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Epistemologies of the Withdrawn: Exploring *Hikikomori* Subjectivities in Digital Spaces

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Asian Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

Epistemologies of the Withdrawn: Exploring *Hikikomori* Subjectivities in Digital Spaces

by

William Ian Hunter

In recent years, the “phenomenon” of *shakaiteki hikikomori*, translated from Japanese as social withdrawal, has risen to international prominence. Originally considered a uniquely Japanese issue, its growing presence in other countries is illustrative of its global presence. Often referred to simply as *hikikomori*, the term refers to individuals who retreat from their daily social interactions to spend prolonged periods secluded in their homes, for months or even years at a time. The term itself carries a dual meaning, indicating both the state of extreme social withdrawal and those struggling under such circumstances. Differing explanations have been offered by various disciplines, principally from the fields of psychology and psychiatry though more recently anthropology and sociology, with no consensus across fields. As a result, *hikikomori* studies have fallen under two epistemological models: an individual/medical model that sees withdrawal as a matter of individual pathology that must be treated and overcome; or a social model that sees *hikikomori* resulting from the structures in the social environment requiring reintegration of the individual.

Hikikomori drop out of more traditional or accepted forms of communication and social interaction. Yet, some *hikikomori* have taken to the virtual space of the internet as a new

way to make connections; however, to date such interactions have not been studied. This work is meant to address this gap in scholarship by examining the posts and comments of withdrawn individuals belonging to the community Hello Hikikomori, on the English language forum-based website Reddit.com. Analysis of the texts from members of this community reveal what I have termed *hikikomori* subjectivities, encompassing the myriad experiences that lead them to identify with the term despite its foreign origin. At the heart of these subjectivities are feelings of inability, and in recognizing this I argue that *hikikomori* embodies an experience of the built world as socially disabling. Individuals withdraw because they do not feel they can participate in normative mainstream society, and instead live lifestyles bounded by the things they “can” and “cannot” do. In this work, I illustrate this by drawing from the words of individuals in withdrawal the different ways they experience inability in their lives, and how the physical act of withdrawal acts as a coping mechanism for dealing with experiences of social disablement.

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Introduction

The term “*hikikomori*” originated in Japan in the late 20th century, gaining widespread acknowledgment in the 1990s after the publication of psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki’s work *Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End* in 1998, and Saitō is often credited with popularizing the term. Meaning “withdrawal,” *hikikomori* refers to individuals who have withdrawn into their homes for months, years, sometimes even decades at a time, some rarely leaving their rooms much less their homes during these periods. They do not work, attend school, and frequently sever social contact with friends and family. Some individuals in withdrawal may leave the home to attend appointments or take walks in the middle of the night when no one else is around, but otherwise live in self-imposed isolation from those around them.

The term carries strong associations with mental health and heavy pathologization, with studies for instance showing avoidant personality disorder being the most common comorbidity (Hayakawa et al. 2018, 1). *Hikikomori* as a pathology can take different forms, and frequently appears in scholarship as stemming from the individual or society as a whole, depending on the discipline of the scholar. While often thought of as a “condition” or “syndrome,” as will be discussed further in chapter two, the term itself is often used as shorthand for a symptom. Deriving from the Japanese term *shakaiteki hikikomori*, translated into English as social withdrawal, most scholars working in the field elide the first word and simply refer to it as *hikikomori*, a noun which can refer either to the individual in, or the state of, withdrawal. Some scholars have also chosen to selectively translate the term, such as anthropologist Amy Borovoy, who wrote of what she calls “social hikikomori,” referring to, “hikikomori not rooted in clinical pathology, and plays into deeply held beliefs...that

shape daily life.” (Borovoy 2008, 555) However, in arguing for a notion of “social hikikomori” as reflecting a social pathology Borovoy ignores the original meaning of *shakaiteki hikikomori* as social withdrawal.

Hikikomori is often thought of as a peculiarly Japanese “phenomenon” given the origin of the term, but when looking on the internet a person can find different spaces across different languages where individuals in withdrawal come together, such as the English-language forum Hello Hikikomori, an online community on Reddit.com where I conducted seven months of digital fieldwork from July 2021 to February 2022. This reflects the growing body of scholarship on the “spread” of *hikikomori* or people in withdrawal outside of Japan, including such varied places as South Korea, Finland, Italy, Spain, Oman, Hong Kong, and Scotland. (Saitō 2013; Husu and Välimäki 2017; Ranieri 2018; Malagón-Amor et al 2015; Sakamoto et al. 2005; Wong 2020) In certain cases this may have to do with cultural similarities such as cohabiting into adulthood, which Saitō notes as potentially the case in South Korea, Italy, and Spain. (Saitō 2013, 6)

What posts on Hello Hikikomori reveal is the growing relevance of the term “*hikikomori*” not only to the lives but the identities of individuals in withdrawal all over the world, and the extent to which *hikikomori* has reached into the global imaginary. The mere fact that non-Japanese individuals from across the world gather as a community, on an English-language website, is testament to the idea that *hikikomori* can no longer be considered a purely Japanese “phenomenon.” Most importantly for my purposes, what the quotes reveal is that *hikikomori* should be thought of less as a mental health disorder or a “syndrome” but instead a lifestyle, and one that has completely dominated the ways individuals in withdrawal think about themselves and society. The *hikikomori* lifestyle is one

marked not only by physically withdrawing oneself into the home, but mentally disengaging with the world around them. As I will show, not all individuals identifying with the term can be easily understood as physically isolated given that many do work or attend school. Instead, a withdrawn lifestyle can better be defined as one in which an individual feels and maintains a distance with normative society, where they live minimalist lives apart from the mainstream and often struggle greatly with their mental health and well-being.

To date there has been little ethnographic work done on *hikikomori*, and the scholars who have performed such work have focused on individuals in mental health treatment or parents involved in support groups. (Ismael 2020; Rubinstein 2016; Horiguchi 2011) Though many scholars point to the importance of digital spaces and the internet as places where many *hikikomori* are, in fact, socially engaged, very little research has attempted to engage with this emergent *digital* sociality. Most often people think of *hikikomori* as a “muted” group, but a glance at forums such as Hello Hikikomori shows this is not the case. This space represents a clear case where *hikikomori* and those who associate themselves with the term actively come together *as a community*, as opposed to scholarship that often casts withdrawn individuals as social outcasts or a population marginalized by contemporary normative society. As a result of *hikikomori* being thought of solely as recluses alone in their rooms, attention is not paid to how they come together in these digital spaces.

I seek to address this gap in scholarship by bringing those in withdrawal to the fore and centering this work on their voices. Attending to the words of these individuals reveals new epistemologies that go beyond academic and popular perceptions of the issue. Instead, doing so uncovers the many different ways *hikikomori* see and understand their lives in relation to society as a whole. They develop their own unique subjectivities based on their

shared experiences, and these subjectivities are marked by expressions of inability. These *hikikomori* subjectivities, as I term them, illustrate how understanding their feelings of inability point to withdrawal as embodying experiences of the world as socially disabling.

Reddit and the Hello Hikikomori Community

In this thesis, I introduce an *innovative approach to conducting digital fieldwork* in a community wherein the experience of public spaces as socially disabling precluded me from conducting in-person fieldwork. While the covid-19 pandemic pushed many ethnographers to explore remote or digitally-based ethnography, my thesis showcases how I developed an innovative approach to engaging with the Hikikomori community, a community that had already developed complex social interactions in online spaces. As I describe in more detail here, my interest in understanding community members' experiences of social withdrawal led me to focus on a communal space highlighting their words in conversation with one another. Rather than seeking to conduct more traditional one-on-one type ethnographic interviews or semi-structured surveys, I utilized publicly available digital spaces through online forums on Reddit.com, a forum-based social media website where millions of people around the English-speaking world can come together to share their lives and experiences. In particular, I chose to hone in on the language, words, and expressions used in posts and interactions shared with one another on the Reddit forum, Hello Hikikomori,¹ an online community on Reddit.com. Created in 2009 as “a public place to discuss the experience of social and psychological isolation,” Hello Hikikomori is a space where individuals interested in or drawn to the term *hikikomori* gather to share their experiences, thoughts, and

¹ Subreddits on Reddit.com are usually preceded by “r/”; however, I have chosen to use the name for the target community in the case of Hello Hikikomori to distinguish it from others. All other subreddits mentioned will be preceded by “r/.” Example: r/Lonely.

opinions about their lives and how the term relates to them. The demographic information of these users can only be gleaned from the contents of posts and comments should users provide such information, but the community is comprised of individuals from all over the world, including North America, South America, South Asia, East Asia, and Europe, ranging in age from mid-teens to some members in the sixties. The dispersed nature of the userbase across the globe makes comprehending the demographic makeup of the community difficult. As I argue below, however, by focusing on the language, text, and shared narratives posted by this community, my approach to words and language, rather than individual voices, lent itself to analysis of *hikikomori* grounded in shared experiences across cultures. When I first came across the community in fall 2020, membership in Hello Hikikomori only numbered 4700 users; however, as of this writing in early 2022, that number has increased to over 7200. The continuing pandemic caused by COVID-19 has likely spurred the large increase in forum membership, though direct mentions of, and discussions about, the pandemic have decreased from when I first encountered Hello Hikikomori and the period of my digital fieldwork from July 2021 to February 2022.

There are thousands of communities on Reddit, known as either subreddits or subs as I will hereafter be referring to them, and once an individual creates an account on the site they can form their own communities, join others, and begin making their own posts or commenting on them². Subs can and often do form around any conceivable interest. Some only have a handful of users and likely belong to small groups of friends or acquaintances, while other subs have memberships numbering in the millions. In the top right of any

² When discussing comments to posts, I will refer to the person originally posting as OP (original poster), which is common terminology used to refer to them among Reddit users.

community's page is an icon stating, "Join," and belonging to a sub is as simple as clicking on it. Unless the moderators, or mods, of certain subreddits set their communities to private, anyone is open to join. Just below this in a small rectangular space is a brief "About" section, explaining the nature or the topic of the sub as well as the current numbers of members and those logged in at that time.

Just beneath the membership numbers is a "Create Post" icon, and once a user joins that sub they are able to begin posting to it. Some subs require a certain amount of karma points or user account age in order to post, particularly ones frequented by young teens, especially for reasons such as weeding out possible child predators. Karma points are attained through receiving upvotes on any posts or comments made. In the upper left of any post, and any comments they receive, are up and down arrows used for "upvoting" and "downvoting" them. They can be considered equivalent to "likes" or "dislikes" a person might find on Facebook or YouTube. The greater the number of upvotes then the greater the visibility that post will receive on members' personal Reddit feeds, increasing its potential viewership and indicating overall user support among visitors to the particular sub. Conversely, the greater the number of downvotes something receives the less likely it will be encountered in a Reddit feed and indicates general disapproval among the Reddit userbase.

Fieldwork and Methodology

My primary fieldwork consisted of engaging with the Hello Hikkikomori community for a period of seven months from July 2021 to the beginning of February 2022. During this time, I analyzed and coded posts and comments related to feelings of inability and/or whether they included inability rhetoric. I coded these postings according to their use of

inability language, but also according to thematic lines focusing on what users felt they were unable to do. As noted earlier, this approach to conducting digital ethnography was innovative in focusing on commenters' words, tracking the types of discussions and themes that generated the greatest engagement, and trying to understand the shared culture of inability rhetoric based on the types of postings that gained the most traction. From tracking these conversations across seven months, I observed that many users come to the sub through what they see as the growing relevance of the term *hikikomori* to their lives, particularly those recent individuals in quarantine or isolation, though this is sometimes contested by others in the forum. All posts on Hello Hikikomori are written in English, though as noted above users come from all across the globe; however, very rarely do individuals offer their location information within the content of their posts. As a result, understanding where these users speak from is difficult or impossible to assess. Certain posts were coded or cross-coded into categories related to lifestyle, work, disability, loneliness, and suicidal ideation to name a few. Doing so allowed me to observe in greater detail the ebbs and flows of conversations within the sub, and how discussion of certain topics are driven by certain individuals at different times.

In choosing to engage solely with the words contained within posts and comments, rather than the individuals behind these texts and the ways in which they represent the narrativity or performativity of those in withdrawal, I am making a conscious decision to employ a new ethnographic method that is not reliant on the type of thick description or individualized subject voices that are conventionally employed to craft ethnographic accounts. As noted above, this type of description is near impossible to achieve for a forum such as Hello Hikikomori given the lack of readily available demographic information, and

user unwillingness to openly provide it. I have also chosen to engage with the words of users rather than users themselves not just due to the time considerations of this project, but because many members publicly display an antipathy toward researchers and journalists “data-mining” the subreddit. The moderator at one point even went so far as to pin a post to the top of the sub’s feed instructing outside observers of how to proceed in the forum. I considered it ethically questionable to dwell on singular voices, either through posts and comments or by invasively examining their profiles, but focusing solely on the words allowed for a greater analysis of this community as a whole: how they express themselves, how they interact with one another, and how they feel about their lives in relation to the world at large. This approach also provides a much greater understanding for what discourse on a forum site is like to an outside observer.

When attempting to capture the “voices” of this community, the transitory nature of many of its participants presents a challenge. Relying on posts and comments places focus solely on their “words” since very rarely do any singular individuals stand out. Even if they do they may delete their profiles, cease posting or commenting on the sub, or take a break for months before returning. Other members may move from making their own posts to just commenting on others, in a pseudo-mentor or advisory type of role. My research examined posts and comments from over a hundred unique users, and to single out any individual user would have necessitated tracking their activity and scraping their profiles in a manner that I believe to be invasive. However, I would contend focusing on the voices of these individuals as expressed in their words more accurately depicts activity and interactions in these spaces, as opposed to focusing more attention on specific individuals active within the subreddit.

Users of Hello Hikikomori define themselves using what I describe as inability rhetoric, and their lives in a sense become bounded by the things they believe they are unable to do. Inability rhetoric refers to the usage of language by users to characterize themselves in terms of what they “can” or “cannot” do. For instance, many individuals discuss their inability to hold down a job for a significant period of time, make friends and maintain those relationships, attend school, meet obligations, confront problems, interact with others, and simply the ability to enjoy things. Many find that they have lost their passion for everyday activities such as watching TV, reading, video games, and *anime*, or Japanese animation; the things they use to cope with their lives in withdrawal. Inability permeates the many different facets of their lives to the point where such notions dominate forum discourse surrounding *hikikomori*, and becomes an underlying theme in the community and *hikikomori* as a lifestyle. But where do all these feelings come from? How do they arise? What do the withdrawn measure themselves against?

