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Defining Hikikomori between Digital Migration, Ghosting and Cyberactivism. A Netnographic Study on Voluntary Social Self-Isolation in Italy

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Abstract

The interest in the analysis and study of the phenomenon of withdrawal and processes of “disappearance” from social life face-to-face has grown significantly in recent years both in clinical and in anthropological and sociological fields.

The Hikikomori, a phenomenon of voluntary social self-exclusion exploded in Japan in the late nineties of last century, has gradually affected, albeit in different ways, all Western societies coming to become in a few years a real social and health emergency (Ricci, 2009; Saito, 2013).

However, recent studies have shown that, although in Japanese society it is considered a social pathology expressly linked to double knit to the supporting structures of Japanese society and its way of understanding the commitment and social confrontation, in Western hybrid forms is considered, instead, an individual condition and in some cases a real psychological-relational structure, imposing a broader reflection on the causes, motivations and coping strategies experienced and implemented by young people who call themselves Hikikomori (Teo, 2015; Bagnato, 2017).

The present research aims to analyze, with an evaluative and depathologizing position, the emotional-relational aspects and the processes and ways of socialization of young Italian Hikikomori through the netnographic analysis of the most important online community of Hikikomori in Italy, trying to identify the common aspects and at the same time the peculiar and prototypical phenomena of some specific types and subcategories within the community itself.

Keywords: hikikomori, online socialization, voluntary social self-exclusion.

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1. Introduction

In the 2020-2021 biennium, in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic and related regulations to contain the spread of the coronavirus, there has been an escalation of voluntary social self-exclusion and social withdrawal phenomena from the community and the community (Wong, 2020).

Face-to-face socialization processes and social confrontation during the pandemic were put under indictment and were considered the main vectors of possible contagion and social and health risk to the community. On the other hand, online socialization (just think of DAD, smartworking, etc.) has become the main and most functional form of relationship, capable of ensuring social, economic and productive continuity on the one hand, and health safety on the other.

In this general framework, even before the pandemic, there were several people who lived in home confinement and at a distance from social contexts: these people are defined by the scientific literature as Hikikomori.

Recent studies have shown that hikikomori manifest important relational difficulties in the face-to-face mode and an important correlation, in many cases, with psychopathological aspects such as social anxiety, avoidance and complex forms of addiction (Saito, 2013; Bagnato, 2017; Coppola, Masullo, 2021).

However, studying the phenomenon and proceeding with a deeper analysis, several researches have traced a “migration” of socialization processes from the face-to-face dimension to the virtuality of the web society, describing a sociality and relationality that have not been completely abandoned.

This research work aims to analyze, with a *depathologizing* position, the emotional-relational aspects and the socialization processes and modalities of young Italian Hikikomori through the netnographic analysis of the most important online community of Hikikomori in Italy, trying to identify the common aspects and at the same time the peculiar and prototypical phenomena of some specific types and subcategories within the community itself.

In the first part of the contribution, in order to create a theoretical frame of reference, we will present the phenomenon of Hikikomori highlighting the defining aspects and the main theories of reference in the psycho-sociological field.

In the final part, in order to meet the research objectives, we will present the data and results of a netnographic analysis of the Hikikomori community in Italy, conducted between October and December 2021.

2. Hikikomori: between sociopathy and psychopathy

The term Hikikomori (“to stay away” in Japanese) refers to the condition of voluntary social self-isolation, i.e. of individuals who decide to voluntarily isolate themselves from face-to-face social contexts for long periods (Saito, 2013).

The phenomenon was first observed in the late eighties and early nineties of the last century in Japan, and then spread, with different forms and characteristics, in almost all Western countries.

The concept of social withdrawal is already present in the DSM IV and is associated as a symptom of other diseases, including depression, schizophrenia. Therefore, for Saitō we refer to a new condition, and therefore not yet classified from a clinical point of view (Sagliocco, 2011).

Hikikomori is defined as a dynamic and gradual condition because it presents itself, depending on the subject, with various facets that then, over time, evolve. So it is interpreted as that: “drive to physical isolation, continuous over time, which is triggered as a reaction to the excessive pressures of social achievement, typical of economically developed capitalist societies” (Ricci, 2011).

