eats exclusively in his room
- Never leaves room throughout film
- School dropout
- Rude to mother
- Usually hunched over
- Understanding of other people's emotions
- Keeps room messy
- Particularly skinny

**Anime:** L from *Death Note* (Death Note, 2006)

- 25 years old
- Separate identities
- High intelligence
- Paranoid distrust of people
- Unhygienic
- Lacks emotion
- School dropout
- Asexual
- Strange eating habits
- Poor posture
- No family
- Insomniac
- Obsessive compulsive habits
- Spends most time indoors
Comparison of variables:

Five variables were chosen among the character lists because they represented the most common attributes among them as well as a limitation to five specific traits allows for more in-depth discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Tatsuhiro</th>
<th>Kiri</th>
<th>Hirofumi</th>
<th>L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rarely leaves home</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little family connection</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paranoia</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Dropout</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor Posture</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each of these characters, a decent amount of variables could be found that describe each of them as interesting, complex characters. In order to compare them, the most common variables among all of them that seemed the most applicable for all without too much of a stretch were chosen to be the variables used within the table shown above. For each of these variables, additional comments are said for each character.

Rarely leaves home

First, all characters are noted for rarely, if ever leaving their home. Tatsuhiro lived home alone and did not even need to leave for a job due to being supported financially by his parents. Kiri is frequently absent from school, staying only at home and when the protagonist attempts to motivate Kiri to come to
class, he frightens her from her home and subsequently takes up residence at
the school where she then also refuses to leave. Hirofumi does not ever leave his
room throughout the film except in a dream sequence and at his very last scene
in the film. L would probably be the most adventurous out of the characters,
ocasionally making a public appearance when necessary but generally keeps
himself indoors whenever possible.

**Little family connection**

All four characters seem to have little to no family connection. Tatsuhiro,
while supported by his parents, makes a point to live on his own so as to be
away from them. Kiri comes to live at the school on her own and away from her
parents, typically being supported by adult figures such as teachers or
counselors rather than her own parents. Hirofumi does live with his parents but
ignores or rudely responds to her mother when she attempts to talk with him or
bring him food. L grew up in an orphanage and so has no family connection.

**Paranoia**

Many of the characters showed signs of paranoia as well. Tatsuhiro
believed Hikikomori was a national conspiracy developed by the government to
make the general population feel better about their own selves by making
Hikikomori seem worse by comparison. He even hallucinates demonic “agents”
of the conspiracy are lurking around him. L also showed signs of paranoia
throughout his work as a detective, distrusting others both to his benefit and
detriment. Hirofumi, however, did not seem to show any overt signs of paranoia
in the film.
School Dropout

Tatsuhiro dropped out of university and is now in his fourth year of unemployment. Hirofumi is high school age but never leaves his room, implying he no longer attends school. L joined a university with Light Yagami for one episode of the anime but is never again mentioned as being a student, implying he dropped out. Kiri, on the other hand, lives at the school though she rarely ever shows up for class.

Poor Posture

Kiri is typically drawn is hunched over or curled up within her safety blanket. Hirofumi is hunched over his desk at the computer in almost every scene. L is actually recognized by characters and fans alike for his unique posture when standing and sitting. The author of *Welcome to N.H.K.* did not particularly mention the posture of Tatsuhiro so he could apply to this variable but this is not certain.

Discussion

The collection of attributes for each of these characters highlights how complex many of them are in their stories. I find these characters to be excellent examples of Hikikomori. Comparing them to real-life Hikikomori has a striking level of similarity as well as many of the traits for each of these characters are shared among them as well.
An interesting point for about these characters is how they compare to real-life Hikikomori. Yuichi Hattori conducted a case study in 2006, studying 35 of his Hikikomori clients. Hattori’s research discovered a variety of common symptoms among his clients, as illustrated in this graph. His case study discovered all of the clients showed a distrust of humans. A super majority of the Hikikomori also had dissociative identities, a phobia of humans, insomnia, and emotional numbness. The interesting point about Hattori’s research is that Hikikomori is not a single mental issue for the people that fit within the category. Many of these people also appear to suffer from a myriad of other mental health problems that could contribute to or be a result of the person becoming a Hikikomori.

Many of these symptoms can be seen in the characters analyzed earlier. Tatsuhiro, Kiri, and L all showed some distrust of humans to the point of paranoia and Hirofumi showed distrust of his parents. L and Hirofumi both seem to have dissociative identities, with L’s true identity never revealed throughout the anime, frequently using various separate identities as the story progressed. Hirofumi interacted with others through his online identity rather than his own, showing he had greater confidence in his online persona than with his non-digital self. Tatsuhiro and Kiri both discuss their thoughts about suicide, another trait more...
common among Hikikomori. The presence of these other mental health problems in the characters shows the effort by the writers and creators to make characters similar to real-life Hikikomori such as those studied by Yuichi Hattori, rather than simple stock representations of a single characteristic.