The posts and comments reflect personal narratives and histories of negative social interactions that reinforce feelings of inability, often stemming from bullying or feelings of ostracism. Often expressions of inability arise when these individuals measure themselves against normative mainstream society, especially relative to societal benchmarks or expectations that they feel they cannot meet. To users of Hello Hikikomori, understandings of terms such “normal” or “normative” are embodied by the figure of the “normie,” which acts as a point of comparison for withdrawn individuals because the normie represents what society wants and expects; what *hikikomori* fail to become. I go further into depth on the relationship between *hikikomori* and the normie in chapter two, but to members of the forum, the normie represents the standard and accepted life course for an individual:

graduating from school, getting a job, being able to function socially, finding a significant other, and building relationships. These all encompass things *hikikomori* believe themselves incapable of doing.

As mentioned above, prior fieldwork methodologies for studying *hikikomori* have focused on those in treatment, mental health practices, and support groups for parents of *hikikomori*; however, in spite of frequently acknowledging the presence they have online no work has yet been undertaken in digital spaces. This work is meant to address this gap in *hikikomori* scholarship. Posts and comments by withdrawn individuals give largely unfettered access to their thoughts and emotions, and the role of Hello Hikikomori as a space for an intersubjective process of meaning-making where users try to make sense of their lives in isolation. This reveals the growing identification with the term to encompass individuals who would not fall into standard definitions, but are drawn to it because the lifestyle reflects their own feelings of inability.

In consideration of the ethicality of this project I have communicated with my university's Office of Research, which determined that I was exempt from needing IRB approval given that I am not directly interfacing with human subjects. I am analyzing texts that are all a part of the public record and not locked behind digital barriers such as passwords. Posting on Reddit includes an option for polling a community surrounding certain questions, but given this gray area of interacting with the userbase I did not conduct any polling of Hello Hikikomori members. All users have been deidentified and the wording of posts and comments has been changed with the intent of still reflecting the spirit with which it was first written.

Chapter Outline

I argue that the pervasiveness of inability rhetoric within the subreddit points to a shared experience among members of the built world as one that is profoundly socially disabling, to the point where they feel they cannot take part in it. In order to do so one must go beyond thinking of *hikikomori* simply in terms of mental health or syndromes or social pathologies, and instead focus on the individuals themselves and how they experience living. What they have to say about their lives and how they feel, allowing their words to guide research rather than fitting it into ideas, structures, or frameworks. What is revealed in doing so is a collection of subjectivities that point to a shared ontological experience of the social world as unwelcoming and as a site that amplifies feelings of social disablement, as opposed to one that can be experienced as enabling.

Understanding *hikikomori* as embodying feelings of inability links it directly to disability and disability studies since it is society that users perceive as invoking these emotions. In the first chapter, I begin by not only reviewing previous scholarship of *hikikomori* but also consider how this body of work maps onto the two most predominant models of disability: the individual/medical and social models. Awareness of the ways these two discourses mirror each other opens a path for an interrogation of *hikikomori* from a disability studies-informed perspective, one drawing from the work of Tobin Siebers and Alison Kafer that seeks to move beyond the individual/social binary to better understand what these lived experiences can tell us and how they inform different understanding of what I term a *hikikomori* subjectivity.

The second chapter is an ethnographic examination of inability in Hello Hikikomori through analysis of posts and comments from members across a seven-month span from July

2021 to the beginning of February 2022. As noted above, all posts were written in English and I begin by reviewing these digital texts to understand what the term “*hikikomori*” means to this group and how they see it as a part of their lives. I then move on to further elaborate on the idea of a *hikikomori* subjectivity as cluster of personal experiences drawing individuals to the term because of how they see their lives embodied within it. Not only that, but it is a subjectivity of inability, and I proceed to illustrate how this is expressed in an understanding of withdrawal as a lifestyle, attitudes toward employment, and the contradictory nature of “neetbux” as enabling a life marked by inability. As a point of comparison I set posts in Hello Hikikomori alongside posts in Japanese from *hikikomori* users of the forum site 5chan, to illustrate that despite how many view *hikikomori* as a Japanese “phenomenon,” non-Japanese and Japanese individuals in withdrawal have much in common regarding attitudes toward work, lifestyles, and income, proving that *hikikomori* can no longer be considered an issue unique to Japan or the Japanese.

Hikikomori are most frequently discussed within the context of contemporary Japanese society, and as a category, they are often placed in conversation with other groups in Japan such as NEETs and *otaku*, a Japanese term referring to “nerds” or “geeks.” However, rarely do *hikikomori* get compared to similar groups along experiential lines. In the final chapter, I begin by looking at *hikikomori* as a behavioral coping mechanism rather than a symptom or syndrome, and one that has more in common with self-harm behaviors. After comparing Hello Hikikomori with the subreddits *r/SelfHarm* and *r/SelfHarmScars* to illustrate withdrawal as a coping mechanism, in the following two sections I examine how it functions in relation to two of the most common experiences expressed by Hello Hikikomori users: loneliness and suicidal ideation. In these two sections I compare the subreddits with

similar ones along an experiential basis to show how withdrawal dulls or numbs the pain of Hello Hikikomori users as a way of coping with their lives in isolation, in comparison to the users of other subs who often express a seemingly greater amount of pain and suffering.

For the members of Hello Hikikomori, not only does the forum offer a space to write their thoughts and share their experiences, but it also allows for anonymity. Users can and do delete their profiles, and rules in the forum encourage many to use “burner” accounts aside from their main Reddit account in the event they decide to leave the community. Moderation of subreddits often depends on the specific sub in question, but the mod for Hello Hikikomori does not often interject themselves into conversation in order to censor them, but instead to try and steer them in certain directions. But most importantly, *hikikomori* utilize social spaces such as Reddit as a means of being differently social when they feel alienated from participating in mainstream society. Another purpose of this paper is to highlight how withdrawn individuals use this social space and sociality to come not only to a better shared understanding of their lives, but also how the physical act of withdrawing acts as a coping mechanism.

Chapter One: Understanding *Hikikomori*

In early July of last year, the moderator of Hello Hikikomori posted a clipped image on the forum from a news article about Oyamada Keigo, the Japanese musician originally set to compose music for the opening ceremony at the Summer 2021 Olympic Games in Tōkyō. Oyamada chose to resign after revelations that in previous interviews he described bullying classmates with disabilities as a young student. In them, Oyamada “boasted about bullying people including his classmates in his childhood,” and admitted to past statements that he did so “without any regrets.” (*Japan Times*, “Keigo Oyamada quits Olympic opening ceremony”) The post itself only received five comments, two of which were from the moderator themselves. One of the mod’s comments was simply a link to the news article, while the other comment was a response to a Hello Hikikomori member. This commenter asked the moderator what relevance the article held to the community, to which the moderator responded with their belief that *hikikomori* and social isolation resulted from excessive bullying.

For many members of the forum this certainly holds true, given their shared experiences dealing with childhood or workplace bullying. But the subject of disability went unnoticed, and though the post received 24 upvotes, noting a degree of consensus among users, it remains likely that this support resulted from experiences of bullying that resonated more strongly within the community. This work is meant to illustrate that, through understanding feelings of inability expressed by those in prolonged states of social withdrawal or isolation, *hikikomori* embodies an experience of society as socially disabling; it is what prompts these individuals to feel “unable” and isolate themselves. However, the above post represents one of the few times disability comes up among the community, and

never as a sole topic of discussion in itself. On the rare occasions when disability appears in posts it is used in passing or disparagingly. As one user described in December 2021, they would commit suicide were it not for their fear of “failing and ending up handicapped. Being disabled is even worse than death.” This same user reiterated this sentiment in a January 2022 post in which they described their fear of becoming “socially disabled.”

Much like in the forum, potential linkages between *hikikomori* and disability have not been made in academic literature. From its inception, *hikikomori* has been understood in terms of pathology and mental health, and discourse surrounding withdrawal has been dominated by psychiatric and medical perspectives. The frequent prevalence and mention of comorbidities such as depression or avoidant personality disorder lead both scholarly and popular understandings of *hikikomori* to focus on mental health issues, both within Japan where most work on withdrawal has been done and in other countries. Saitō contends in his work that *hikikomori*, “is fundamentally a problem having to do with the mind,” (Saitō 2013, 35) and scholarly perspectives continue to come most often from psychiatrists and psychologists, though a growing number of scholars write more clearly of *hikikomori* as a social pathology arising from social factors in the environment. Over the past 10-15 years an increasing number of new investigations of *hikikomori* have come from sociological and anthropological perspectives.

However, despite the introduction of new disciplinary understandings of, and research on, *hikikomori*, work nevertheless falls into two predominant models that have become the most common ways of approaching the issue of withdrawal. Scholarship typically casts *hikikomori* as either an individual/psychological pathology in need of being treated or overcome, originating within the individual and their own mental state and well-

being; or as a social pathology resulting from structures in the built environment. Indeed, Berman and Rizzo invoke this binary by suggesting that scholarship, “rest[s] on an arbitrary distinction between a medical model invoking clinical archetypes, and a social model, drawing on tired tropes of modernity and social change.” (Berman and Rizzo 2019, 792) They contend that, “Both models provide the platform for a rhetoric of blame and responsibility, and the inevitable victim figure that results.” (Ibid.) Each model seems more interested with explaining the forces that prompt withdrawal rather than engaging with withdrawn individuals themselves, resulting in the absence of *hikikomori* voices. In this chapter, I seek to illustrate the way discursive models of *hikikomori* reflect the two dominant models of disability: the individual/medical and social models of disability. Then I move on to illustrate how disability theory can help shed light on the lives of those in withdrawal, and finally briefly examine the anthropology of subjectivity and why it is so important to understand the many possible layers of a *hikikomori* subjectivity.

***Hikikomori* and the Individual/Medical Model**

The individual and medical models are often conflated and considered as one and are “very closely aligned,” though both have their own characteristics. (Kafer 2013, 5) Alison Kafer notes that the individual model sees disability as, “best solved through strength of character and resolve,” and in her view the individual model is embodied best in the disability simulation exercises often undertaken by able-bodied individuals promoting awareness to “understand” what life is like for those living with a disability. (Ibid., 4) In these exercises, individuals will attempt to understand what life is like for the blind or deaf by covering their eyes or stopping their ears, “present[ing] disability as a knowable fact of the body.” (Ibid.) Similarly, given the ongoing pandemic, widespread quarantines and

isolation measures have in effect functioned as *hikikomori* simulation exercises, albeit unintentionally. Many in academia and the media see in *hikikomori* the potential to learn “lessons” for dealing with isolation, and for example Kato et al. even use the same scale invoking criteria for *hikikomori* to measure social isolation among individuals impacted by the pandemic given what they see as similar behaviors and tendencies. (Kato et al. 2020, 506) Key to such simulations to Kafer, and equally true for those seeing “lessons” in isolation, are the absence of authentic voices and experiences, and the different ways individuals embody those experiences and subjectivities. Instead, the individual model often links itself to notions of “overcoming” obstacles such as impairments through strength of will or one’s personal character.

In the medical model, disability theorist Tobin Siebers, “defines disability as an individual defect lodged in the person, a defect that must be cured or eliminated if the person is to achieve full capacity as a human being.” (Siebers 2008, 3) He goes on further to describe how it is, “a property of the individual body that requires medical intervention.” (Ibid., 25) Kafer sees a medical framework casting, “atypical bodies and minds as deviant, pathological, and defective, best understood and addressed in medical terms,” and what is most important to her understanding of the medical model is the way it “characterizes” disability in purely medical terms. (Kafer 2013, 5) As mentioned above, approaches to *hikikomori* often pathologize withdrawal and come from psycho-medical perspectives, viewing it as something best solved through psychiatric treatment, medication, or psychotherapy. Just as the medical model of disability sees it as something to be “cured” or “eliminated” through intervention, a medical model of *hikikomori* sees it as something to be treated in order to return to normative social functioning.

Work on *hikikomori* mirrors the individual/medical model of disability because it is seen in individual terms as something to be either overcome (individual) or treated through intervention (medical); something inherent in the individual that must be put behind them in order to get better. Krieg and Dickie have echoed notions of overcoming in relation to *hikikomori* by arguing that the presence of peer support groups around the withdrawn individual will enable them to overcome heightened levels of anxiety resulting from experiences of rejection and bullying in education settings. (Krieg and Dickie 2011, 69)

Anthropologist Sachiko Horiguchi has written extensively on *hikikomori*, and she notes the presence in Japan of different types of support groups, self-help groups, and the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare's 3-step model, all designed to reintegrate *hikikomori* into society through overcoming their personal obstacles. (Horiguchi 2017, 63-63) Elsewhere she has written of the importance of parents and family in overcoming a withdrawn state, and how such support groups for parents, "are seen as the key in *hikikomori* support." (Horiguchi 2011, 222) She writes of how these groups, which function as a form of self-help for parents of *hikikomori*, are a crucial part of the process through the sharing of experiences of raising a withdrawn child and one of the best ways to help them overcome it. Ellen Rubinstein further emphasizes the important role played by the family in this process by arguing that parents find hope in their withdrawn children's future potential to overcome their situation as a justification for their continued caregiving and support. (Rubinstein 2016, 644)

More often than discussed as something in need of overcoming, *hikikomori* is seen as something that needs to be treated, and this has been the dominant way of viewing *hikikomori* from its inception with Saitō's work. He argues that, "It is absolutely necessary

to understand social withdrawal as a pathological system,” and moreover that, “Psychiatrists should make efforts to alleviate this system.” (Saitō 2013, 24) Saitō thus directly pathologizes *hikikomori* and sets it within the realm of psychiatry, and similar to Horiguchi and Rubinstein he places a great deal of emphasis on the family as part of this system and how they, “must cooperate fully to treat a withdrawn child.” (Ibid., 123) He further contends that not only is treatment necessary, but in situations when withdrawn individuals refuse, the parents, “have the right to lead their child toward treatment.” (Ibid., 99)

In one of the earliest anthropological works on *hikikomori*, Amy Borovoy notes that, “Rehabilitation into normal life is the key goal of treatment, and pharmaceuticals are most often thought of as a means to regulate the body and the person’s daily routines. (Borovoy 2008, 556-557) Indeed, Berman and Rizzo point to the tendency for treatment of *hikikomori*, “to draw on mainly clinical or psychiatric approaches with psychotherapy, and in some instances psychopharmacology,” as key modalities in the progress of patients. (Berman and Rizzo 2019, 794) Elsewhere, Kubo et al. have developed a 5-day intervention program designed to be implemented by family members of *hikikomori*, which includes training programs in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) to deal with mental health issues such as depressive symptoms and avoidant behavior. (Kubo et al. 2019) What these different perspectives have in common is the necessity of viewing *hikikomori* as something that needs to be treated, as any disease or illness, in order to return the individual to normal functioning as an adult.