The hikikomori profile is generally characterized by four aspects considered prototypical of the phenomenon: a) social isolation and home deconfinement for at least 6 months; b) high levels of social, performance and generalized anxiety; c) the sublimation of face-to-face sociality with compensatory activities (manga, cosplays, TV series, internet addiction, etc.) d) inadequate strategies to frustration (Saito, 2013).

Crepaldi (2019) outlined an evolutionary trajectory of the phenomenon highlighting a first stage in which the subject begins to perceive the drive to social isolation without being able to consciously process it. He feels discomfort in relating to other people and finds relief in loneliness, struggling to identify a link of cause and effect between his condition and the feelings experienced. In this stage the hikikomori tries to counteract social isolation by continuing to maintain some social activities.

The behaviors that characterize this stage are: the occasional refusal to go to school or work using excuses of any kind; the gradual abandonment of all extracurricular/extra-work activities that require direct contact with the outside world and are not perceived as obligations; a gradual inversion of the sleep-wake rhythm and a clear preference for solitary activities especially related to new technologies such as video games or the consumption of TV series. In a second stage, the Hikikomori begins to consciously elaborate the urge to isolate himself, linking it directly to social situations. It is at this stage that the person abandons school for good, refuses all proposals to go out with friends, totally

reverses the rhythm of sleep-wakefulness and spends almost all his time closed in his own home. Social relationships are limited exclusively to virtual ones. The direct relationship with parents and relatives is maintained although highly conflicting and intermittent. In this stage you can also see an increase in aggressive behavior, sometimes physical, but more often verbal, related to frustration and the feeling of having lost control of their condition. In the third and last stage the subject gives in completely to the isolation drive and progressively distances himself also from the family and from the relationships developed in the network, source of malaise just like the relationships not mediated by the network. The hikikomori sinks in a total isolation exposing himself to the risk of developing depression, obsessiveness and paranoia. Self-harming and suicidal instincts, already present in the second stage, are further intensified and are only rarely implemented in this phase. The perception of time and reality are strongly altered with the risk that the accumulated frustration turns into aggression towards themselves or their parents (Sagliocco, 2011).

In less severe cases hikikomori lives a hybrid situation, that is, they never leave the house, but they talk to family members and spend time outside their room. There are also hybrid hikikomori who are able to leave the house only stimulated, but never on their own initiative.

Recent research (Kato et al. 2020; Teo et al. 2020) has emphasized the central role of certain factors in the construction first, and consolidation later, of a Hikikomori profile. The presence of unstable family situations, the absence of rules and normative parameters, excessive demands from social contexts, combined with physical issues (weight, height, and specific anthropometric indices) identity (ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality) can act as indicators and predictors of the evolutionary trajectory towards a process of voluntary social self-exclusion.

Wong (2020), pointed out that the hikikomori phenomenon has experienced an exacerbation in “spread” in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic. Regulations to contain the spread of the contagion included the gradual reduction of face-to-face activities, the encouragement of social distancing, and the transposition of offline activities into the web society; consolidating, legitimizing, and reinforcing social withdrawal and strategies to offset offline sociality with online ones, aspects present and strongly conveying the hikikomori profile (Wong, 2020; Kato et al. 2020; Teo et. al 2020; Coppola, Masullo, 2021).

3. The research design

On the basis of the theoretical reflections presented so far, the objective of this research is to analyze the psychological, relational and social aspects and the online socialization modes of young Italian Hikikomori through the analysis of interactions, posts, presentations and comments in the most important Italian community that collects subscriptions and creation users of individuals who define themselves in a condition of voluntary social self-isolation.

Specifically, three research questions were formulated:

- RQ1: what are the main motivations that drove individuals to social self-isolation that emerge from the analysis of the presentations and biographies posted within the community?
- RQ2: is it possible to trace the typologies of Hikikomori in order to highlight their peculiarities, strengths and relational fragilities so as to provide useful information for the social, educational and clinical planning of suitable paths for their social reintegration?
- RQ3: what are the ways of using cyberspace expressed by young Hikikomori enrolled in an online community?

The psycho-sociological study was conducted with an exploratory purpose and following the dictates of netnographic research, a qualitative modality that adapts and reworks ethnographic techniques to the analysis of virtual contexts, online communities and web society (Kozinets, 2010, Masullo, Addeo, Delli Paoli, 2020).