Despite many of these characters showing similar characteristics as the Hikikomori observed in the case study, they might not be classified as Hikikomori under the guidelines set by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. As stated earlier, the Ministry established four criteria for classification as a Hikikomori that may eliminate even proclaimed Hikikomori characters. The first criterion, "shutting himself or herself at home for a period for at least six months," could disqualify any of the characters if they should happen to leave home even for short periods of time (Saito, 2003). This ties into the fourth criterion, "not taking part in any social activities such as school and work settings," which would eliminate someone like Kiri Komori, a character specifically created to represent Hikikomori, because she shows up for class occasionally (Saito, 2003). Many of these characters express some form of development of an intimate relationship throughout their story arc, negating the second criterion of having "having no intimate relationships with other than family members" (Saito, 2003). L develops a friendship with Light Yagami and views Watari as a father figure. Tatsuhiro Sato discovers he has feelings for Misaki Nakahara and confesses his love for her. Kiri Komori falls for her teacher and takes care of him at the school. Even Hirofumi shows a distinct relationship with his pet rabbit. The remaining criterion requires that the "social withdrawal is not a
symptom of other psychotic disorders” meaning a psychologist could look at some of their symptoms and identify them purely as sufferers of some other mental illness and not as a Hikikomori or as both. This criterion is particularly difficult when looking at research such as the case study conducted by Yuichi Hattori, who identifies a variety of mental health problems that the government, psychologists, or health insurance companies, who could place these Hikikomori into other illness categories while ignoring the issues specifically related to being a Hikikomori. The comparison of these characters to the clinical definition of Hikikomori highlights the restrictive and debilitating definition created by the Japanese government. If these characters were to exist within our reality, the government could disqualify many of these people from treatment due to technicalities.

Another interesting point of discussion relates to whether the characters identify as Hikikomori. Out of the four characters analyzed, only Tatsuhiro Sato and Kiri Komori identify themselves or are identified in their story as Hikikomori. Hirofumi is not directly called a Hikikomori in the film but his character description identifies him as a Hikikomori. Death Note, on the other hand, does not use the term “Hikikomori” at all, even in relation to L. Despite the lack of L’s identification as a Hikikomori, he seems to have the most of the characteristics relating to Hikikomori. In the table listing all the variables, only L applied to all five while the other three characters had a variable that did not. This shows how Hikikomori can have a presence in Japanese media even when the characters are not specifically identified as such. This result emphasizes my decision early on to
include L as one of the four characters. Before conducting official research I believed L seemed to fit within the category of Hikikomori just from casual observation and the collection of variables certainly supports the idea that not only is L within the realm of Hikikomori but also seems to be one of the best examples of a Hikikomori within Japanese media.

One final point about these characters is that many of them are portrayed in a positive manner. Hirofumi is a shy boy who assists his friend with dating advice, despite having little human interaction himself. Kiri Komori is the quirky and easily frightened student who is believed by one of her classmates to be a zashiki-warashi, a mythical creature of good fortune. L would technically be identified as the antagonist in *Death Note* but only in that he works against the actions of the protagonist, Light Yagami, who kills anyone he deems evil or unfit for belonging in his new world order. Tatsuhiro Sato may be the only exception being that despite being the protagonist in *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, he is portrayed as a man fighting against addiction, his fears, and literally even his own demons as a result of his condition. He is the only character to undergo treatment for being Hikikomori and shows progress as a result of that treatment.

This positive portrayal of Hikikomori is somewhat frightening to me. While these characters come off as innocent, quirky, or heroic, real-life examples of Hikikomori are far less optimistic. People like Tsutomo Miyazaki, who was described in the introduction, exemplify the dark side to this mental disorder. Even besides the many serial killers Hikikomori like Miyazaki, the more “typical” Hikikomori living throughout Japan are also a detriment to the society. Tamaki
Saito makes the claim that around 1% of the Japanese population is Hikikomori, meaning that millions of Japanese people refuse to leave their home and enter the workplace (Saito, 2002). Because of this, the Hikikomori population is often associated with the NEET group. NEET is an acronym meant to describe young people “Not in Education, Employment, or Training” and was originally coined in the United Kingdom but is used within Japan as well (Scottish Executive, 2005). Essentially the problem with Hikikomori being also within the NEET group is that these people reduce the economic capacity of the family and nation by taking up funds and resources to support their introverted lifestyle while not contributing back to society in a quantifiable manner.

One could understand that the creators could attempt to capitalize on this large population by creating characters similar to them but the positive manner, sometimes to the point of deluded optimism, could encourage the Hikikomori to maintain their behavior or even suggest to some Japanese youth that becoming a Hikikomori is something to be commended rather than a condition that deserves treatment.

Conclusion

Overall, analyzing these four characters presents a wealth of information about Japan, its media, and its culture. All four of these characters have a variety of aspects that create their personalities, with some relating to them being Hikikomori while other do not. Some of these aspects are common among multiple characters and seem to represent common perceptions about
Hikikomori. Particularly, these characters even show similar symptoms as real-life Hikikomori, even if they may not fit perfectly within the Japanese government’s definition of the condition. The research also discovered that some characters could fit the criteria for Hikikomori even though they might not be identified as such within the story. Finally, the research notes that Hikikomori are mostly portrayed in a positive manner within Japanese media.

This research did come with a certain set of limitations that could interfere with the information reaching its full potential. One such limitation is that this research only involved four characters or only one character per media type. The research could also be limited as a result of translation, with some aspects about the characters being lost during the transition from Japanese to English. Another problem is that this research was limited to the identification and comparison of Hikikomori in Japanese media. This research did not involve the effect of these characters in media on the audience and culture nor the factors to influence the creators’ decision to include Hikikomori within their stories. Finally, this research only involved the presence of Hikikomori within Japan and not with other people or characters in other nations as well.

Works Cited


