Hikikomori: The syndrome of juvenile social isolation. Analysis, education, technologies.

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Hikikomori: A síndrome do isolamento social juvenil. Análise, educação, tecnologias.

Andrea Cueto Florido
Universidad de Málaga
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2406-6585
andreacuetoflorido@gmail.com

Abstract

Youth social isolation syndrome, also known as Hikikomori, a term introduced into Japanese society by Tamaki Saito, is part of one of the biggest problems in today's society, as many people are addicted to the Internet. This essay presents data on the extent of this phenomenon not only in its place of origin, but also on a large scale. For the most part, this pathology occurred in young men from any social stratum, with an aversion to rejection and criticism, due to school failure, bullying, anxiety, among others, but today it occurs in a large part of the population. Likewise, a personal vision and possible solutions for this case are presented.

Keywords: Hikikomori, Internet, addiction, isolation, pathology, education, young people.

Resumen

El síndrome de aislamiento social juvenil, también conocido como Hikikomori, término introducido en la sociedad japonesa por Tamaki Saito, forma parte de uno de los grandes problemas de la sociedad actual, ya que son numerosas las personas adictas a Internet. Este ensayo muestra datos sobre la extensión de este fenómeno no solo en su lugar de origen sino también a gran escala. En su mayoría, esta patología se daba en jóvenes varones de cualquier estrato social, con aversión al rechazo y a la crítica, debido a fracaso escolar, bullying, ansiedad, entre otros, pero hoy en día se da en una gran parte de la población. Asimismo, se muestra una visión personal, y posibles soluciones a este caso.

Palabras clave: Hikikomori, Internet, adicción, aislamiento, patología, educación, jóvenes.

Resumo

A síndrome do isolamento social dos jovens, também conhecida como Hikikomori, termo introduzido na sociedade japonesa por Tamaki Saito, faz parte de um dos maiores problemas da sociedade atual, uma vez que muitas pessoas são viciadas na Internet. Este ensaio mostra como este fenómeno está generalizado, não só no seu local de origem, mas também em grande escala. Esta patologia era maioritariamente encontrada em jovens do sexo masculino de qualquer estrato social, com aversão à rejeição e à crítica, devido ao insucesso escolar, bullying, ansiedade, entre outros, mas atualmente encontra-se numa grande parte da população. Este ensaio apresenta também uma visão pessoal e possíveis soluções para este caso.

Palavras-chave: Internet, dependencia, isolamento, patología, educação, jovens.

INTRODUCTION

Pathologies present in society, specifically technological dependence, and those related to the inability of some people, especially young people, to relate to each other, are increasing, Hikikomori being a clear example of this.

Adolescence is a period of development in which many changes occur and at the same time the period in which many mental health problems begin to appear, such as those mentioned above. Many people describe this stage as complicated, as they begin to experience significant physical and personal changes, as well as being a very sensitive and chaotic period. During this period, usually, inopportune and immature decisions are made, bringing numerous consequences, through which they learn and differentiate between good and evil, the first toxic relationships appear, the feeling of belonging to the group, the construction of personality, the mismanagement of emotions, among many others. Palacios (2019) points out the following:

> Today's adolescents are people who were born right at the turn of the millennium (between the end of the 1990s and 2008), immersed in a technological context, where social networks are their main source of social interaction and communication, where work at home and the virtualisation of educational processes are promoted, and where loneliness is a common element in their lives. (P. 2).

Why does society (families, teachers, etc.) force adolescents, at that age, to make such important decisions as *what they want to do in general, for work, for living*, *whether they want to live with their parents* (in the case of a divorce), etc.? Not to mention that some of them at this age already have to work in minimal conditions, having to face adult life without being adults, and without having the mental and physical development that this entails.