As a virtual context of study, a specific community of Italian Hikikomori was selected through a reasoned choice based on criteria of theoretical sampling that suggest selecting in a "maximalist" way the cases that can provide the best and / or greatest opportunities to find, collect and select the information necessary for the investigation and that can represent a sampling close enough (although not representative) to the characteristics of the population under study.

To this end, the Hikikomori Italia community was identified, which has about 5000 members.

The community was born in 2017 in response to an aggregative need of some boys who manifested social discomfort approaching the issue of hikikomori effect, a condition assimilated to their own discomfort and social expression and mode.

The community is currently one of the main points of reference for hikikomori people on a national level and represents a virtual space of information, training and sharing for those who wish to have answers and/or deepen the topic.

The observation and the collection of information were conducted with a covert access procedure trying to respect the setting, the rules and the methods of access to the community, and ensuring the authenticity of the information collected.

The analysis focused on a period of observation ranging from September 1 to November 30, 2021, and analyzed about 259 posts of presentations to the community, specifically examining the discussions and posts that had as a topic of discussion biographical aspects, the mode of use of the community and cyberspace, opinions and motivations on their condition and possible evolutionary trajectories.

The interpretation of data has followed a hermeneutic approach, a process that has tried to enhance the point of view of the subjects, the relational modes, the description of routines, the types of interests and hobbies, the motivations for choosing a life in a digital environment, with the attempt to outline common traits and distinctive aspects among different users.

The analysis of socio-demographic aspects, where it has been possible to find or reconstruct them, in the period of time examined by this research, show a clear imbalance of the phenomenon on the axis of the male gender (about 92% compared to 8% of female gender) and with an age range that goes from 16 to 35 years (average 21.5 years), with a geographical distribution concentrated mainly in large urban centers (Rome, Milan, Naples, Bologna) and the most populous regions (Lombardy, Lazio, Campania, Veneto and Emilia Romagna).

4. The main motivations for voluntary social self-isolation: an interdependence between individual and contextual factors

As highlighted by Zielenziger's studies (2008), it is possible to trace in the combination of factors considered individual (physical and anthropometric aspects, personality traits, coping strategies, and perceived self-esteem and self-efficacy) and contextual elements (relational aspects, phenomena of social exclusion and social pressure) the main predictors of what is defined as hikikomori career evolution. Specifically, Dzieszinski (2003; 2011) states that individuals in voluntary social self-isolation tend to follow a "career" that slowly leads to self-exclusion.

According to the author, this path is often the result of different types of pressures (social, school and family), pressures to conform by institutions and the group to which they belong, which result in progressive social withdrawal as the only form of protest.

By analyzing the presentations and posts of users registered in the Hikikomori Italia community, it was possible to confirm the main motivations

that trigger the “hikikomori career”. A first motivational set-up would invest in psychological factors, identified in a high level of performance anxiety and a pronounced social phobia typical traits of the personality and emotional characteristics of hikikomori, combined with low self-esteem for aesthetic and anthropometric aspects (e.g. body weight, height, etc.).

In addition, the analysis of the presentations traces in the school system the main social environment in which this emotional construction would create a significant push towards the process of thinning of face-to-face social relationships until the complete zeroing of offline relationships.

I feel the need to tell someone about my life. I am a 19 year old boy and in my life I have NEVER gone out with friends and I have never had a social relationship with anyone outside of school. Now it's summer and I'm out of high school, so I feel even more lost and depressed than before, since while my peers go out every afternoon and evening I spend my days in front of play, tablets and computers. A few days ago I chatted with a friend of mine from school, the one I could call my best friend, and we joked with each other in chat. Then he asked me to hang out with some of his friends, telling me that he would pick me up at my house. I didn't answer him because the fear was too great, this is because I suffer from social anxiety, so I'm afraid to be with others, I'm afraid to eat in public, while when I'm in case I amuse myself with the Playstation or on YouTube and I feel calm and happy. Yet, at the same time, I am depressed because I feel different from others, I feel like a hikikomori, because I spend days without leaving the house, only sometimes with my parents, to go to my grandparents or to go to the driving school (even just the thought of driving with unknown people next to me gives me crazy anxiety) (Luigi, 19 years old, Rome).