***Hikikomori* and the Social Model**

In addition to the individual/medical models of disability, the social model is the most widely adopted framework for disability studies. The social model sees disability in

relation to the environment, and Tobin Siebers writes that it, “opposes the medical model by defining disability relative to the social and built environment, arguing that disabling environments produce disability in bodies and require interventions at the level of social justice.” (Siebers 2008, 25) By seeing disability as a product of one’s surroundings, Siebers contends that, “The social model challenges the idea of defective citizenship,” that a medical understanding of disability and the body inevitably creates. (Ibid., 73) Kafer further suggests that the social model, “relies on a distinction between impairment and disability...[where] impairment refers to any physical or mental limitation, while disability signals the social exclusions based, and social meanings attributed to, that impairment.” (Kafer 2013, 7) Both Siebers and Kafer see disability within the social model as a creation of the built environment, and Siebers’ notion of defective citizenship based on the body dovetails with Kafer’s understanding of impaired bodies dealing with experiences of exclusion.

This social understanding of disability is reflected in the work of many scholars on *hikikomori* and Japan, particularly in relation to certain social factors such as the uncertainty surrounding the labor market since the Japanese recession beginning in the 1990s. American anthropologist Anne Allison sees the issue of withdrawal in relation to both *hikikomori* and NEETs (those not in employment, education, or training), viewing it as a, “form of refugeeism...This social precariousness is linked to, but hardly coterminous with, that of the precarity of work, labor, and the economy of today.” (Allison 2013, 70) For Allison, individuals are not withdrawing as a result of issues related to their mental health or well-being, but a social environment and incredibly uncertain labor market that leaves them feeling excluded. She further notes the tendency on the part of some in Japan to envisage withdrawal as a form of protest against a government that doesn’t, “protect its youths from

the precarity and precariousness they are susceptible to.” (Ibid., 71) She specifically writes of *hikikomori* as, “refugees from one kind of ordinary,” the normal life of going to school, acquiring a job, having a family, and the impairment for which they are excluded is their inability to adapt to the normative standards placed on them. (Ibid., 73)

Since most work on *hikikomori* has been done within an understanding of Japanese society, some scholars also link the unpredictable labor market to the erosion of traditional Japanese values and the government’s inflexibility to adapt in the face of changing conditions. Norasakkunkit et al. argue that young people, which in their work includes *hikikomori*, are, “caught between the post-industrial pressures being exerted on Japanese society and stiff resistance to those pressures at the institutional level.” (Norasakkunkit et al. 2012, 365) They emphasize traditional Japanese values of collectivity, and how those on the margins have, “become alienated from indigenous cultural values without switching to other values in a coherent way.” (Ibid., 366) The Japanese government fails to fashion new policies designed to increase job inclusion for those on the periphery, and *hikikomori*, are, “among the segment of the population that has incurred the greatest cost of policy response to protect mainstream Japanese institutional practices.” (Ibid., 374) Elsewhere, Norasakkunkit and Uchida have argued that *hikikomori* become increasingly marginalized due to, “consciously rejecting dominant cultural values of harmony-seeking and consequently deviating in their motivation to conform to others’ behaviors.” (Norasakkunkit and Uchida 2014, 918) In their view, normative social values and expectations of behavior create conditions in the environment for the production of *hikikomori*.

***Hikikomori* and Disability**

Recognizing how *hikikomori* discourse mirrors disability models opens up an opportunity for an interrogation of the issue of withdrawal from a new epistemological perspective. Tobin Siebers writes of the ideology of ability that it is a preference for able-bodiedness, and that, “ideology creates, by virtue of its exclusionary nature, social locations outside of itself and therefore capable of making epistemological claims about it.” (Siebers 2008, 8) These social locations can comprise many different types of identities based on race, ethnicity, gender, or disability each of these groups, being excluded, can shed light on the prevailing dominant ideology. Most importantly, these social locations are, “capable of making epistemological claims about it.” (Ibid.) *Hikikomori* and those with a *hikikomori* subjectivity represent such locations, and a subjectivity that is rarely thought of as belonging among the categories Siebers describes; however, I believe the prevalence of inability rhetoric among users of Hello Hikikomori links it directly to disability. *Hikikomori* subjectivities are not static, and encompass a broad range of experiences. These individuals represent social locations falling outside mainstream and normative social expectations, and understanding them along with how they are steeped in feelings of inability casts light on a socially disabling world.

Siebers’ theory of complex embodiment offers a useful alternative conceptual model through which to comprehend the lives of those in withdrawal. He writes of complex embodiment that it, “raises awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people’s lived experience of the body, but it emphasizes that some factors affecting disability...derive from the body...[these factors] belong to the spectrum of human variation...and they need to be considered in tandem with social forces affecting disability.” (Ibid., 25) The relationship

he describes, between the individual and the disabling environment, is “reciprocal” and “mutually transformative,” and under a model of complex embodiment persons with disabilities, “are recognized by the use of knowledge acquired by embodiment...Here the ‘social’ in the social model refers to what disabled people know about society as a consequence of embodying it.” (Siebers 2019, 42) As has been shown above, scholars often study *hikikomori* through a social lens, seeing in the bodies of withdrawn individuals the embodiment of social issues and problems. Even under individual and medical models of *hikikomori*, the factors that could be said to “derive from the body” are often seen as originating from the environment instead of how the two may act upon each other. These approaches do not consider the knowledge *hikikomori* themselves embody, the different epistemologies that they bring to bear, and how further investigations of them could enrich our knowledge of those in extreme withdrawal.

In order to grasp the *hikikomori* experience it is necessary to understand who they are relative to their surroundings, and I find the “relational” aspect of Alison Kafer’s political/relational model of disability particularly constructive here. In Kafer’s model, “the problem of disability no longer resides in the minds or bodies of individuals but in built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being,” and the social patterns she speaks of are, “ideological systems that attribute normalcy and deviance to particular minds and bodies.” (Kafer 2013, 6) But key is when she notes that under her model, “disability is experienced in and through relationships; it does not occur in isolation.” (Ibid., 8) Just as the disabled person experiences their disability in relation with environments unaccommodating to their bodies, I contend the same holds true for members of the different subreddits under discussion in

their relations with normative society, and their “minds and bodies” are thus seen as deviant or abnormal. Feelings of inability are relational, and not exclusive to any one group, and individuals exhibit behavioral responses as a means of coping.

As will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, *hikikomori* are frequently characterized not only by their physical isolation but by the fact that they do not work, and attitudes toward them as a non-working population mirror those toward persons with disabilities. Alison Kafer writes, “Disability, then, is defined as a lack of productivity; in a move that brings the word closer to its roots, being disabled means being unable to work.” (Kafer 2013, 54) For Kafer, the inability of disabled persons to work becomes conflated with achieving adulthood, and the same holds true for *hikikomori*. As the subtitle to Saitō’s book notes, many consider it an “adolescence without end.” Both disabled persons and *hikikomori* are seen as non-working or unproductive for different reasons, but Kafer’s description of disabled persons as “being unable to work” rings very true for those in withdrawal. For persons with disabilities, the inability to work can often arise through physical limitations in the built environment that impede the individual’s ability to work. Workplace environments are often not built to accommodate nonnormative body types, and as a result many persons with physical and intellectual disabilities find gaining employment incredibly difficult.

Subjective Experience and *Hikikomori*

Up to this point I have resisted referring to users of Hello Hikikomori as “*hikikomori*,” primarily because users may or may not identify with the term, and applying any type of label to their experience would misrepresent both it and them. Many users do not consider themselves *hikikomori* but instead are drawn to it for other reasons, such as similar

experiences of social isolation or bullying. Hello Hikikomori represents a safe space to share life stories involving trauma, bullying, or depression, experiences common across different demographic groups. However, the main reason I resist the urge to reference users is because posts reveal that the experiences associated with the term, those drawing these users in, are too vast and encompass too many experiences to be collapsed under one label. Instead of thinking about users as being *hikikomori*, I choose instead to think of them as having “*hikikomori* subjectivities.”

By subjectivity I refer to the individual experiences and understandings of each given user, one sometimes shared with other members and sometimes not. Tanya Luhrmann writes that, “subjectivity implies the *emotional* experience of a *political subject*...the subject’s distress under the authority of another.” (emphasis in original, Luhrmann 2006, 346) While users do not often speak of themselves as political subjects, frequent references to a society from which they feel ostracized and unable to partake in speak to a feeling of being under another’s authority. As a user in August of 2021 put it, “fuck society and it should be burned to the ground.” Withdrawal and isolation symbolize responses to a society users feel cut off from. But even more, it represents an emotional experience, and posts can contain emotionally charged language ranging from sadness to anger. Many users share the same experiences but come away with different understanding of them, and, “the same events can trigger different appraisals...in different individuals and different settings.” (Ibid., 353)

Loneliness lies chief among the experiences associated with withdrawal. In her work on loneliness in contemporary Japan, Chikako Ozawa de Silva writes, “It is also a society whose people do not feel taken care of and cared for by society as a whole, and whose

structures promote a sense of loneliness rather than one of belonging and connection.” (Ozawa de Silva 2021, 6) While users of Hello Hikikomori are drawn to the forum for different reasons and associate with the term based on their own lived experience, “loneliness is an affective and subjective reality,” (Ibid., 12) and she defines subjectivity as, “first-person experience and the internal structures of the body and mind that shape experience.” (Ibid., 20) The centrality of loneliness to the lives of many users shapes Hello Hikikomori into a “shared world,” and since “all experience is intersubjective,” the forum transforms into a space where these individuals create their own personal subjective understandings of their lives in tandem with each other, making sense of their surroundings through this dialogue. (Ibid., 21)

Understanding the different subjectivities users bring to bear in this intersubjective experience helps one to develop a firmer grasp on what the term means to these individuals. A *hikikomori* subjectivity also helps elucidate the position these individuals see themselves occupying in society. As João Biehl notes in *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, subjectivity is, “a battleground in which separation and exclusion [has] been authorized and as the means through which [one hopes] to reenter the social world.” (Biehl 2005, 6) Coming from his anthropological study of Caterina, a woman living in the asylum Vita and struggling to survive in the liminal spaces of Porto Alegre, Brazil, the sense of social abandonment noted in her and others in her situation rings similarly true for how many users of Hello Hikikomori also see themselves. As a user posted it in October 2021, they had never experienced a time when, “society didn’t treat me like a piece of shit,” to which another user responded to the OP by concurring and saying, “modern society straight up sucks.”

In *Vita*, Biehl goes on to write that, “Catarina’s subjectivity is discovered in her constant efforts to communicate, to remember, to recollect, and to write – that is, to preserve something unique to her – all of which take on new and special import in the zone of abandonment where she and I encountered each other. (Ibid., 24) She “struggled to transmit her understanding of the world and herself,” in much the same way many forum users do in their posts, struggling to comprehend their lives in withdrawal and isolation away from normative society, and in their own way feeling abandoned by those around them. (Ibid.) Hello Hikikomori members encounter each other in this digital “zone of abandonment”, and a *hikikomori* subjectivity becomes the “battleground” where users discuss, share, or openly contest meanings of the term while attempting to remain a part of society by exercising a limited degree of sociality. This intersubjective exercise offers a glimpse into the lifeworlds of those in prolonged withdrawal, and specifically what aspects of the term and its associated experiences carry such an allure. All point not only to a subjective of inability, but one also marked by persistent struggle.

Creating the Struggling Subject

Collectively, the posts and comments across each of these subs comprise what Arthur Kleinman terms “illness narratives...a story the patient tells, and significant others retell, to give coherence to the distinctive events and long-term course of suffering.” (Kleinman 1988, 47) They are personal narratives of the short- and long-term pain users of Reddit experience on a daily basis. He further writes that these are “local systems of knowledge,” and in places such as a subreddit, “shared meanings will be negotiated among individuals.” (Ibid., 13) The intersubjective space of the forum allows for the shaping of subjectivity through shared experiences, and crucial is what Kleinman suggests by stating,

“That tale of complaints becomes the text that is to be decoded by the practitioner cum diagnostician.” (Ibid., 15) Kleinman wrote his work for medical practitioners dealing with their patients, but the same holds up equally well for ethnographers. What comes to the fore by examining these trails of texts is a shared sense of suffering, one that is widespread and similar across users of Hello Hikikomori, r/Lonely, or r/SuicideWatch.

Anthropologist Joel Robbins contends that the “other” was the main object of anthropological study but argues, “that from the early 1990s onward to an important extent it has been the suffering subject who has come to occupy its spot.” (Robbins 2013, 448) This shift in focus placing the suffering subject as the discipline’s primary object of study occurred, “when trauma became universal, when it came to define a humanity without border, that anthropologists found a foundation for their science that allowed them to dispense with the notion of the other completely.” (Ibid., 454) The words of Hello Hikikomori users are replete with notions of suffering, and as anthropologist Janis H. Jenkins suggests, “suffering here is a mode of experience through which the ethnographer finds occasion to analyze extraordinary experience, power, meaning, emotion, and illness.” (Jenkins 2015, 93)

Attending to these feelings allows one to better understand the overall experience, but I find Jenkins’ notion of struggle over suffering instructive in what she terms “extraordinary conditions.” These are conditions “that are culturally defined as mental illness” but also “constituted by social situations and forces of adversity.” (Ibid., 1) Specifically, she writes that central to her understanding of extraordinary conditions is the, “human capacity for struggle.” (Ibid.) It is a “fundamental human process,” and one, “embedded in the often profound and even courageous social engagement with living,

working, and caring for others despite an onslaught of subjective experiences.” (Ibid., 2) *Hikikomori* itself has most frequently been defined as a mental health condition, and what makes it extraordinary are the “onslaught of subjective experiences” that I would argue have been ignored up to this point. While focusing on the suffering of individuals on Hello Hikikomori would be all too easy, I stress their ongoing capacity to struggle, particularly those users whose posts often reflect daily life as a struggle to simply get by and survive.

Siebers writes that, “embodiment seen complexly understands disability as an epistemology that...embraces what the body has become and will become relative to the demands on it.” (Siebers 2008, 27) This work is entitled “Epistemologies of the Withdrawn,” because for individuals in withdrawal there is no one single way of understanding why they have chosen to live in such isolation. Each individual carries with them their own epistemology. Hence then need for a recognition of *hikikomori* subjectivities, and the many different and varied ways they interpret and share their experiences, and how the intersubjective meaning-making of Hello Hikikomori illuminates this shared sense of inability and struggle across the experiential spectrum. Scholars of *hikikomori* have yet to truly grapple with “embracing” *hikikomori*, the minds and bodies of withdrawn individuals and what they bring to the table, but doing so is necessary if we ever hope to achieve a full understanding of such a complex issue as prolonged withdrawal.

Chapter Two:

Living the Hiki Life: Subjectivities of Inability and the Lifeworlds of *Hikikomori*

Hikikomori means mental disorder.