Since information and communication technologies (ICT) have been introduced into our lives, there have been numerous studies on the use of these technologies, showing the great danger they represent for the new generations. There are many young people who are addicted to new technologies and social networks, which causes them various problems in their academic results, real personal relationships, etc. Although the Internet has many benefits, it is worth mentioning that it has to be employed in a correct way, given that otherwise it can cause serious obsessions related to mental and social problems. Echeburúa and de Corral state: "In some circumstances, especially affecting adolescents, the Internet and technological resources can become an end and not a means" (2010, p.3). This is due to the fact that new technologies have the capacity to trap a subject in certain cases, since the virtual world can produce a fictitious identity and a social distancing or a deviation from the real world, related to the loss of contact and the inability to relate.

Any excessive affection for a certain action can lead to addiction, whether or not there is a chemical element. Such addiction is increasing, also posing a great threat to society by accepting that information is in the hands of the entire population and by providing new ways of communication, information and entertainment. These tools introduce new forms of connection between individuals, which are essential in the fields of education, health, business and others, as ICTs are indispensable in every aspect today.

Technology is one of the great obsessions of many young people today, the world is totally digitalised, but do we know what the concept of 'Hikikomori' refers to? It is a social pathology that refers to behaviour, considered as 'non-normative,' within the society to which the person being analysed belongs, related to addiction to ICT, whether from a mobile phone, a computer, or any other device that makes it possible. Both mobile phones and computers have become indispensable elements in our daily lives, for work, entertainment, communication, etc. However, the problem is when the person who uses them is not able to relate to the real world unless it is through virtuality. Likewise, many people are unaware that their mobile device is their own spy, because it is capable of offering you all the information you are interested in at the very moment you want it, without you asking for it, and all this is possible thanks to our previous searches, the acceptance of cookies, the 'likes' on networks, etc. Hence the addiction.

Theoretical background

According to professionals related to the phenomenon of study, such as De la Calle and Muñoz, we find that "Hikikomori is a recently described disorder characterised by asocial and avoidant behaviour that leads to social withdrawal" (2018, p. 2). Numerous studies have shown that this disorder is specific to the state of Japan and is known to be an epidemic linked to the secretive environment of Japanese society and the esteem in which it holds loneliness. It has therefore come to be thought of as part of a 'culture-bound epidemic.'

Tamaki Saito, a Japanese psychologist, first brought the Hikikomori concept to light in 1998 in his book *Sakateki hikikomori, an endless adolescence*. This concept comes from the terms *hiki* and *komoru*,

which refer to the verbs "to be enclosed" and "to be isolated." Yume Nikki has also been quite well known in this respect, as it had a great impact in Japan (Grau, 2021). It is necessary to mention that Saito has been very criticised in his research due to the lack of accuracy, however, thanks to his research, the social isolation syndrome or Hikikomori was named and became known, at first only in Japan, and then in the rest of the countries. Based on information from an article published by the Japanese Government in July 2010, I can state that there are approximately 700,000 cases of Hikikomori people in Japan, while other studies show that the worldwide figure is between 800000 and 1400,000 cases (Hattori, 2006). Becerra-Canales et al. (2023) show the meaning of the Hikikomori concept as follows:

> It is a cross-cultural psychiatric phenomenon, without becoming a psychiatric illness, and represents a new diagnostic category which is not yet included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or DSM-5, but which aspires to become a clinical term in psychiatry. (P. 3).

This pathology mainly affects young people who withdraw from society, isolating themselves in their rooms for an indeterminate period of time, mainly in the home where they live with their parents, who are primarily people with a high economic level, which is why it occurs mainly in countries such as Japan, India, the United States and Spain. These subjects reject all types of communication, as their life revolves around video games and the Internet, with no conception of whether it is day or night.

Feixa states: "In a study carried out by the Japanese government in 2002 on 3300 former Hikikomori, 17% were unable to leave the house, and 10% could not even leave their own room" (2005, p. 5). This withdrawal mechanism is gradual and appears when adolescents begin to confine themselves to their bedrooms for longer and longer hours, consumed by the Internet. It is a process in which these people neglect their environment (studies, family and friends) and themselves, as their hygiene is less and less, their food is scarce, etc. In addition, behaviour is different in each case, with aggressive tendencies in some and depression and anxiety in others, with the latter in many cases being overwhelmed by suicide.