A second important motivational framework highlighted in many stories and presentations is that many Hikikomori relates to “microsystemic” contextual factors experienced that is in primary and secondary reference groups in which individuals have been bullied or cyberbullied, and voluntary social self-isolation would seem to be a possible solution or “coping” to feelings of rejection and social exclusion experienced in the microsystems of everyday life (peer group, school, work, university, etc.).

I spent a childhood, if not happy, at least serene and quiet, even if the first signs of total closure arrived already in kindergarten and elementary school. At soccer school the first panic attacks and tachycardia occurred, but the real drama began with the middle school, where I could not absolutely escape the bullying, which made things even worse by making me become even more insecure and lonely than I already was. Even in high school, bullying resumed, right from the first year, like two strings tied and inseparable from each other.

Five years made of school-home/home-school days, without ever going out and breathing the polluted air of this life so brutal and murderous, that, if you fall behind or you don't know how to do it, assaults you and leaves you with no escape (Giuseppe, 21 years old, Lecco).

Finally, a “macro-systemic” contextual motivational structure recurs in many stories analyzed and presented in the community: the denial of mainstream society, of the normative parameters of access to face-to-face sociality.

The Hikikomori have difficulty in finding their place in society, they do not have the normative parameters that guarantee access to everyday social life; they are not extroverted, they are not competitive, they are not individualistic and they have difficulty in expressing their emotions. All aspects that, according to their perceptions and stories, place them in a “normative mismatch” that irreversibly hinders their evolutionary trajectory throughout life.

I have a repudiation for society as a whole that several times has gotten out of hand from how huge it is. More specifically, I loathe those hostile forms of thought with ulterior motives, which now arise spontaneously in society as it is structured. I think there is a deep cultural problem at the base, in the way the human being doesn't expand his own line of thought, and makes this last involuntary choice fall on the generation that will grow up, creating gaps and splits that can be filled only through the good sense and the will to think of who, of that future generation is part of it. As if we were forced to an eternal limp, because getting lost is so easy, just a moment, a negative input, and bang, an entire will to do good, which is lost in a sea of hatred. I will not dwell on this point, I would only be confused, I've never been good at talking, I'm content with the passion that still remains to me (Giacomo, 33 years old, Livorno).

On this reflection, the decision to “migrate” from the offline society to the web society stands out, where you can alternatively “start again” with a new digital identity, deciding the degree of “involvement” and “unveiling” of identity.

5. The emotional-relational typologies of Italian Hikikomori

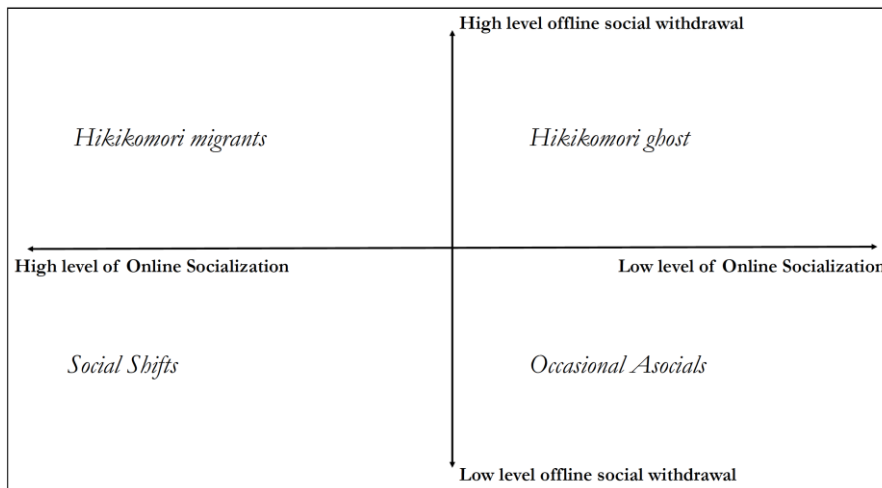
The analysis of the presentations and posts highlighted the criteria for framing the Hikikomori members of the community from an emotional-relational point of view. The first one is given by the level of online socialization, understood as openness to the establishment and cultivation, through an

emotional and relational involvement, in online interactions and within the web community.