Isn't this sub about people trying to achieve the hiki lifestyle?

I think being hiki is more a state of mind than something physical.

It's a disability caused by depression and anxiety.

The subreddit Hello Hikikomori represents an intersubjective space where individuals from across the world and all walks of life debate the meaning and applicability of the term *hikikomori*, and one can discern through their posts and comments the different epistemological claims they make about the societies from which they withdraw. Each member brings their own experience of withdrawal, isolation, or alienation to bear as thoughts and emotions are shared back and forth. In this chapter I will begin by looking first at what *hikikomori* stands for among those with *hikikomori* subjectivities, what they believe it does or does not mean, and how that relates to current academic understandings of the term. Then we will examine *hikikomori* subjectivities, and specifically what I argue are a collection of subjectivities defined by feelings of inability that dominate their lives and sense of selves. Inability thus becomes an intrinsic part of their identity. In the following sections I hone in on three of the areas where inability rhetoric and feelings appear with the greatest frequency: *hikikomori* as a lifestyle of inability, the inability to attain or maintain employment, and disability income as enabling a life characterized by inability. Members of Hello Hikikomori join the forum to share their subjective experiences and life stories, and understanding them collectively rather than individually helps us understand not only what drove them into isolation but also what keeps them there.

What is “*Hikikomori*” to Hello Hikikomori?

Hello Hikikomori is a community where individuals primarily outside Japan come together to discuss the term *hikikomori* and its relevance to their lives. The common denominator among these individuals is their ability to communicate in English, the lingua franca of the sub in which every post and comment is written. But how does the community understand the term “*hikikomori*?” Not just its meaning but what it represents or symbolizes to them? As the opening epigraphs show, the meaning of *hikikomori* is multivalent, and carries different connotations to different users, and for many becomes a label. For some users the term actually has a liberating effect, particularly those in search of something to help them make sense of their lives; discovering a term they can identify with, despite their misgivings about the life they lead, helps anchor their realities. For others it carries more negative undertones and feels constricting. *Hikikomori* is often spoken of not simply as a term to describe prolonged withdrawal or isolation, but instead as a lifestyle, whether or not by choice. A post from January 2022 asked the community why they decided to become a shut-in, and many users described it in agential terms: “been a pretty unconscious decision,” “my choice at first but a gradual one,” “by choice because of abuse,” and “it began as a decision to isolate myself but just snowballed into a way of life.”

Frequently, others speak to the positives of withdrawn life. A user in October of 2021 states, “it’s a lonely life but at least I have freedom.” In December a user wrote that isolation gives them, “the freedom to rot away on their own time.” While another in August said that they, “enjoy the safety of isolation when they’re alone at home.” For most if not all members of Hello Hikikomori, the term is inextricably tied to mental health, and as the very first epigraph shows many see it as a mental disorder in itself though it has never been

officially labeled as one, either within or outside of Japan where discourse originated. Users frequently tie *hikikomori* to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, and autism. It is unclear whether or not many users have been diagnosed by a professional given that some list multiple diagnoses, or if they are diagnosing themselves. Individuals in psychiatric or therapeutic treatment would receive a primary and perhaps secondary diagnosis, but posts from users stating they have five or more mental health disorders makes me believe they might self-diagnose since it would be unethical for a practitioner to over diagnose. However, as one user in January put it, they believe “hikis are just ugly guys who can’t integrate because they’ve got a disorder.”

Understanding the words of those in withdrawal helps us understand the influence and impact of academic understandings of *hikikomori*. As previously discussed, research on withdrawal has been dominated by either individual/psychiatric or social models that closely mirror the individual/medical and social models of disability, and in the posts on the forum one can see users describing their situations in both individual and social terms: either they withdraw due to mental illness or because they cannot integrate into normative society. In his recent monograph on *hikikomori* in Japan, psychoanalyst Nicolas Tajan echoes user feelings about the meaning of the term when he writes *hikikomori*, “is neither medical nor well-defined.” (Tajan 2021, xv) Instead he defines it as, “a phenomenon of social withdrawal and the individual concerned.” (Ibid. xi) In both academic and popular sources, the words “phenomenon” and “syndrome” become frequent buzzwords to describe withdrawal. A syndrome connotes a group of signs or symptoms frequently associated with a certain disorder, and many scholars describe *hikikomori* as such. Rosenthal and Zimmerman write that, “*Hikikomori* is a social behavioral syndrome that has appeared more

frequently among Japan's male adolescents," (Rosenthal and Zimmerman, 83) while Stip et al. equate it with, "prolonged social withdrawal syndrome." (Stip et al., 6) And anthropologist Chikako Ozawa de Silva simply refers to it as, "social withdrawal syndrome." (Ozawa de Silva 2021, 136)

The term "phenomenon" rarely comes up in the sub, but the way Hello Hikikomori members often speak of withdrawal dovetails closely with the term "syndrome;" however, over the course of my digital fieldwork I never encountered it in posts or comments. Many users also see their situations as being caused by their environments, socially disabling worlds that illicit feelings of profound inability in members. More scholars today take an approach to *hikikomori* from sociological or anthropological perspectives that consider withdrawal as a reaction to social environments. Institutions create the conditions and ultimately cause individuals to seek isolation. Berman and Rizzo have written that people, "perpetually cast hikikomori as an irretrievable social problem." (Berman and Rizzo 2019, 792). The notion that *hikikomori* are deviants or deviant subjects also arises, and they go on to state that, "The social anxiety surrounding hikikomori is strongly connected to notions of failed economic participation on behalf of the deviant subjects." (Ibid., 802) In speaking of specifically Japanese *hikikomori*, Norasakkunkit and Uchida state that they, "devia[te] from the Japanese cultural mandate toward conformity for the sake of harmony." (Norasakkunkit and Uchida 2014, 922) Likewise, Sachiko Horiguchi writes, "Media representations of *hikikomori* as a social 'problem' reflect domestic concerns around youth precarity." (Horiguchi 2017, 68) These academic readings of *hikikomori* come from studies done within a purely Japanese context, but to reiterate the notion of withdrawal as unique to Japan is belied by the activity shown by members of Hello Hikikomori.

While academic readings and understandings of *hikikomori* are not easily accessible to the average person, both individual and social interpretations of *hikikomori* are present within the community and different users tend to invoke one more than the other. Some see it solely as a mental health issue, while others associate it strongly with society in general and especially not working or being unproductive. As a result of the lack of access to scholarly discussions of *hikikomori*, many users come to an understanding of it through the work of Saitō Tamaki or popular representations in the media. Saitō is widely credited with coining the term and was the first to attempt a clear definition in 1998 in his work *Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End*: “[Hikikomori is] a state that has become a problem by the late twenties, that involves cooping oneself up in one’s own home and not participating in society for six months or longer, but that does not seem to have another psychological problem as its principal source.” (Saito 2013, 24) Saitō’s definition and description of *hikikomori* has had a potentially large impact on Hello Hikikomori users given it is the only book-length work widely available and affordable to the public, and even more so because the second rule of the forum directs users to read it should they wish to learn more. Instead, many turn to other forms of media to further their understanding.

Often users point to *anime* as their introduction to the term *hikikomori*, particularly *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, a 2006 *anime* aired in Japan featuring a *hikikomori* as the protagonist. The frequency with which users mention a love of *anime* not only points to how they come across the term, but also an affinity for Japanese culture that may underlie identification with the term. YouTube videos are another frequent source of information for Hello Hikikomori users who either want to learn more about the life or who desire escape from it, a very common sentiment expressed in posts and comments. However, the overall

lack of information and sources lead many individuals in withdrawal to forum sites such as Reddit and the sub under discussion, and these sites become places of intersubjective meaning-making where feelings of inability come to the fore. Hello Hikikomori is a place for this kind of intersubjective dialogue, where posts reveal a shared ontological reality of a socially disabling world, and the users participating in these discussions highlight the overlapping, complementary, and opposing subjectivities at work among those in withdrawal.

Gatekeeping *Hikikomori* Subjectivities

Users of Hello Hikikomori find appeal in the relatability of the term due to its connotations describing parts if not all of their life experiences, and this meaning-making process is crucial to their greater comprehension. Inability and feelings of perceived inability lie at the heart of a *hikikomori* subjectivity. Such rhetoric is prevalent across many different topics, including social isolation, withdrawal, mental health-related concerns such as depression, anxiety, or autism, attitudes toward work, and the aforementioned feeling of abandonment by society discussed in the previous chapter. Parsing through the experiences different users bring to the table in the forum allows for a greater and broader understanding of *hikikomori* subjectivities, as well as the contestation taking place around it; when *hikikomori* becomes an actual “battleground.”

Gatekeeping posts and comments highlight the tendency of some users to, in a sense, hold the keys to “hikidom,” a term used within the community referring to the life or lifestyle of someone in complete withdrawal. When I first encountered the forum in late 2020 gatekeeping was much more common in what I believe was a response to the many users forced into quarantine resulting from the pandemic. At present gatekeeping remains a

presence though not as great as in the past. Rule #3 of the forum specifically forbids deciding whether or not someone qualifies as *hikikomori*. These “secondary gatekeepers,” as Jane Singer refers to individuals in similar shared media environments, engage in a process “that is an attempt to separate the worthy from the unworthy.” (Singer 2104, 57) Users acting as secondary gatekeepers, alongside primary ones such as journalists or academics, hold to a more rigid definition of the term, one in which *hikikomori* do not work, never leave their room, and suffer from mental health issues.

Welbers and Opgenhaffen note that such users “can be conceptualized as gatekeepers, referring to their power to decide which messages may or may not pass through these channels.” (Welbers and Opgenhaffen 2018, 4730) While Hello Hikikomori users attempting to gatekeep the term hold no actual power or say in what is allowed to be posted (these are always at the discretion of the moderator, who in my observation generally does not censor posts or ban users), the forcefulness with which they argue for an authentic *hikikomori* subjectivity as opposed to an inauthentic one cannot be ignored. It prevents many members from feeling comfortable voicing their thoughts and opinions, particularly women.

Most users of Hello Hikikomori do not signpost their gender so the overall number of female users is difficult to grasp, and while the userbase seems mostly male over the past seven months women have been an active part of more discussions. In other subs such as r/Lonely or r/Depression female users will signpost their gender, but I believe frequent references to creepy and unwanted attention from male users leaves many to not state they are female. An entire subreddit, r/CreepyPMs, was even created just for mostly female users of Reddit to post screenshots of unsolicited and sexually explicit private messages they have received.

On Hello Hikikomori, occasionally users will state they are female, or one can look in their profile to see if they have stated their gender in other posts or subs. The avatar image can also give an indication to whether they are male or female, but judging based on that is unreliable at best given the presence of members who may identify as transgender. However, earlier this year in January 2022 gender became a much greater topic of discussion in the sub, including several posts specifically related to the topic and female *hikikomori*. Female users queried the forum in search of others to share their experiences, as their own perception was that the sub was overwhelmingly male. One user in January even suggested creating a private Discord server only for females in withdrawal for just such a reason.

Unfortunately, accompanying the greater visibility of female users posting on Hello Hikikomori are male users contesting their presence. These gatekeeping male users often echo sentiments expressed in academic literature that *hikikomori* are mostly male, though they instead take it to an extreme by stating that *hikikomori* are *exclusively* male. Rosenthal and Zimmerman write that it, “occurs more frequently among Japan’s male adolescents,” (Rosenthal and Zimmerman, 83) while Saitō has also cited the overwhelming number of *hikikomori* in Japan who are first-born male children. (Saitō 2013, 22) The increased presence of female users in the sub attests to this notion of *hikikomori* being mostly male as false. And yet, these gatekeeping male users turn Hello Hikikomori into a contested space when female users openly discuss their gender in relation to withdrawal, including openly inflammatory rhetoric from users who either do or may identify as incel (involuntary celibate).

Brooks et al. define incels as individuals who, “often blame their celibacy on trends toward gender equity and on the ostensibly superior men chosen by attractive women as mates.” (Brooks et al. 2022, 249) Some male users of the forum bring a level of toxicity to posts based on their own perceptions of being unattractive and unable to attain a significant other, buttressed by their belief that by definition women cannot be *hikikomori*. Indeed, the female user mentioned above who posted to the forum in regard to creating a Discord server for women in withdrawal received a comment from a male member of the sub that not only by dint of her gender she could not *hikikomori*, but also she could simply solve all her problems through marriage. This male user went even further to suggest that if there was such a thing as a female *hikikomori* then she would be an ugly girl incapable of getting a good man. In his view, “hiki = incel.”

It is important to note that these male gatekeepers are a very small minority, and when such incendiary rhetoric is present the conversation is usually only driven by two or three individuals; however, their mere presence seems to be enough to make many female users wary of providing gender information or sharing in the community. A post in January challenged the moderator of the forum to do something about misogynistic and sexist rhetoric of the male user commenting on the aforementioned post, to which the mod responded that they do not ban users because of their belief that those users will simply return under new accounts. The offending male user responded that members were simply upset because they did not like his posts, calling them all “fascists.” This user’s account was ultimately suspended by Reddit administrators when someone complained, but illustrates that not only are they attempting to gatekeep the term *hikikomori* but also Hello Hikikomori as a safe space for individuals of any gender to discuss meanings of it.

At stake in these posts is who gatekeepers believe should or should not be able to post in the forum, and many members do not appreciate it. One user in October 2021 disparagingly referred to gatekeeping users as “elitist assholes,” and the increased number of downvotes gatekeeping posts and comments receive attests to the community’s dislike of such behavior. However, it also must be noted that during the time of my digital fieldwork there have been multiple posts by users asking if they “qualify” as *hikikomori*; actually *requesting* gatekeeping. Users querying the forum may still be in school or employed but otherwise feel socially isolated and find the term *hikikomori* appealing to their life experience. For example, a user in September 2021 asked just such a question and received responses ranging from they qualify so long as they are “happy as a Hikikomori,” to another user telling the OP that they did not want to gatekeep since words were “just labels we get attached to,” but they certainly sounded like a shut-in.

Examples such as the post above illustrate that Hello Hikikomori is more than just a “battleground” to contest meaning but also a place for empathy and understanding. As Hollan and Throop note in their work on empathy, “empathic knowledge of others often develops in the crucible of one’s own pain, confusion, and humiliation as one struggles to make sense of social interaction.” (Hollan and Throop 2008, 390-91) This type of knowledge “emerges in an intersubjective field,” one like Hello Hikikomori, and the sharing of painful experiences and memories forms one of the backbones of the community. Most posts and accompanying comments relate to an OP’s history of anguish or distress, and delicate bonds of trust can form between members. While it is difficult to gauge, relationships do form through this intersubjective process, as noted by the frequency with which users ask for or send each other direct messages, share Discord tags to talk on that

chat platform, or simply offer words of kindness. Often users reaffirm each other's life stories and validate what they have experienced, developing a shared understanding of a *hikikomori* subjectivity.