Authors such as Lindblad et al. (2024) carried out a study on the increase of physical illnesses in young people, being in a NEET position, which means without education or employment, so much so that in 2015 there were 40000000 cases in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and the percentage, between that number, increases in the case of having some type of diversity, and the risk of suffering from Hikikomori is there.

Hikikomori refers to an extreme enthusiasm for digital culture, linked to a terror of coping with their adult life supported by competition, whose aim is to 'stop time' and 'shrink space,' turning it into a fictitious one. This has provoked in me a strong déjà vu, related to a strong virus that led to a global pandemic in the year 2020. This gave rise to an era of confinement to which I have seen a clear relationship, as the entire world population was locked in their homes. Paricio and Pando point out: "A study conducted on a child and youth population in China indicates that 22.6% of their students have presented depressive

symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic, a figure higher than previous studies conducted on primary schools (17.2%)" (2020, p. 5): similar symptoms are reported by people with Hikikomori syndrome. It is worth noting that among the most notable characteristics of these individuals is that they were fundamentally asocial men, with a fear of criticism or rejection. Today, however, the syndrome is suffered by both genders; a research with 2767 primary school students in Slovakia, with an average age of 12-13 years, found that Hikikomori syndrome was now more prevalent in girls than in boys (Niklová, Zošáková and Šimšíková, 2024).

A research of the incidences and variables associated with this pathology, in the Japanese population, based on a questionnaire conducted between 2020 and 2021, with the participation of 3092 subjects, aged between 15 and 64 years, gave a 2.3% rate of Hikikomori, showing that there are many variables that directly indicate the development of this addiction, such as unemployment, lack of a safe place, or psychiatric history... this analysis highlights the prevalence in males (Kanai et al., 2024).

Bradley (2024) analyses this pathology in Japan and points out how sufferers are deprived of desire and a link with reality, with a great deal of introversion. All of this in an environment of a mercantilist society that accentuates abandonment.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the period of confinement led to moments of anxiety, depression and boredom, and the Internet was used to alleviate this, which may have led to addiction and Hikikomori syndrome in many adolescents (Mooney, 2024). The causes of Hikikomori syndrome include, but not limited to, family overprotection, academic pressure, school failure, bullying, or a personal problem, either related to friends, or a romantic partner. It is very important to see the socio-economic variables of the families, since an adolescent who presents with this syndrome, and belongs to a high socio-economic context, will be easier to preserve. Someone living in a family with minimal income, may need to find a job, or study, or both, in order to survive, which may cause the shock of reality to become a solution to the syndrome in isolated cases (Concina, Frate and Biasutti, 2024). Realities have been complex for a long time…

> The problems they refer not only had to do with poor infrastructure (obsolete software and machines), access conditions (four or five students per machine), poor teacher training, virtually no integration of the computer workshop with the rest of the curriculum, censorship and prohibitions (no gaming), but also with the profound contradiction between school culture and youth cultures. (Winogur, 2006, p. 8).

The object of this research may give rise to great pain, both socially and physically, as the individual is socially excluded, as he/she is immersed in a screen, which leads to great physical consequences, such as back pain due to posture, vision difficulties, headaches, etc. (Pérez et al., 2020): "More recently, neuroscience research has connected the experience of physical pain with the experience of social pain by identifying a shared underlying neural pathway" (p. 3).

Cáceres (2021) points out: "For many of these young people, virtuality has become a form of substitution for face-to-face contact with their peers" (p. 12). From my point of view, I believe that one of the causes that has led these adolescents to immerse themselves in technology may have been that social loneliness, finding their peers on social networks or their refuge being a computer and a keyboard, so I think that they do feel it, and that this wound is expressed.

In 2019, BBC Radio 4 showed a research that involved 55,000 individuals from numerous countries, aged between 16 and 99, a high percentage of whom were women: "Many report feeling lonely despite being surrounded by people" (The Family Watch, 2019, p. 1).