A second distinctive criterion refers, instead, to the level of social withdrawal of the hikikomori person in offline society, and therefore of the inability to maintain interactions and processes of sociability in mainstream society, a difficulty experienced daily in social routines.

The intersection of these two criteria makes it possible to arrive at the elaboration of a typology that envisages four hypothetical types of people who implement voluntary social self-isolation (fig.1):

FIGURE 1. *Typologies of Italian Hikikomori.*



1) *Hikikomori migrants*: it can be considered as an individual who migrates from the offline reality to the online reality in order to live his life almost entirely on the web, making a real space-time “transposition”. This typology would highlight a high level of social withdrawal from the offline reality, but at the same time a network of relationships on the platforms of the web society stable, from which it shows a considerable gratification in terms of quality of relationships experienced. Here the condition of hikikomori is not perceived as “pathological”, but chosen as a preferential and/or even strategic condition to cope with the frustration generated by social pressures.

Recently my mother took me to a psychologist who deals with hikikomori. A pleasant person. I explained to her that I'm fine and I don't miss going to school and seeing teachers and my former classmates at all. I explained that my isolation is only apparent and that I have many friends and do many things

through the internet. I know English and study music at a high level. Maybe one day I'll want to go out and see some people from my city again, but things have to change, honestly the anxiety I had before I don't want to live it again (Francesco, 26 years old, Trieste).

2) *Hikikomori ghosts*: is the case of those who implement a voluntary self-isolation more severe and extreme, both in offline and online society, with an inability to build meaningful relationships and interactions. There are high levels of social anxiety and distrust towards others and more generally the outside world; virtual reality would seem to exacerbate the sense of inadequacy and low perceived self-efficacy. In the rare online interactions on the community is frequent recourse to fake identity or anonymous profiles, reducing to a minimum the degree of emotional and affective involvement. In all likelihood this is the condition that fully coincides with the medicalized and clinical vision identified in the literature.

I have never had many friends, in fact making friends was really difficult for me. I only had one friend, but even he had a lot of problems with others. I dropped out of school right before the field trip, I was too afraid of the nights to spend with my class. Just the thought of it made me anxious...so that I wouldn't be asked why I wasn't going, I chose not to go at all. I don't use social media. I consider them dangerous and feel uncomfortable. I use communities because they are less demanding, relationships cost commitment (Encounter19).

3) *Social Shifts*: one can consider this condition as pre-Hikikomori, of those individuals who exhibit a high level of online socialization, but a low level of social withdrawal. Individuals of this type maintain a fair level of socialization in offline reality, but prefer online relationships and virtual relationality. This typology can include those young people who continue to go to school, sometimes go out with friends, but if they can they stay at home and play, interact and entertain themselves with the tools offered by the web society. In this typology, the link with the offline reality could be suddenly interrupted due to a school or work failure and with the experience of high levels of social anxiety in demanding contexts.

I don't know whether to call myself a Hikikomori. I go to school and I also have friends, but if I have to choose between leaving home at night or logging on to the internet with friends to play video games, I honestly prefer the latter! Leaving the house is often boring. I don't always like the speeches that are made and then on the Internet you know many different people, you have more choice (Vincenzo, 17 years old, Naples).

4) *Occasional asocials*: also this case could be considered as a preparatory stage to the Hikikomori condition. This typology, very residual, presents a low level of online socialization and a low level of offline social withdrawal. This category includes those who join the community when they begin to feel the desire not to be an active part of society; the community thus becomes the first port of call for information, an “informational space” where to find notions, stories, to understand if the difficulties and discomfort that they feel is common to other people. They are therefore asocial, not stabilized, occasional, in an embryonic phase in which they experience the first difficulties with the outside world.

I am here to try to understand if what I am experiencing has been experienced by any of you. I haven't had any major relationship difficulties until now, I work and have a relatively stable group of friends. But for the past few months I find myself choosing to spend a lot of time alone, and I take pleasure in that. I feel like I'm better off alone than in the company of other people. I dedicate myself, but reading your stories I saw that you have a history of bullying and discrimination, I do not. That's why I wanted to understand if some of you have suddenly started to want to be alone (Enrico, 32 years old, Rome).

6. The presence and ways of using cyber space of hikikomori: some recurring traits

From the analysis of the presentations and posts, three main ways of using and occupying digital space were identified.