As reflected in posts and comments, a deeper analysis of these individual subjectivities reveals the differing reasons for joining and sharing within the greater community. Doing so illuminates the different areas and themes where feelings of inability arise. Many of these areas relate to mental health and wellness given the ubiquity of posts related to topics such as coping mechanisms, loneliness, and suicide; however, those areas will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter where I compare these conversations in Hello Hikikomori to similar ones in different subs, such as r/SelfHarm, r/Lonely, and r/SuicideWatch. For this chapter, I look specifically at the themes of inability present in discussions of *hikikomori* as a lifestyle, relations to employment, and disability.

Stuck in “Hikidom”

Among the userbase, *hikikomori* is often thought of not simply as a mental health disorder or syndrome, but principally as a lifestyle. For users this is a way of living cut off and disengaged from friends, loved ones, and society. While many still attend school or work, *hikikomori* symbolizes psychological isolation more than physical. For some, withdrawal represents an impossible situation from which they see no escape, or as one user in October 2021 lamented, “I can't see any way I ever get out from this.” For others it represents an idyllic life free of distress, and all they need is a little money. A user posted in August 2021 that they dreamt only of “passive income” that would facilitate the *hikikomori* life, while another commented that they simply wanted peace and quiet. But examining posts also reveals what these individuals too frequently measure themselves up against and

find themselves wanting. Many carry an antagonistic relationship with “normative” society or “normal” people, and either withdraw because they do not want to subscribe to societal expectations (“the world’s fucked up not me”) or they believe they cannot thrive among “normies.”

This lifestyle is marked by many things depending on the user posting in the forum, and certain terms have been created to describe the *hikikomori* lifestyle. Most frequent of these terms is “hiki” or “hikki”, a shorthand version of *hikikomori* that first appeared in internet message boards among Japanese in withdrawal, “as a more friendly and less stigmatized way to refer to young withdrawn individuals.” (Toivonen and Imoto 2013, 74) Appearing frequently in gatekeeping posts such as those discussed above are accusations of being a “false hiki,” another term with a Japanese counterpart as Sachiko Horiguchi notes, “the term *nisehiki* (‘fake *hikikomori*’) is used to refer to those who are judged to sound like they are not ‘true.’” (Horiguchi 2012, 133) A phrase that does not seem to have a Japanese equivalent is “full hiki,” referring to an individual going completely into withdrawal, entering a “true” or “authentic” *hikikomori* state. Lastly is the noun “hikidom,” which directly invokes it as a lifestyle. When an individual enters “hikidom,” they have completely cut off ties to the outside world and very rarely, if ever, leave their homes.

Hello Hikikomori becomes a space where users share and debate what *hikikomori* as a lifestyle means to them. Whether or not users believe they live in isolation by choice, it is one marked by inability. Individuals attesting to the fact that they exercised a degree of agency when choosing to withdraw often speak of being unable to adapt to societal standards, while those desiring escape believe that they cannot. Regardless of how users see *hikikomori* as a lifestyle impacting their lives, it becomes a deeply ingrained part of their

identities, structuring who they are and how they see themselves. In order to truly understand *hikikomori* as a lifestyle of inability, it is first necessary to consider withdrawn individuals in relation to the “normie.”

Users often mention normies or normative society in their posts and comments as a reference point against which they position themselves. A user in July 2021 commented how much they hated going on social media sites and seeing old friends living a “normal life” and the intense feelings of guilt this engendered. In September 2021, a user thought of the normie as “something I’ll have to become” once their parents pass away and they need to get a job. And in October 2021, a user associated the normie with “making it” and living up to societal standards. In each of these cases the normie represents a measuring stick: normies are the societal expectations that they either failed or were unable to meet.

In this sense the normie holds much in common with what disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson terms the “normate,” a term, “designating the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them.” (Garland-Thomson 1997, 8) For Garland-Thomson, the normate is a reference point or “conceptual strategy,” a figure more often imagined than real but one that represents the normative expectations people are meant to live up to but few in fact can ever achieve. (Ibid.) The same holds equally true of the normie in Hello Hikikomori posts and discourse, a “constructed identity” that few feel they can ever hope to become but in truth likely does not exist. To many in the sub, anyone who can hold down a job, go to school, or maintain relationships is a normie, regardless of that person’s own subjective experience. Given that

members rarely provide demographic information such as location, and understanding that they come from across the globe, I find it significant that a common conception of normative standards exists across cultures. Users hold normies up as high-functioning members of society without grappling with the fact that most individuals may struggle just as much as them. Understanding the normie in this sense allows one to gain a better understanding of its place within a *hikikomori* subjectivity, and in what ways a withdrawn lifestyle differs from a more normative one.

A similar term exists in Japanese, *riajū*, though I have not seen it used on the 5chan message board Hikki. According to the online Japanese-English dictionary jisho.org, this is a direct translation of the English term normie, and refers to individuals satisfied with their “offline” lives as opposed to their digital ones. Many users of the message board reflect similar understandings of their lives as ones shaped by a dominant normative ideal. A user on 5chan posted in December 2021 that societal expectations of looks forced them into withdrawal: “people who are small, chubby, bald, short legs, curly hair, disability and such appearances are prone to bullying because of it.”³ Another user in early February of this year simply posted, “Let’s gather together all *hikikomori* who are unfit for society.”⁴ This small snapshot of posts from 5chan illustrates not only that normative ideals are in play across different cultures, but that they represent common societal benchmarks individuals are expected to meet.

The mirroring of the *hikikomori* against the normie illuminates feelings of inability, and what withdrawn individuals feel they cannot do that normies can. Throughout posts on

³ “チビ、デブ、ハゲ、短足、天パ、障害など容姿が原因でいじめのきっかけになりやすい”

⁴ “社会不適郷社のひきこもりのみなさん集まりましょう”

Hello Hikikomori this often means being able to not only gain employment but to hold it for a significant amount of time. Their lives in withdrawal serve as an impediment to building and maintaining friendships or formulating relationships with significant others. As one user put it in December 2021, they feel like they cannot post their thoughts in other subs because “I don’t feel welcome anywhere else” and the difficulty of relating to “people with normal lives that aren’t also fucked up.” Unlike normies, users do not believe they can ask for help when needed, a reason many end up turning to other members of the forum for advice and help when going through difficult periods. Ultimately, many feel they simply cannot live as normies since “hikidom” has taken too great a toll and because “the brain has been rewired to live like an animal in a hole.” Normies represent those actively able to participate in society whereas the *hikikomori* lifestyle symbolizes one in which they cannot.

Many individuals choose to withdraw as a means of eliminating or reducing triggering mechanisms in their lives, be they people or environments. In January of this year a user posted their thoughts on not understanding why the community complained so much, believing “hikidom” was the ultimate dream and they desired “as minimal contact with people and society as possible.” They just wanted to live a comfortable life away from others. Another user in December echoed this sentiment, stating that they lived off disability with their parents, and perfectly content to be cut off from everyone they once knew. Users such as these two individuals maintain a more antagonist attitude toward society, while others opt to isolate themselves for protection, illustrating how a lifestyle in isolation holds a great deal of appeal to some members.

A user in December 2021 writes that they chose to withdraw because they could not relate to normies who did not understand their struggles with bipolar disorder or borderline

personality disorder, while a different user in January withdrew as a result of a history of abuse and desire to be safe. Users like these engage in a process of risk assessment, evaluating risks in the social environment and isolating themselves in order to eliminate potential threats. For many users, withdrawal represents an unconscious decision, something they fall into without suspecting it. In response to the OP above who stated “hikidom” was a dream to achieve, a commenter replied that *hikikomori* life was like a “rabbit hole” one cannot get out of, and though they wanted to become a “functioning member of society” it will require a lot of work to do so. The responses to the OP’s sentiment that withdrawn life is the dream were overwhelmingly negative and it received zero upvotes, illustrating that the majority of the community disagreed. Another user in December felt “society chose for me,” since they could not integrate and abide by social norms, and does not believe society “should get to decide the right way to live.”

This reflects a notion prevalent across many posts that withdrawn life was forced onto them as a result of users’ inability to adapt to norms. In a different December post a user states they do not believe it is possible to be “hiki by choice since I don’t have any control and it’s a pit that just gets deeper.” This individual felt a painful loss of agency over their withdrawal, that it was something impressed on them from outside. As someone else described, they cannot imagine anyone actively choosing this life considering the suffering it put them through. These users clearly consider *hikikomori* as a lifestyle but one that has been foisted upon them, and one marked by the experience of feeling cast aside.

The members of Hello Hikikomori who voice willingly choosing a lifestyle of isolation are in the minority, whereas those actively hoping to escape its clutches make up the bulk of the userbase. Since users of the forum often come and go, certain topics come up

repeatedly over time, and one question frequently asked of the community is whether or not anyone has had success escaping the *hikikomori* lifestyle. Some do in fact state they have made some degree of progress toward attaining a “normal” life. For instance, a user responded to just such a question in September that they were beginning a PhD program, while others describe taking things slowly, piece by piece. However, many users state that hikikomori feels like something they cannot leave: “my life just snowballed and I can’t get out, it’s permanent.” Another user in October describes being unable to “envision escape and unable to breakthrough.” Several days after this post someone wrote that they can never find a way out because they are not “emotionally developed enough” and they have lost all sense of motivation.

Some posts by users relate an acceptance of their lives in isolation, giving up the possibility of finding a way out and learning to live with the lives they have. Others believe they are held back because they lack the ability to participate in normative daily life. In either case, they create alternative spaces and ways of living similar to what David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder term nonnormative positivisms, or “alternative spaces from which to discuss options for living within alternative embodiments.” (Mitchell and Snyder 2015, 6) These alternative embodiments occupied by individuals in withdrawal, especially the lifestyles they lead either by choice or not, have the ability to cast light on the normative structures that precipitate such a life and how it shapes the way they live. For many on the outside who do not understand *hikikomori* or know of it only through media, this is often embodied in the fact that many do not or cannot work.

Hiki or NEET: That is the Question

Hikikomori are often cast as a non-working population, and this holds true within the community, as well. Those Hello Hikikomori users who obsessively gatekeep the term often refer to employment as a determining factor in whether or not someone qualifies as *hikikomori*. Teo and Gaw note that in Japan, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW) in part defines *hikikomori* as individuals who, “have no interest or willingness to attend school or work.” (Teo and Gaw 2016, 445) Uchida and Norasakkunkit further elaborate on the MHLW’s *hikikomori* criteria by noting that these are individuals, “who are neither in work nor school, do not have social interactions and are socially withdrawn for more than 6 months.” (Uchida and Norasakkunkit 2015, 1) For persons in withdrawal, feelings of inability arise when they enter the built social world and struggle to interact with others and adapt, becoming what Mitchell and Snyder refer to as “nonproductive bodies.” (Mitchell and Snyder 2015, 211) These are individuals who are, “not merely excluded from, but also resistant to, standardized labor demands or productivity particular to neoliberalism” (Ibid.)

Users of both Hello Hikikomori and 5chan echo this idea, not only the feeling of being excluded from normative social life but also resistance to the demands of contemporary neoliberal expectations. A member of Hello Hikikomori posted in January 2022 that they withdrew as a result of “too many choices in capitalist society,” leaving them feeling unable to choose, while a Japanese user of 5chan posted in February of 2020, “Society is wrong, capitalism made by Americans is wrong, money is an evil thing.”⁵ As populations existing outside normative structures, *hikikomori* occupy a social location that

⁵ “社会がまちがい。アメリカのつくった資本主義ぜんぶがまちがい。おかねはふこうのもと。”

embodies an experience of the world as socially disabling, and this is made clear through their feelings of inability to work and maintain meaningful employment. For some users of Hello Hikikomori, the criterion of not working is held as a truism, and part and parcel of the shared experience of withdrawal; it is intrinsically tied to the *hikikomori* lifestyle. For others this is not the case. Judging from the content of the posts, many users do in fact work, seek employment, or desire to work but cannot for many of the reasons discussed previously. These conflicting attitudes toward work form a key aspect of the *hikikomori* lifestyle and how each individual user relates to it, but what feels clear is that whether or not someone works is less important than how users feel about the workplace.

The centrality of discussions surrounding work in regard to *hikikomori* create a great deal of overlap with similar discussions of NEETs. Originally a term coined in the United Kingdom describing, “youth who do not work or attend school,” the acronym stands for Not in Employment, Education, or Training. (Toivonen and Imoto 2013, 64) In their examination of labels such as *otaku*, *hikikomori*, and NEET, Toivonen and Imoto note, “the sheer symbolic lure of these categories is so powerful that it predisposes researchers across disciplines to pursue certain topics.” (Ibid., 63) While this is very true of academic investigations of these groups, it also holds sway over users in the forum. Many users see themselves identifying with both terms, and one or the other may dominate their sense of self at any given time, such as viewing themselves as NEET but with *hikikomori* tendencies.

It is worth noting that many members of Hello Hikikomori either have posted in or were once members of the forum r/NEET, another subreddit dedicated to the idea of NEETs or being NEET. This particular sub currently has over four times the number of members at over 29 thousand, with anywhere from 25-75 members online at any given time. I did not

conduct any direct fieldwork in r/NEET over the course of the 7 months I studied Hello Hikikomori, but my sense from users of Hello Hikikomori is that r/NEET possesses a much more toxic and disrespectful userbase, creating an unsafe environment where they feel they do not belong. Many users left r/NEET as a result, and felt their concerns more readily understood and shared by members of Hello Hikikomori. R/NEET may instead have more in common with another subreddit, r/antiwork, than Hello Hikikomori. R/antiwork members, who currently number over 1.9 million, share an antipathy toward normative work culture and its emphasis on employment, and in the “About Community” box of the homepage describes itself as a sub for those, “who want to end work, are curious about ending work, [or] want to get the most out of a work-free life.” The banner tagline for the sub even reads: “Antiwork: Unemployment for all, not just the rich!”

Some Hello Hikikomori users do not work by choice, and these individuals often cross-identify as NEET. In November 2021, a user queried the community about ways of quitting their job and becoming a NEET “sustainably after my parents pass away.” This particular user attested to hating the idea of working and the anxiety it generated in them, and sought alternatives. In response, commenters encouraged the OP to invest in cryptocurrencies, find remote work, or move to an area with cheaper rents. So prevalent at times are mentions of NEETs that the term has become not just a noun but a verb, as well. Users will make posts or comments about “neeting” or “how to neet,” viewing a non-working life performatively as an action rather than a circumstance or situation. Additionally, NEET also makes its way into new terms in the sub as a prefix for other words like neetbros (other NEETs), neethousing (affordable housing), and especially neetbux (a

frequently used term for social security income or disability income, discussed in more detail below).