It is different with families, who in many cases can only provide food at their son or daughter's bedroom door, without even being able to see their son or daughter's face. Many others shy away from the idea, i.e. they do not admit that they have a Hikikomori child, lest other people, so that the rest of the people related to them could notice it: shame prevails, instead of seeking psychological help for the young person to get out of the situation he or she is in.

Wong et al. (2019) distinguish between two types of Hikikomori: primary Hikikomori, who do not have psychiatric disorders, and secondary hikikomori, who do have psychiatric disorders associated with the syndrome itself, the most common being depression. However, it should be noted that this is not an empirically supported classification, but only a theoretical concept. Amendola (2024) points out that depending on the criteria used, the subject suffering from this pathology could see a severe form of psychiatric disorders, or only an exaggerated form of social isolation provoked by different psychosocial indices and unfavourable situations, without necessarily presenting a diagnosis of his or her own.

With regard to treatment, it should be noted that the involvement of family members is essential, in addition to psychoeducation at both individual and group level, with cognitive-behavioural techniques being the most commonly used, in addition to the use of antidepressants such as sertraline.

Critical analysis

A phenomenon like the one analyzed occurs on such a scale could surprise those who are not used to the object of study. We have been able to verify that this is an epidemic that affects many people. However, it is not given the importance it requires; it is enough to turn on the television and watch the news, where we can realize that much more importance is given to any incident related to Cristiano Ronaldo, any other athlete, influencers, politicians, etc., than to a problem that affects more and more people. We need writings like this so that we are not blind to the issue, because until it affects us fully, we do not realize that this is really happening around us, like so many other issues related to mental health, technology addictions, and social isolation.

Extracting the information, that I have been able to gather, has been of great help in breaking patterns and showing the great impact that the Internet has on our lives. Among the risks that occur due to its

excess are not only addiction, but also the loss of privacy, accessibility to certain content not suitable for minors, cyberbullying... among others. However, I do not mean that new technologies should be eliminated from the lives of adolescents or from schools, but that every adult, and in this case, every educator, should offer a series of guidelines to students so that they know how they should be used appropriately.

At this time, I believe that education is the key to putting an end to the social isolation of many young people. We must give the starting signal so that this does not repeat itself generation after generation and so that the individuals who are suffering this torment today realise that the solution really lies beyond the door of the room in which they are imprisoned. Plato's analogy of the cave, which he uses to explain his Theory of Forms, is a helpful way to think of Hikikomori syndrome as well.. In this analogy, Plato shows us how people who are imprisoned in the cave pass from a dark world to a world full of light, the real world, just as happens in the life of the Hikikomori, who are prisoners of real life. They are ignorant of knowledge and live in a complete fiction, as in the myth of the cave. Abensour states: "His ascent into the realm of ideas has caused him to lose his sense of orientation in the cave, he nurtures thoughts all the more dangerous because they lead him to contradict the evidence of common sense" (2007, p. 11).

Education, in my opinion, is the most powerful weapon to change the world, since educating involves forming committed and responsible individuals, with a great capacity for critical thinking. School should not be a space for indoctrination and instilling fear, within an educational system designed by the world's elites to satisfy their interests (Betancur, 2023).

There are numerous treatments to end this epidemic, among which are therapeutic, social and educational approaches, focusing on the latter. I believe we can reduce the cases and severity of Hikikomori from an educational point of view through activities that work on emotional intelligence, interpersonal and social skills and the construction of their future.

Conclusions

It is necessary to learn a lot of information about the social isolation syndrome that haunts many young people today, as well as ways to treat and prevent it. We have to think about loneliness, but not only about the fact that Hikikomori find themselves like this, but about the fact that human beings cannot be isolated. In the case of Hikikomori, instead of being surrounded by real people, they live among fictitious individuals. Do people run away from loneliness? We have the habit of being surrounded by people all the time, so if we lose ourselves in solitude for a few seconds, we already feel abandoned and sad. This has such an impact on our lives that we feel incapable of carrying out certain actions by ourselves. However, solitude could have numerous advantages for mental health (health to which many people today do not give the importance it deserves), since our mind is adequately trained and cooperates in a more appropriate way when the person is alone. In my opinion, this is because in this way our concentration can increase, thus having a better performance in all areas.