A first way of use is represented by the practice of vamping, a phenomenon through which the individual reverses the circadian rhythm day-night, carrying at night most of the social, work and educational activities, to devote the daytime hours to rest and refreshment.

The hikikomori who practice vamping implement a real spatial and temporal translation of offline reality, thus reproducing a parallel reality in cyberspace and at night. As a real matrix reality hikikomori relate, create bonds, engage in constructive and / or productive activities without really having a perception of their condition to the point of feeling in line with the evolutionary and personal stages, through modes of expression and behavior more “comfortable”.

I didn't answer you before because I was asleep (smile) to chat with me you have to connect with the American time zone (laugh) because most of the things I do are based on American hours! (Jacopo, 32 years old, Milan).

Since I've been living this way I've met a lot of people in Australia, Korea and Japan, I always knew in advance how the Covid situation was because I would ask my Japanese friends. I like my life. Everyone thinks it's a problem that I don't have any friends here, but instead I have a lot of friends around the world... (Ivan, 22, Pavia).

The main motivation that pushes the spatio-temporal translation of the reality of hikikomori who practice vamping would seem to be the temporal mismatch of the offline reality between the interests, ways of being, relationships established in the offline context.

Most of the people I knew at school or on the streets of my town were not like me at all. They all seemed a bit retarded or superficial, and I felt like a fish out of water. Eventually I joined this forum and then others, I started spending a lot of time on the net and I was going to bed later and later. Over time I started sleeping in during the day, waking up at 5pm, eating lunch at 8pm and getting in front of the computer for my social activities around 11pm until 5am. But I do a lot, I study Japanese, I have many friends in Ireland, America and Sweden who like me live life between their rooms and their PCs. Since I have them I feel much less alone (Antonio, 33 years old, Lecce).

A second way of using cyberspace and community is represented by the practice of covert identity. The users who practice this modality of use sign up with nicknames in which the information that can be traced back to their identity is hidden, often even the gender is not clear and/or not made explicit; however, despite the absolute anonymity and the absolute secrecy on the identity they spend many hours on the web, also having a good network of social relations online.

I don't do anything from morning to night: I observe, comment and stay on the web. I spend my hours between the community, TikTok, and Instagram. It relaxes me to see other people's lives and I watch TV series in the evening. Sometimes even in a row, I often devour them (users2289).

The social comparison would be a fragile aspect in the condition of Hikikomori that implements the covert identity mode, an aspect that despite the anonymity and virtuality, would generate social anxiety and performance and often pushes the individual to perform actions of changing identity in order to preserve their social disempowerment and low emotional involvement in the face of a high interactive activity.

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When something goes wrong I also disappear from conversations, or I change nickname, so I avoid fighting, I do not like to fight and talking to people often bores me or I can't stand it. That's just the way I am... I've always been that way (Iliot333).

Another way of using cyberspace and another way of experiencing online relationships by young hikikomori is linked to aspects of a political nature, social criticism and desire for renewal in the face of a society considered “unfair” “unequal” “not very inclusive”, it is possible to define this mode as “digital activism” or cyber-activism.

Those who practice cyber-activism consider their isolation a form of social protest, a “distancing” from the offline mainstream society and the values that inspire it. Feelings of social anxiety, of denunciation of an extremely demanding society, lacking empathy for the discomfort that these people experience, emerge.

I holed up at home because the world out there sucks for me! Every day was a battle, to be what they want you to be. I suffered so much, too much to keep it up. My family then oppressed me, oppressed me and compared me to my capable siblings. And then how can you live in a world where people are left to die in the streets? Where only those in power want more and more? I honestly don't want to live like that. I'd rather stay home and not talk to anyone. I think I spent two years without opening my mouth to speak (Cristiano, 34 years old, Florence).

Particularly illustrative of this modality of using cyberspace are the postings experienced during the pandemic period, in which home confinement and social distancing were imposed; through posts people who can be included in this modality claimed a certain foresight in their behaviors before the outbreak of the health emergency.

Now that the pandemic has brought the world to its knees everyone is saying we need to stay home! When I'm here, everyone is breaking my xxxx! So what should I say that I was doing right? No one wants to understand how things really are, if we had something as big as the pandemic is because the world deserves it! Maybe the coronavirus was the solution! (Ivo, 42 years old, Naples).