The glorification of life as a NEET becomes part of the ideal *hikikomori* lifestyle, but for those desiring “to neet” there exists no clear indication of where they draw the line between *hikikomori* and NEET. As stated previously, many users feel that one cannot be *hikikomori* unless they are also NEET. To them, NEET encompasses the idea of not working whereas *hikikomori* represents social withdrawal and isolation, and the two separate identities often coexist but are invoked at different times. As one user stated in an October 2021 comment, “I’m a neet and don’t want to change. I can’t handle myself among normies.” In the first sentence this individual expresses a desire to continue not working, because that life appeals to them. But in the very next phrase they evoke feelings of inability in the face of normative society, and that in fact their unemployment may be the result of their own feelings of social isolation rather than their attitude toward work.

While there are many Hello Hikikomori users who straddle the line between *hikikomori* and NEET, or invoke either identity depending on the circumstances, many other members of the sub do not work but not necessarily by choice. For these users, anxiety, fear, and especially experiences of bullying or harassment at school or in the workplace prevent them from actively participating in the workforce. As a user reflected in February 2022 in response to an OP’s question regarding why fellow members became *hikikomori*, bullying in middle and high school and “mistreatment by managers and coworkers” made them feel unwelcome in those spaces, and engendered feelings of agoraphobia. This individual’s feeling of ostracism is shared across the sub, and many state they would like to find employment and earn an income but feel unable to socialize. As one user put it succinctly in

the title of a January 2022 post, “it’s hard to be social at work.” This individual desired a place where “I can just stick to my own job” but excess socializing would simply lead to “more work being piled on me.”

Normative work environments present too much stress and seem too anxiety-inducing; however, what these members are opposed to is not necessarily work itself but the workplace. Many struggle with understanding what type of work would represent a good fit for them, or as one user put it in a post asking for job recommendations “what kind of jobs are suitable for a hiki.” Over the seven months of my fieldwork, posts such as this were common, with users at different times querying the community regarding jobs that require little to no social interaction, seeking advice regarding employment. Commenters on several occasions have recommended jobs working in warehouses or as night security guards, which they deem boring, repetitive, and, above all, jobs where an individual can stick to themselves. Frequently, users recommend coding or call center-type jobs, ones that can be done remotely from the user’s home and involve little to no in-person interaction. The greater opportunities or possibility for remote work stemming from the pandemic have generated a small degree of optimism among some that they will be able to earn some type of income.

Despite feelings of withdrawal and ostracism, quite a few members of Hello Hikikomori do work, but for these users work represents a constant, persistent struggle, with anxiety often being the primary reason. In October 2021, a woman describes getting a job for the first time after being a “hiki/neet for over 4 years and only talking to my family,” but she feels pathetic for being too awkward at work resulting from her terrible anxiety. The co-workers who did attempt to befriend her “ended up giving up” because of how closed off

she describes herself. Another user posted similar feelings the next month, getting a warehouse job after over three years of living in withdrawal, but their social anxiety prevented them from building relationships with those who tried. After work every day they “can’t stop crying” because of how much they hate themselves.

Heightened levels of anxiety regarding in-person employment lead many to seek online or remote work, as mentioned above, and some members do different sorts of part-time work online. Often, though, exactly what type of work they engage in remains unclear. Some simply refer to it as freelance work, paid online surveys, or coding. *Hikikomori* and those in withdrawal live minimalist lives, and the purpose of incomes is simply to earn enough money to maintain their preferred lifestyle. As a user put it in November, they needed “survival income” in order to support their NEET lifestyle; money is only needed to cover the bare necessities. However, what this attitude highlights for these users is a disassociation of working from *hikikomori*; despite often being thought of as a prerequisite to identification with the term, not working for many members is not always an inherent part of this lifestyle. Instead, the meaning of *hikikomori* for these individuals expands to encompass feelings of social withdrawal and isolation *beyond* the home to include the workplace, as well as school or other social settings. Inability to function, much less excel or thrive, in these spaces holds greater symbolic meaning and resonates more strongly with members’ understanding of *hikikomori* as a lifestyle than simply being isolated for prolonged periods of time within the home.

Enabling Inability: The Need for Neetbux

As described in the previous chapter, the moderator of Hello Hikikomori posted a news piece about Oyamada Keigo, who resigned from his position composing music for the Summer 2021 Olympics' opening due to revelations of bullying former classmates with disabilities. The mentions of bullying seemed to resonate with other members, but the subject of disability went unnoticed. Despite the prevalence of inability rhetoric as a means of describing their lives in socially disabling environments, many users do not readily, or at least do not openly, see themselves as disabled. This may be a result of disability never being a topic of discussion in its own right over the course of my digital fieldwork, in which case users never tackled with its applicability and meaning to their lives. Instead, rather than dialogue around *hikikomori* and its potential relation to disability, it most frequently comes up in regard to neetbux (or “schizobux” as one user with schizophrenia described it). As mentioned in the previous section, a blurry line exists for many between *hikikomori* and NEET, and the latter term has taken on new meanings as a verb and a prefix for other terms. Among the community, neetbux refers primarily to two different types of income: social security income (SSI) or disability income (users who apply for and get on disability in their country).

An analogous term exists among Japanese users of 5chan called *namapo*. According to jisho.org, *namapo* as a noun can mean either “livelihood protection; welfare” or a derogatory term referring to recipients of such public assistance. Much like Hello Hikikomori users desirous of neetbux, some Japanese users of 5chan express the same sentiment toward *namapo*. In a recent chat thread specifically regarding livelihood protection and *hikikomori*, one user referred to fellow *hikikomori* as “We the Namapo

tribe,”⁶ while another user in the same thread referred to “Uncle Namapo.”⁷ In a comment on another chat thread from December 2020 about what individuals learned when they became *hikikomori*, a user stated that, “I could live without working by getting welfare assistance.”⁸ In both the Japanese and non-Japanese contexts, disability does not manifest as an identity in relation to *hikikomori*, but instead as a crutch, a potential source of income that enables a continued lifestyle defined by inability.

Users of Hello Hikikomori often speak of neetbux with a combination of envy for those who have it and an aspirational longing; being able to earn neetbux is a goal to be achieved. Neetbux represents something many in the sub desire because of its ability to help them maintain a withdrawn lifestyle. As a user in November expressed, “I’m really jealous of neetbros with neetbux.” Over the course of my fieldwork there were several posts from inquiring members regarding how to get neetbux, but the process often takes too long. In response to a December 2021 post in which a member asked the community what, in their view, caused misery, another user simply lamented that, “not having neetbux is pure misery.” In the same November post as the one above, a user bemoaned how long the welfare process takes and what seemed like the inevitability of homelessness.

Getting on disability itself represents a significant hurdle, as several users point out the extensive medical history required to get access to those benefits. A couple of days prior to this in November, another user spoke longingly of neetbux but believed they would need to, “kick and scratch their way to get it.” Despite this user’s intense desire for neetbux he

⁶ “俺達ナマポ族”

⁷ “ナマポおっさん”

⁸ “ナマポゲットして働かずに生きられるということ”

reflects the contradictory attitude toward work of many on the forum. In response to a commenter encouraging this OP to find a job and try and stick with it, the OP replied back that, “it’s not that I wouldn’t like a job, I just know I’m not capable of holding one down or doing a good job. I bet I’d get fired really quick.” Many users do not oppose working or employment but do not believe they fit with any employer, the anxiety of interacting with others being too much, and neetbux offers an alternative to earning a normal income.

By and large, the desire for neetbux seems consistent throughout the community, or at the very least users accept it in others. I observed very little pushback against these sentiments or acknowledgment that some of these users openly want to game the system, receiving disability income when they may not actually qualify. Across seven months, I only encountered a single post of a user disputing another member for desiring neetbux. In July 2021, a user inquired of the community how to go about getting neetbux in America, to which two separate users suggested to the OP that they could try to get on disability and earn disability income. To one of these comments the OP asked, “how can I fake a disability?” Another user identifying as disabled replied in disgust, appalled that the OP would fake being disabled when “it’s already too tough to get accommodations without people like you trying to cheat the system.” This was the lone case of dissent I observed regarding neetbux and disability income. Left unclear is whether or not users of Hello Hikikomori see themselves as disabled, either resulting from their withdrawn lifestyles or as products of socially disabling environments. A disability identity, for many, is not something they are either willing to contend with or ready to claim.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have illustrated how many and varied are the experiences of individuals in withdrawal among members of Hello Hikikomori, encompassing *hikikomori* subjectivities that go beyond simple understandings of *hikikomori* as youths isolated in their homes. Each person in their own way turns to the term because it resonates with certain aspects of their lives. In articulating the ways in which it does, they unveil the extent to which their usage of inability rhetoric speaks to lifestyle marked by feelings of social disablement. Withdrawn life is one that holds a certain appeal but it quickly becomes clear to many that it is something they feel unable to escape. It offers reprieve from a society they perceive themselves unable of partaking in but cannot find lasting comfort in it.

Chapter Three

Lessening the Pain: *Hikikomori* as a Coping Mechanism

In the previous chapter I examined how some individuals feel drawn to the term *hikikomori* as a result of their life experiences, turning the subreddit Hello Hikikomori into an intersubjective space informing and shaping forum users' understanding of the term and its application or relevance to their lives. Doing so allows many users to achieve a greater degree of clarity in regard to their own sense of identity and subjective experience. Chikako Ozawa de Silva notes that all subjectivity is intersubjective, and "to be a self is to be independent *with* others; one is and becomes a self in relation to others." (emphasis added, Ozawa de Silva 2021, 19) The intersubjectivity of the sub shapes what I refer to as *hikikomori* subjectivities, a cluster of personal experiences felt by the user that leads them to the term, and more than anything else a subjectivity marked by feelings of inability. I illustrated how normative societal expectations, embodied in the person of the "normie," engendered such feelings in Hello Hikikomori users, revealing how the environments we live in can, for some, be profoundly socially disabling.

But, in truth, how unique are Hello Hikikomori as a space and *hikikomori* subjectivities when one looks more carefully at the contents and posts of other subreddits? *Hikikomori* are rarely linked with other groups beyond NEETs, most especially not along experiential lines. Aside from not working, attending school, or some other type of training, nothing immediately connects *hikikomori* with NEETs since analyses such as Toivonen and Imoto's do not tackle the lived experiences of either group. (Toivonen and Imoto 2013) The same can be said for *otaku*, or "nerds" obsessed with manga and *anime*, which has become a trendy label both within and outside of Japan, and they note that politicians such as former

Prime Minister Aso Taro was known as an *otaku*. (Ibid., 68-9) Resulting from the allure that such labels hold, *hikikomori* have not been studied in comparison with other groups sharing similar life experiences, such as loneliness or suicidal ideation. However, Reddit offers a space where this type of comparison is possible. What does analyzing Hello Hikikomori in relation to other subreddits tell us about the experience of *hikikomori* and beyond?

Most often *hikikomori* is thought of as either a symptom or a condition.

Understanding that the term *hikikomori* derives from the Japanese *shakaiteki hikikomori*, meaning social withdrawal, Saitō Tamaki notes that, “social withdrawal is a symptom, not the name of an illness.” (Saitō 2013, 11) He further states that the “withdrawn state” of a *hikikomori* individual should be considered a “primary symptom” given the oversized importance of isolation in the individual’s life, and other symptoms such as a fear of others or obsessive-compulsive disorder should be seen as “secondary.” (Ibid., 26) *Hikikomori* is often cited as a symptom of society, and indeed, Saitō even refers to it as reflecting the “social pathology” of Japan. (Ibid., 80) Rubenstein and Sakakibara have referred to it as a “social, medical, and sociomedical condition,” one spawning from Japan’s “sociohistorical and economic contexts.” (Rubinstein and Sakakibara 2020, 60) Elsewhere Anne Allison has written of *hikikomori* as a “new disease” in Japan, “the condition of being a social ‘shut-in.’” (Allison 2006, 82)

However, in reviewing and comparing Hello Hikikomori posts and comments with those from other subs like r/SelfHarm, r/Lonely and r/SuicideWatch, *hikikomori* seems to represent less a symptom and more an extreme reaction to experiences of depression or anxiety. The thoughts, feelings, and emotions of users from all of these subs closely echo one another, and requests for help occur with regular frequency. With this in mind, I believe

it is more constructive to think of withdrawal to the point of isolation as a behavioral response rather than as a symptom. The type of withdrawal exhibited by Hello Hikikomori users is both very similar to, and more extreme than, users in these other subs despite shared experiences. Users in these other subreddits describe similar experiences of withdrawal but, unlike Hello Hikikomori members, this does not include extended isolation within the home but rather the experience of withdrawing into themselves in social situations.

Not only do these comparisons illustrate shared experiences of enduring struggle across subreddits, but also that often these feelings have the same source. Users in other subs may be lonely, depressed, or suicidal for many varying reasons, and often chief among them perceptions of failure to engage functionally in society bring those users to their respective subs. Instead, I argue that thinking of *hikikomori* as a coping mechanism, one more akin to other coping behaviors such as self-harm behaviors like cutting, will be more productive as it allows for a greater investigation of why users choose to withdraw. Members of Hello Hikikomori are often acutely aware of the potential long term impact their withdrawn state will have on their lives, and that the longer they live in isolation lives the more difficult it will become to escape, as has been previously discussed. Individuals who exhibit self-harm behaviors, such as users of the subs r/SelfHarm and r/SelfHarmScars, feel remarkably similar: both groups inflict pain on their persons as a way to cope with daily life, up to and including lasting damage to their bodies and minds.

I believe removing the “social” from social withdrawal allows for a more productive analysis of these life experiences, since user activity on Hello Hikikomori provides proof that rather than being socially withdrawn they are being differently social. It also places greater emphasis on the behavior, and viewing withdrawal as the behavior of shutting

oneself away, either physically or mentally, more effectively captures the subjective experiences of the lives of forum users. Rather than a symptom of something greater, *hikikomori* should be seen as a *choice*, and as a behavior in its own right, and in doing so more emphasis and analysis is placed on the actions and agency of individuals rather than considering withdrawal as symptomatic of something greater.

In this chapter I will compare posts by members of Hello Hikikomori with other mental-health related subreddits, and specifically self-harm (r/SelfHarm and r/SelfHarmScars), loneliness (r/Lonely) and suicide or suicidal ideation (r/SuicideWatch, r/Lonely, and r/Depression). What we find is that feelings of inability are not confined to *hikikomori* or those with a *hikikomori* subjectivity, but instead appear with regular frequency much more broadly. To begin my case for considering *hikikomori* as a coping mechanism rather than a symptom, I start by directly comparing Hello Hikikomori with forums related to self-harm to highlight the function of *hikikomori* as a coping mechanism. Then I move on to illustrate how withdrawal functions as such in regard to two of the most prominently expressed experiences in the sub: loneliness and suicidal ideation. It is in discussions of suicide and suicidal ideation on Hello Hikikomori where I believe withdrawal as a coping strategy can be mostly clearly observed.