Thanks to all of the above, we can deduce that it is essential to raise awareness of this syndrome that has currently become a global pandemic, in my opinion. The same occurs with the fear caused by the social and economic transformations that are happening today in the world, leaving a large part of the population without personal tools, not knowing how to face these changes. However, it is necessary to point out that we have many educational advances that we must use to end this pandemic, among others those related to innovative methodologies, that is, if students receive traditional education, they tend not to feel motivated to go to class, so they look for that motivation elsewhere. Let us make students feel attracted to school, and then, they will not have as much need to use the computer or mobile phone. However, it is necessary to establish times that subjects must respect to make use of each display, in addition to prohibiting the use of certain websites, so that they cannot easily fall into the addiction that ICT can cause.

Another way to avoid addiction is through parents: stop buying mobile phones or computers at an early age, do not buy them until they are really necessary, as well as not lending the mobile phone to children aged 5 or younger. However, the Internet is necessary for educational purposes. In this case, kids could use their parents' laptop for educational purposes by establishing a schedule and being supervised. In the case that it is desired to use it for leisure, always starting from a schedule and at an appropriate age, being informed in advance of the web pages that can be visited, in addition to the importance of not accepting cookies without first being informed, thereby promoting critical thinking in the individual.

New questions arise: if there are so many people suffering from this pathology, why is nothing being done about it? We must continue to investigate the issue. Likewise, this study has made me think of new lines of research, among which I can mention the following:

First, an exhaustive study of the factors that incite this addiction, whether psychological, family, educational, cultural or social factors, such as social pressure…

> In the case of the numerous disruptive changes that we have seen from the last three decades of the 20th century to the AI of the present millennium, what is relevant is a specific social evaluation of each system or technological device, where ethical criteria that weigh the affectation or safeguarding of freedom and human autonomy take precedence. (Colina, 2024, p. 5)

Next, the consequences that Hikikomori confinement can cause for mental health should be examined, relating it to depression or anxiety and offering inputs on these and the repercussion and impact of ICTs. Lastly, I recommend an investigation of possible ways of action or programs for the reintegration of these subjects into the population. All of these analyzes could be carried out in specific countries or as a whole. In today's society, new technologies are essential, however, as I have already mentioned, we must use them properly, otherwise, many problems could arise.

Finally, our role as future education professionals is to offer this information to our students, and the first thing we must do is to understand the current situation regarding the use of ICT, how they are used and where the main problems are. Achieving social inclusion is feasible, but we must have education as a regular basis and rely in turn on other professionals in the field of health, such as psychologists and doctors. In addition, as educators, we must promote correct healthy lifestyle habits in order to prevent disruptive behaviors and to avoid these cases of addictions and other similar problems in adolescents. Likewise, it is necessary to know that we have many social reintegration programmes, with which we can treat this pathology in different ways depending on the region. These programmes include, but are not limited to:

Regional Youth Support Centres and the NGO New Start (2020) in Japan. The former provides the subjects with workshops, psychological support and guidance in many aspects, while the NGO has a set of shared flats where the individuals can live with other people, so that they can integrate back into society, respecting each other's time. The Youth Recovery Programme in South Korea, similar to the Regional Youth Support Centres in Japan. Finally, Europe has programmes such as Transitions, BetterHelp or Out of the net, which are examples of more personalised and home-based support.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the aim of all these programmes is to enable people suffering from this pathology to gradually reintegrate into society. However, as already mentioned above, the help of these programmes will not be possible without the involvement of the families, who will have to carry out a great deal of work in order for their respective children to succeed, including a series of rules or responsibilities that they must comply with (Tokuni, 2024). Also, essential in this process, is the desire and motivation of the individual, because if he/she does not consent, the process will be slowed down. This is why it is essential to connect with the subject and attend to their needs and interests, in order to focus their attention on something other than the computer or mobile phone.

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