The typology of the cyber-activist is extremely active in online social interactions, the motivations that drive the interaction would reside in activities of diffusion of political knowledge, civic sense and a specific ideology of denunciation and distancing from the dittami of the contemporary western

society. The cyber-activist would also participate in specific online events such as webinars, virtual flash mobs and denunciation challenges. There would also be an important presence on other social networks where it is also easier and more immediate to spread messages of denunciation and information, such as TikTok, Twitter and Instagram.

I keep abreast of a lot of things going on in the world. For example, the dispute between Pro-Vax and No-Vax has engaged me a lot. I think an important social battle is being played out on these issues. I follow some influencers and those rare times I talk to my parents they tell me “Sara you’re always locked in the room but you always know everything!” For me to get informed and be able to fight my own battles and those like me (Sara, 23, Milan).

It is important to observe how these different relational modes or ways of experiencing virtual reality and cyberspace can occur singly or simultaneously, thus outlining more complex modes that prompt a more careful evaluation for the reasons that produce such forms of overlap.

7. Concluding remarks: digital migration as a coping strategy for social exclusion processes in mainstream society

This research work has contributed to the analysis and identification, with an depathologizing position, of the psychological, social and relational aspects of young Italian hikikomori, through the netnographic analysis of the main Hikikomori-themed community in Italy.

While considering the methodological limitations inherent in the netnographic method that is often not generalizable and not extendable to the entire social reality under study, it is possible to consider the results and reflections proposed as a first exploratory analysis of the phenomenon Hikikomori that, aiming at a progressive depathologization of the condition through a more careful and holistic form of analysis, aims to provide insights, indications and interpretative tools that can be important stimuli for clinical, pedagogical and social planning to overcome the malaise experienced by hikikomori.

The analysis of the presentations, stories and posts in the community focused on the emotional-relational aspects that identify the Hikikomori, identifying the level of offline social withdrawal and openness to online socialization as the main reference criteria (Ricci, 2011; Saito, 2013).

Through the intersection of the two parameters, four typologies of users who use the community were identified, highlighting two of them, which we

can define as Hikikomori tout court, in which the process of voluntary social self-isolation is initiated and consolidated, and two others, which we can consider as pre-Hikikomori conditions, in which there are elements of fragility and risk indicators where the community represents a formative, informative and confrontational space. This leads us to reflect on the processual nature of voluntary self-isolation, or a continuum made of intermediate positions that do not necessarily culminate in the disabling and pathologizing condition identified in the literature with the term Hikikomori. The choice of voluntary self-isolation, is in some cases the expression of a subjectivity that finds in the virtual space resources to express itself and not only to confine itself, aspect that, however, should not underestimate at the same time the need to establish positive relationships outside of a society considered by most as problematic. On the side of prevention policies, the main agencies of socialization are of fundamental importance, first of all the family, which must be trained to understand whether the use of web resources by their children, often considered as excessive, is a symptom of a deeper psychological and inner discomfort, or on the contrary only expression of personality characteristics that find in this space greater capacity and possibility of expression.

In line with the data in the literature, the interdependence between individual and psychological factors (such as high levels of social anxiety, low self-esteem for one's physical and psychological characteristics and) relational factors (bullying, social exclusion, body shaming) and macro-systemic factors (denial of the normative parameters of society) at the origin of voluntary self-isolation is undeniable. Due to the simultaneous action of these different aspects, the individual carries out a real escalation of asociality, not only from the offline reality, but also from the online one, an aspect that would allow us to distinguish these different positions from the condition identified in the literature with the term hikikomori (Sagliocco, 2011; Saito 2013).

The study, although exploratory, has also allowed to highlight peculiar ways of using the digital space of people who implement voluntary social self-isolation, such as the practice of vamping, covert identity and cyber-activist.

These specific practices of use of digital space, have made understand the need for a more accurate reflection on the concept of "hikikomori" at least the classic definition drawn in clinical and psychiatric. If it is true that the users of the community recognize themselves in the condition of hikikomori, many of its frequenters express subjective needs that are easier to express in the digital environment, denoting interests and forms of participation that do not fit with the problematic structure traced by medical and psychiatric literature on this condition, which is still little explored by social and digital research.

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