***Hikikomori* as Self-Harm**

In posts on Hello Hikikomori, self-harm as a topic is rarely mentioned or discussed. Over the course of seven months of fieldwork, I only encountered three posts in which a member alluded to either having harmed themselves in the past or feeling anxious to do so in the future. In August 2021, a user related experiencing continuous depressive episodes and thoughts that led them to engage in self-harm behaviors. In January of this year, in

response to a post from a member who related their attempt to commit suicide, a user commented feeling the urge to harm themselves more than normal.

However, much like the way disability is referenced in the forum discussed in the previous chapter, the absence of self-harm-related posts may likely be due to the fact that it is never the sole topic of a post. The only post I encountered directly addressing such behaviors comes from December 2021, in which a user polled the community to ask how common it was for members to engage in such practices. Many said that they used to harm themselves, while some that they actively still do. Several spoke of cutting as a means of coping, to the point where it became an addiction. One user related putting the behavior behind them but “the emotional pain is still too much for me.” Another user said they have never harmed themselves physically but they do so mentally constantly.

Despite having many similar experiences such as bullying, anxiety, or depression, the lack of discussion surrounding self-harm in Hello Hikikomori is of course in marked contrast to members of the subreddits r/SelfHarm and r/SelfHarmScars. The former, which describes itself as “A place for self-harmers,” where they can “relate to each other, ask questions, and build up a community,” was created in March 2010 and currently contains over 98 thousand members, over thirteen times the number in Hello Hikikomori. Anywhere between 50 and 100 users may be online at any given time and the sub experiences considerably more traffic. The similar subreddit r/SelfHarmScars was formed in March 2016 as a place where those engaging in self-harm practices can share pictures of their scars with the community (a trigger warning is necessary in the event that the reader should visit this sub, as the images can be graphic and disturbing). It presently has over 40 thousand members and around 50 online depending on the time of day. Users posting here frequently

discuss the lack of space left on their skin to cut (individuals prefer harming themselves on certain parts of the body), whether or not they should be concerned about the long-term effects of healing or scars, or other concerns such as the subject of “hitting beans,” a phrase used to describe cutting deep enough beneath the skin to expose the layer of fat underneath.

But what is self-harm and why make this comparison? Self-harm behaviors involve the deliberate harming of the body through acts such as cutting the skin with blades or other sharp-edged objects; burning oneself, such as with cigarette butts or lighters; or physically thrusting oneself against the environment, for example by punching or banging one’s head against the wall. As Adler and Adler write, self-harm is, “the deliberate, nonsuicidal destruction of one’s own body tissue.” (Adler and Adler 2011, 1) Some scholars refer to the practice as self-injury instead of self-harm. Anna Motz sees self-injury as, “consciously chosen and, in this sense, deliberate, although there may also be unconscious motivations and meanings of which the individual is unaware.” (Motz 2009, 16) In contrast, self-harm refers to behaviors that the individual may not believe they chose. While I understand and agree with the definition of Motz, echoed by Adler and Adler, I choose to continue using self-harm since this is how it is referred to within the communities.

In their work *The Tender Cut*, Patricia Adler and Peter Adler write of self-harm as a “coping strategy,” or, “a behavior practiced by psychologically troubled individuals who used it to soothe their trauma, but it also became a legitimated mode of emotional expression and relief among a much wider population.” (Adler and Adler 2011, 2) In one of the interviews they conducted for their work, a young woman spoke of self-harm as, “numb[ing] her emotional feelings when she had no other outlet.” (Ibid., 11) Indeed, one thing that sets Hello Hikikomori members apart from the other subs I will be comparing is the seeming

lack of pain, emotion, and anguish in many posts when compared to users of r/Lonely or r/SuicideWatch. This is not to say Hello Hikikomori members do not feel this way, which they certainly do, but the withdrawn state may act to dampen those emotions. When viewing withdrawal as a consciously chosen behavior, physical isolation in the home and the severing of relationships with friends of family works to mute those feelings in the same way cutting behaviors may help an individual to numb theirs. Elsewhere, Peter Steggals has written that self-harm,

is a symptom of disorder, impulsiveness and addiction yet also a coping mechanism and therefore an agent of control...something that helps yet torments; something that belongs to the person who practices it, indeed often their sole possession, yet also something alien and invasive, a formidable enemy. (Steggals 2015, 2-3)

For Hello Hikikomori members, withdrawal aids them in getting by through removal of harmful trigger mechanisms such as social engagement, but as the state persists they become their own worst enemy and, as we have seen, something many fear will become permanent.

Choosing to think of *hikikomori* as a coping mechanism, rather than a symptom or syndrome, brings the act of withdrawal as a behavior into greater relief. Consideration of *hikikomori* as either a symptom or syndrome can be instructive in understanding withdrawal in terms of mental health and its potential relation to other disorders; they can both speak to a disease or illness an individual may have. However, thinking of withdrawal as a behavior requires more careful consideration of an individual's actions, especially understanding that it involves choice. As a coping mechanism, withdrawal functions to lessen the pain caused by mental illness, anxiety, and feelings of social ostracism. Withdrawn individuals exhibit agency when they choose to isolate themselves, and as a coping behavior it has both positive

and negative effects, and also something that Hello Hikikomori members feel belongs to them but simultaneously dread.

Adler and Adler make an important point about intersubjective communities such as r/SelfHarm and r/SelfHarmScars that applies equally well to Hello Hikikomori. “Internet self-injury sites and groups have enabled the development of cyber subcultures and cyber relationships in which communities of self-injurers flourish and grow.” (Adler and Adler 2011, 17) Community message boards and forums provide a safe space for self-harmers to share their experiences in much the same way as those in withdrawal, and what stands out when comparing posts from these different subs are the similarities that exist in how users speak of their situations. Users engaging in self-harm practices and those in withdrawal both speak in terms of coping, fears of relapse, and addiction.

Users of these self-harm subreddits are well aware that behaviors such as cutting are coping mechanisms, and Adler and Adler have observed that the individuals they studied “regarded this behavior as a coping strategy, perhaps one they wished they did not need (and might someday be able to quit), but one that functioned to fill needs for them nevertheless.” (Ibid., 1) A user on r/SelfHarm in April 2022 posted about cutting themselves after opening up to a friend, and needing to cope with the pain of not feeling heard. The same day, another user posted beginning to harm themselves after being told they had driven their best friend to do so, and the OP here needed to cope with the pain. A 13-year-old user also confided to the sub that they began to self-harm the previous year when their family made them feel “like a monster” and they needed a way to cope. In each of these instances a feeling of inability to form and maintain healthy relationships can be discerned, speaking to something more disabling that self-harm behaviors allows them to cope with.

Members of Hello Hikikomori also speak of withdrawal and isolation in terms of coping. A user in October 2021 commented on a post that the definition of *hikikomori* should simply be coping, as that is all they believe their life amounted to. Another member in July 2021 wrote of a history of trauma and abuse, and withdrawal represented a means of coping. This was echoed by another user in February 2022 who wrote that their anxiety around other people led them to a life of isolation as a coping strategy. However, members not only see withdrawal as a coping mechanism itself, but instead often describe the need to search for ways to cope *with* withdrawal. In other words, they need a coping mechanism to cope with their coping mechanism. In January 2022 a user wrote that they gave up whatever ambition they had to cope with their isolated life, while others write of using the internet, gaming, and *anime* as their own coping strategies. The behavior these individuals have chosen in order to cope with their everyday lives, namely withdrawal, becomes so problematic that they find the need to develop new strategies to counteract it.

Individuals on Hello Hikikomori and r/SelfHarm or r/SelfHarmScars frequently invoke the idea of addiction to explain their behavior. People most often think of addiction in terms of substance abuse, especially in relation to alcohol, drugs, and the ongoing opioid epidemic. Levy states that, “Addiction comes in many forms,” but hedges when considering whether or not “supposed behavioral addictions” actually qualify. (Levy 2013, 124) Other scholars of addiction dismiss the term entirely, as pointed out by Jan Keene, preferring instead to utilize the term “dependence” which “embrace[s] a range of different conceptions.” (Keene 2010, 36) Again, however, Keene refers specifically to drug use and not non-drug-related behaviors, and research on addiction often focuses on individuals’ dependency on illicit substances as coping mechanisms rather than other types of behavior.

In the case of self-harm and those in withdrawal, their respective behaviors represent both a problematic behavior and a dependency. They engage in acts they know are detrimental to their overall well-being, but continued practice of such acts is deemed necessary to cope.

The words of users across these subs illustrates how self-harm and withdrawal can be both an addiction and a dependency. Self-harmers seem much more likely to refer to their behavior as an addiction. The prevalence of users in r/SelfHarm speaking on fears of relapse is a testament to its addictive nature. Much like Hello Hikikomori members querying the community for advice on how to escape the lifestyle, self-harmers often ask their subs how to stay clean, or in a sense how to escape the vicious cycle they have fallen into. A recent user told the community they could only refrain from self-harm for at most 1-2 days, and needed advice because the pull to keep engaging in it was too strong. Other members of r/SelfHarm and r/SelfHarmScars find a thrill or elation in cutting themselves and watching blood seep out, and confess to using blood thinners in order to bleed more. Inflicting pain on their bodies for some members validates their experience, as another recent user described the act as making their depression seem more real. A member of Hello Hikikomori noted a similar experience in January 2022, considering the frequent headaches they had begun having since their withdrawal as “a good sign since the pain means I’m alive,” despite their fear that the longer they lived in withdrawal the more likely they could incur some type of brain damage.

Self-harmers demonstrate a compulsive need to continue engaging in these behaviors, similar to how many in withdrawal experience a need to isolate themselves from normative society. A member of Hello Hikikomori wrote in December 2021 of feeling like their “brain’s been rewired” to deal with isolation and the “hiki life” as an addiction similar

to drugs or alcohol, and in this individual's opinion it was the mind's way of coping with ostracism from normies. While withdrawal also functions to diminish the pain caused by mental health issues or other factors such as bullying, these coping mechanisms embody the ways individuals who struggle deal with a socially disabling world, and the struggle does not end when they "overcome" the need for those behavioral strategies. For self-harmers, even after long periods of being "clean" many still struggle just like Hello Hikikomori users who "make it," as a recent r/SelfHarm user attests to struggling three months after cessation of self-harm behaviors because they have no one to talk to that knows "I used to be addicted."

Fears of relapsing are both quite common across these subs. An April 2022 user of r/SelfHarm posted that they had made progress and been clean, abstaining from self-harm for 3 months but that the urges to regress were too great and coming with greater frequency. The same day, another user posted that they had hit their 7-month anniversary of being clean but it was still a "long and terrible battle." On r/SelfHarmScars the same day, a user described their own fear of relapsing after years being clean because their depression and anxiety were beginning to take a heavy toll on them mentally. Over on Hello Hikikomori, members do not often speak in direct terms of relapse, though a member in December 2021 did speak of the constant specter of relapsing during the process of getting better.

Instead, many write in terms of "reverting." A user in September 2021 wrote of feeling as if they will "revert to their old ways once I finish school," while another in November 2021 felt themselves "reverting into a *hikikomori*." Users also speak of fear regarding "falling back into the lifestyle," and the presence of "former hiki" in posts and comments is testament to the validity of such a fear. Many come back to Hello Hikikomori because it is still a safe space where they feel understood, but also because they were unable

to cope with “normie” life and withdrew again. For the members of each of these subs, the chosen coping behavior becomes such an intrinsic aspect of their lives, something they deem necessary to get by, that it offers comfort if they ever feel their mood slipping away.

Can’t Shake that Lonely Feeling

In January 2022, a user on Reddit stated that they simply felt like lying down, prostrating themselves on the ground and giving in to feeling depressed, lacking even the strength it would take to cry. Last December 2021, a different user wrote that the pain of their loneliness was unbearable, they had no friends or significant other, and needed advice on how to cope with it. In early 2022, another user stated their belief that everything that had occurred in their life up to that point was their fault and now just desired an end to everything, while a separate user confided that the sole reason they were posting on Reddit was because they did not want to feel alone anymore. All four of these individuals expressed profound feelings of loneliness, and one can sense a deep struggle they have with living day-to-day lives as a result. In the first post one can see a feeling of emotional numbness take hold, and in the last an attempt to find a reprieve through social media. The centrality loneliness in their lives as a subjective experience is made plain in each post.

However, these posts do not all come from the same subreddit despite their similarities. The first two posts, about the individual wanting to lie down and the other seeking advice, appeared on Hello Hikikomori. The latter two come from r/Lonely, a subreddit devoted to those experiencing loneliness, either in the moment or as a more prolonged state of being. Members of this forum post for many different reasons, such as venting, seeking empathy from other users, or looking for connections with other lonely people. The sub even refers to members not simply as “members” but instead as “Lonely

Hearts.” Created in 2008, r/Lonely currently sits at over 281 thousand members, and in my observation of the forum anywhere from 100-300 members are online at any given time. The traffic on the site is understandably much greater than that of Hello Hikikomori, which may only receive 4-6 posts per day. An average day on r/Lonely can see in excess of 50 posts, with many times the number of comments, upvotes, and downvotes in comparison. As of this writing, a user posting earlier this morning of feelings of exhaustion when trying to make connections with the opposite sex received over 70 upvotes and nearly 50 comments. In comparison, it could take days for a post on Hello Hikikomori to reach anywhere near those figures, which would be exceedingly rare, and those do not represent the high end for r/Lonely.

But when we speak of loneliness, how do we define it? How and why exactly are the individuals in these subs lonely? Chikako Ozawa de Silva defines loneliness as, “feelings of dissatisfaction that arise with regard to relationships to others in the environment.” (Ozawa de Silva 2021, 16) Not only does this include lack of meaningful connections with other people but, “also of social and physical places where one feels one belongs and where one feels ‘at home.’” (Ibid., 16-17) Both ways of thinking about relationships certainly apply to each subs. Members of both Hello Hikikomori and r/Lonely frequently relate their inability to make or maintain friendships or find significant others. The latter holds especially true for many r/Lonely members, who often struggle with their need to love and feel loved by another. However, many members in both subs seem to feel they do not belong anywhere except for their respective forums. This is a sentiment expressed occasionally by Hello Hikikomori members, and at times r/Lonely members write simple posts expressing their

gratitude for other members and the support they receive. The forums offer safe spaces to express how they feel and connect.

For members of each, loneliness exists as a prolonged state that has become an innate part of how they see themselves, and oftentimes it is difficult for them to see beyond it. Kafer's notion of the relational nature of disability can clearly be seen in both subs with regard to relationships. A recent user of r/Lonely stated in a post that they desired someone they could share themselves with, that they mattered to, and in a similar vein another user of the sub simply wanted to be understood. Both seek meaningful relationships with others since the ones they have leave them wanting and lonely. Perhaps because r/Lonely members are not as isolated as Hello Hikikomori members, users of the latter often speak of relationships in regard to society as whole. A user on Hello Hikikomori in September of last year believed "society just wants me to off myself," while another in December wrote that the world is pushing them into "hikidom." Here it is the negative relationship with the environment generating feelings of loneliness. Ozawa de Silva further echoes Kafer through her "relational theory of meaning," in which she argues, "the meaning of life is not based on a single driving purpose or a cognitive understanding of what life means...[but] the meaning we have in the eyes of others." (Ibid., 8) These individuals on Reddit simply want to feel like they matter to someone or the worlds in which they live.

Loneliness and the feeling of being alone occurred with regular frequency throughout my fieldwork, either stated explicitly or by casting a shadow over the words of Hello Hikikomori users. For many, the experience of loneliness brought on through withdrawal is a part of a *hikikomori* subjectivity because some users feel self-isolation necessitates the severing of relationships and contacts. As a member commented in July

2021, they were too scared to kill themselves so the “next best thing is cutting everyone off,” then withdrawing to cope with his feelings of paranoia. A couple months later in September, a different user posted feeling lonely after successfully reentering normative life but continuing to have trouble interacting with others and making new friends.

However, Hello Hikikomori members often mention feeling lonely without relation to anything; loneliness is simply an aspect of their lives, one that other members will understand without the OP needing to elaborate. In contrast, relationality with others, particularly with significant others, forms a central basis for many posts by members of r/Lonely. Whereas Hello Hikikomori members often sound resigned to these emotions, those on r/Lonely wear their pain and suffering on their sleeve. A recent user posted of living in a vibrant town but losing all their friends, and subsequently finding themselves in a downward spiral. A common expression of anguish in the sub is the desire to be held, for something more tactile that users have never experienced, and the feeling of missing that experience causes them pain.

A separate post on r/Lonely came from a user after losing the person they were in love with, the only time they had experienced “true happiness.” This points to the frequent theme in r/Lonely of desiring romantic love. A user posting on the day of this writing simply titled their post, “I just want a girlfriend, but there are 100 posts a day like this.” Another that they wanted to “give up on finding the one.” Users of Hello Hikikomori will occasionally post or comment about never having had a significant other, but do not do so with the daily regularity of r/Lonely members or the same intense focus. As the above user suggests, there are frequent posts on r/Lonely about the search for romantic love but for many withdrawn users of Hello Hikikomori this is not central to their understanding of

loneliness, as some users have stated feeling asexual or believe finding someone is no longer in the cards for them.

Despite its regularity in discussions across subs, loneliness as an object of discourse appears differently in r/Lonely and Hello Hikikomori: in the former it is a subject of discussion, the object around which posts and comments revolve, while in the latter loneliness appears more as an intrinsic aspect of prolonged withdrawal and self-isolation. Loneliness is what Lonely Hearts focus on, whereas it is a part of a *hikikomori* subjectivity. For both groups the feeling is relational, but I would argue that because members of Hello Hikikomori feel so much more isolated they experience loneliness in the moment less acutely than those on r/Lonely. The environment that *hikikomori* feel most dissatisfied in is the social world of the “normies,” one which they have chosen to withdraw from. Doing so removes a harmful triggering mechanism, and though the feelings persist they do not become activated as frequently as they do for members of r/Lonely, many of whom continue to live “normie” lives. This allows those in withdrawal to cope. Hello Hikikomori members do not experience the dissatisfaction of relationships with others as often because, for many, they have either made a conscious choice to cut people off or being in a withdrawn state results in much more limited interaction. While the feeling of loneliness lingers, it is dulled by withdrawal as coping response.

Suicidal Ideation and *Hikikomori*

On the same day in early April 2022, users across three different subreddits posted their thoughts of committing suicide in the moment. One user spoke of just wanting to be loved and how their “ugliness” kept so many people away, and as a result strongly considered ending their life. In a different sub, an individual posted their desire to go to the doctor and

“get what old pets get,” their feelings of worthlessness driving them to the point of desiring euthanasia. In a third sub, someone wrote that the world would be a better place without them, believing even their own family wants them dead, and they were ready to end it, “to make the world better tonight.”

Respectively, these posts came from r/Lonely, r/Depression, and r/SuicideWatch. I have already discussed r/Lonely, but r/Depression is a similar forum dedicated to users experiencing depression. Created in January 2009, currently membership sits at over 864 thousand individuals with 500-1000 online at any given time. Billing itself as “a peer support group for anyone struggling with a depressive disorder,” members use r/Depression to vent, exchange thoughts, and potentially make connections. Like r/Lonely, r/Depression experiences far heavier traffic than Hello Hikikomori and tracking it in the same manner represents an extreme challenge. The third forum, r/SuicideWatch, as the name implies, is for users experiencing suicidal ideation. Formed in December 2008, this subreddit has over 352 thousand members with 300-600 online at any time, and users come to this sub to express their thoughts on suicide, seek help, or, as in the examples above, often state their desire to commit suicide that very day.

Posts such as these occur with regular frequency daily on r/Lonely, r/Depression, and r/SuicideWatch, expressing intense feelings of suffering and alienation that drives the individual to that precipice. Though many users do not explicitly state their intention to commit suicide in the moment, it is constructive to consider these posts as akin to suicide notes. While it is difficult on Reddit to truly determine an individual’s intent, such notes illustrate the individual’s belief that there existed “circumstances lying outside their control” and they created mental scenarios to justify their decision. (Fincham et al. 2011, 81) Indeed,

when looking at the profiles and post/comment histories of users who post about committing suicide in the very near future, one often finds that they continue to participate in conversations either in the same or different subreddits in the future. Craig J. Bryan notes this trend in fluctuation regarding suicidal ideation, that “thoughts about death and suicide fluctuate over time,” and its “dynamic nature” has largely been absent from research until recently (Bryan 2022, 58-59) Given the continued activity, suicide posts on these subs can be seen as cries for help from the community, a search for an empathic ear and understanding, but they still must be taken very seriously.

Oftentimes users of these three subreddits post about *why* they feel suicidal, rather than their intention to act in the moment. A recent woman in her mid-20s on r/SuicideWatch expressed feeling suicidal because of a history of child abuse and feeling like their youth passed them by, having never experienced friendships or romantic relationships and feeling a continued inability to do so. On r/Depression another user wished for their own death because they had also experienced abuse, but also because they considered themselves “fat and ugly,” and their perceived inability to go to school, work, or maintain any type of relationship. The same day on r/Lonely, a user simply titled their post, “Help me,” writing that they felt their life was “empty” and they needed reasons to live. Many of these posts receive huge numbers of upvotes, and not necessarily because users concur with the sentiments but because doing so makes the post “Hot” and pushes it higher up a user’s Reddit feed, increasing its visibility. Doing so for members of these subs is more likely to put them on another member’s radar, and other users reach out with words of support and kindness, often expressing a willingness to exchange private messages or contact information in the pursuit of getting well.

In contrast to what might be considered the painful cries for help on other subs such as r/SuicideWatch, users of Hello Hikikomori seem much more muted in their thoughts on the issue. Over the course of seven months of fieldwork and over 200 posts examined, suicide appeared in over 40 of them so it is very much a part of the thinking of many in withdrawal. I only encountered one instance of a user directly echoing the sentiments expressed by users of the other three forums of desiring to commit suicide in the moment. In September 2021 a user wanted to say “goodbye” to Hello Hikikomori as they had determined to end their own life, believing they would always be miserable but wishing other members good luck. When I first came across the post I checked the user’s profile and they had written similar statements in other subs, and the day this post was made marked their last activity on the site. While this may mean the user did in fact go through with their stated intention, recently upon trying to review the post again for this writing I discovered it had been deleted by the user, perhaps indicating that they indeed did not commit suicide.

Members of Hello Hikikomori speak of suicide as a means of escape, but a way out of an imagined future rather than a necessarily imminent one. Many members of the sub rely on either their families or government assistance for financial support, and often see only two eventualities should that support cease: homelessness or suicide. A user in July 2021 commented on a post that they could only see those two options in their future. Another user in December 2021 stated their belief that suicide was inevitable “but I don’t have the balls for it.” The fear of homelessness comes up with surprising regularity, and suicide offers a way out of such a situation; however, unlike in the other subs it is not always experienced in the moment but instead seen as an inevitability.

Hello Hikikomori posts about suicide lack the same expressions of pain and anguish as those expressed by members of r/Lonely or r/SuicideWatch. This is not to say that withdrawn individuals do not also experience such feelings, only that when discussing suicide those emotions rarely come to the fore. When thinking of withdrawal as a coping mechanism that keeps imminent considerations of suicide at bay, it is important to keep in mind both Kafer's and Ozawa de Silva's notions of relationality. Just as Kafer notes disability is experienced through relationships and Ozawa de Silva describes loneliness in the same manner, I contend suicidal ideation arises in a similar vein. Users of the other three subs think of suicide in the moment more frequently because they interact with both other people and the social environment to a much greater extent than those on Hello Hikikomori. However, the primary reason those in withdrawal do not experience them as acutely is, in their decision to withdraw, they exercise a greater degree of agency over their environments and relationships that removes potential triggers. While their lives are far from ideal and many want to escape from "hikidom," being in isolation not only numbs their feelings as described above in terms of loneliness, but gives these individuals more control over the extent and nature of the relationships in their lives, allowing them a greater ability to cope.

Conclusion

Users of Hello Hikikomori withdraw for many reasons, but above all they choose to isolate themselves as a coping mechanism, and I have shown how in doing so they weaken or sever the relationships they have. These could be relationships with either people or environments, and unlike users of the other subreddits under examination who share similar experiences, the loss of those relationships as part of their coping strategy inhibits the ability of many Hello Hikikomori members to experience their emotions as intensely. Unlike

r/Lonely members who wear the pain of their loneliness on their sleeves, withdrawn individuals do not dwell on those feelings. And whereas members of other subs experience extreme bouts of suicidal ideation, more often than not Hello Hikikomori users simply see suicide in an imagined future. An understanding of *hikikomori* as a coping mechanism for dealing with a socially disabling world illustrates how an inability to truly feel may be another part of a *hikikomori* subjectivity.

Conclusion

In January 2022, a member of Hello Hikikomori posted to the forum that the previous day they had tried to “kermit sewerslide” in the shower. Though several users already knew what this meant, another user asked the OP “what the fuck is that.” The phrase “kermit sewerslide” is a euphemistic way in online spaces to write “commit suicide,” changing the words while sounding similar enough to avoid possible text and keyword filters that search for potentially triggering or inappropriate phrases. On their way to the shower, the OP wrote that they saw a box cutter and randomly decided to take it in with them but did not do so with the intention of attempting suicide; they simply decided to attempt once they were in the shower. Instead, the OP described it more as a spontaneous act and they have a tendency of taking random things into the shower with them anyways, such as pieces of cloth. In response, several users provided words of comfort and support, glad that it was unsuccessful, including one supportive user who told the OP that next time they should take food with them instead. A look at the OP’s profile shows that they have continued using Reddit as of this writing, though they do actively participate in the sub [r/MadeOfStyrofoam](#), another subreddit created for discussions of self-harm.

This poster reiterated on several occasions throughout the comment thread the sense of feeling empty. They described the feeling as persistent but that they were experiencing it more acutely around this time. Sentiments such as this, feeling empty or numb or as if they are trapped in a void, occur frequently on Hello Hikikomori, speaking more generally to a perception that many users experience an inability to express their emotions. Sometimes users describe themselves as being incapable of feeling anything. This includes not just an inability to experience emotions, but also a loss of motivation or feeling as if there is no

place for them in society, illustrating the overlapping ways individuals experience inability as part of a *hikikomori* subjectivity.

In the first chapter I examined the ways that discourse on *hikikomori* up to the present has closely mirrored the individual/medical and social models of disability, including in both instances an absence of not only the voices of those concerned but more importantly what they embody. Scholars such as Tobin Siebers and Alison Kafer seek to push the social model further by recentering the lived experiences of persons with disabilities, and I draw inspiration especially from Siebers and his theory of complex embodiment to understand the different epistemologies they bring to bear. My work here is envisioned as an extension of this in the field of *hikikomori* studies, where progress on truly comprehending withdrawal cannot be made until discourse surrounding it moves beyond why individuals isolate themselves and how to effectively reintegrate them into society. The mental health-related trauma and feelings of social exclusion echo many of the ideas discussed in *hikikomori* studies based on those models, and this work builds on this prior body of work to closely study and monitor, for the first time in English-language scholarship, an actual community of *hikikomori* where they gather to discuss their lives in withdrawal.

Attending to the words of those in withdrawal reveals what I have termed *hikikomori* subjectivities, a cluster of individual experiences that draw that person to the term and what they feel it embodies. For many users of Hello Hikikomori it can embody different things such as their preferred lifestyle or alienation from social settings. But as I have shown, above all the prevalence of inability rhetoric speaks to *hikikomori* embodying an experience of the world as socially disabling. The actual lives of many Hello Hikikomori members do

not mirror textbook definitions of *hikikomori* as individuals who never leave their homes, yet despite that they find something in the term with which they identify. Instead, what they find in the sharing of their experiences online and understanding of the term are shared feelings of inability and dissociation from normative society and the “normie.”

Withdrawal into the home not only illustrates how *hikikomori* embodies this experience of normative society but also how it acts as a coping mechanism, with individuals enacting strategies to minimize the emotional pain and distress that come from both social interactions and prolonged isolation. Much like those engaged in self-harm practices, *hikikomori* find in withdrawal a way of numbing the pain, yet because withdrawal can last for an extended period of time the effect persists. Unlike members of other subreddits such as r/Lonely or r/SuicideWatch, users of Hello Hikikomori do not express their emotional struggle to the same degree, and as the user posting of attempting to “kermit sewerslide” attests, prolonged withdrawal can lead to continual feelings of emptiness that induces its own inability to express those emotions or, for some members, even feel.

I have chosen to focus solely on the words of Hello Hikikomori members in their posts and comments primarily because their voices were my top priority, but also due to time constraints on this project and my own ability to develop ethnographic methods in a timely manner to engage this population on a deeper level. This could include surveys, semi- or unstructured interviews, or even the creation of private Discord servers to conduct work with members as a group. I believe understanding *hikikomori* subjectivities is the tip of the iceberg, and future research into online communities must take greater care to understand how other identities such as gender, race, or ethnicity intersect with how these individuals envision their lives as *hikikomori*.

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