The COVID-19 Pandemic through the Eyes of Italian Young Hikikomori

MARIANNA COPPOLA & GIUSEPPE MASULLO

1. **Affiliazione Autore / Authors' information**
University of Salerno, Italy

2. **Contatti / Authors' contact**
Marianna Coppola: mcoppola[at]unisa.it
Giuseppe Masullo: gmasullo[at]unisa.it

Informazioni aggiuntive / Additional information

Culture e Studi del Sociale

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Marianna Coppola & Giuseppe Masullo

University of Salerno, Italy
E-mail: mcoppola[at]unisa.it; gmasullo[at]unisa.it

Abstract

The health and socio-economic crisis induced by COVID-19 has upset the political structures of the worlds governments, which had to respond to an unprecedented health emergency. This shifted attention to the issue of internal control: the danger comes not only from outside but is related to the citizens compliance with social distancing norms and, more generally, with the various measures to prevent the spread of. COVID-19 is today pivotal for rethinking oneself, ones future, having acquired an immanent quality for the discourses on the meaning of reality. It is even truer for those whose self and actions have been highlighted with the pandemic moment, as the hikikomori, whose voluntary self-isolation and living mostly within media spaces is now a generalized condition. The first section of this contribution will discuss the Italian hikikomori phenomenon through a critical reading of Mazzettis essay: Hikikomori - Il viaggio bloccato dell'eroe. Un punto di vista sociologico (The Heros Blocked Journey. A Sociological Point of View). The second section will summarise the results of a netnographic survey on the psychological, social, and imaginary dimensions of young Italian hikikomori on COVID-19 containment measures during the first lockdown, between March and May 2020.

Keywords: Hikikomori, COVID-19, Identity, Coronavirus.

Introduction

On December 31, 2019, a new viral form of SARS – later called COVID-19 – was isolated and identified in the city of Wuhan, in the Chinese province of Hubei. Since then, with a worldwide effect, our perception of reality has undergone a major upheaval, changing many of the certainties on which we based our choices and behaviours. Besides affecting our health, this pandemic has substantially modified our relationship with society in general, marking this event as a key theme for contemporary sociology (Mangone, Zyuzev, 2020). At the *macro* level, the crisis induced by COVID-19 has upset the political structures of world governments. They had to set aside objectives and problems that had hitherto been priorities to respond to an unprecedented health emergency. This shifted attention to the theme of internal control: the danger comes not only from "outside" but is related to the citizens' compliance with social distancing norms and, more generally, the various measures aimed at preventing and containing the spread of the virus (Masullo, Coppola & Senatore, 2020). On the *micro* level, the theme of identity has also become critical due to the disappearance of the normative references that previously regulated social belonging and recognition. For example, work – a central aspect through which individuals identify themselves and are socially identified – has changed and moved largely online, whereas until now digital platforms had represented only leisure and transience. The same goes for sociality, which, thanks to new media, such as social networks, could continue to take place.

We will be dwelling on the *micro* level, examining the relationship between the individual and what some have called "digital society" (Caliandro, Gandini, 2019). The pandemic has been for many an opportunity to question the meaning of their lives and aspects previously taken for granted about themselves and the way they relate to others. Indeed, COVID-19 is today the most recurrent word in the discussions that take place on the most used social media (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp); an element around which individuals have carried out what William Thomas (1968) theoretically described as the "definition of the situation". Lacking opportunities for offline encounters, digital sociality vastly contributed to the definition of the events connected to the pandemic. This was especially true in the first phase, characterised by the lack of a clear horizon of meaning due to the uncertainties of the scientific community on Coronavirus-related risks.

COVID-19 is today a central topic in rethinking oneself, one's future, having acquired an immanent quality in the discourses on the meaning of reality- this is even truer for those whose self and actions have been highlighted by the pandemic. It is the case of the *hikikomori*, whose voluntary self-isolation and living mostly within media spaces is now a generalized condition.

Starting from the essay on *hikikomori* by Maria Luisa Mazzetti (2020), this article aims at examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the imagination, particularly for those young people for whom the web, and cyberspace in general, is an important area of signification and individual and social action. Mazzetti's text, more than previous ones, highlighted central aspects in reading and studying these young people and how they have faced (and are still facing) this health emergency.

The phenomenon, known by the Japanese term *hikikomori* ("stepping aside"), first appeared in Japan in the late 1980s and then spread with diversified and "hybrid" forms in the Western world[1] (Bagnato, 2017).

Hikikomori individuals implement a voluntary and conscious withdrawal from all face-to-face or direct social relationships, which damages their school performance, interpersonal skills, self-esteem, and perceived self-efficacy (Ricci 2009; Saito 2013)[2].

In our opinion, the sociological point of view is paramount to highlight how the pandemic was an opportunity for *hikikomori* individuals to reconfigure themselves, to emphasise that they are bearers of a specific point of view on reality, a subculture that is not merely an expression of malaise, marginalization, and discomfort.

Mazzetti's essay allows us to theoretically highlight their strategies to resist the outside attempts at "stigmatization" and "pathologization" – where the "outside" means the world of adults (parents, teachers, doctors and psychologists, journalists,

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[1] The term "hikikomori" is formed by the fusion of two Japanese verbs: hiku 引く which, among its many meanings, also has that of "back off" and "disappear" and komoru 篭る which means "to isolate oneself", "to confine oneself". It denotes a condition in which the only possibility of survival seems to be moving away from society and "disappear" by withdrawing completely into their room. The following criteria identify *hikikomori*: social withdrawal for at least six months, (partial or total), presence of social/school phobia sometimes in comorbidity with addiction to the internet and electronic devices (Saito, 2013).

[2] According to a 2014 survey by the World Health Organization, 67% of *Hikikomori* are also addicted to the Internet and electronic devices (Spinello *et al.*, 2015). Self-avowed *Hikikomori* individuals are obsessed with the resources of the web society and use the web to the point of jeopardizing work/school activities, up to cause a perceptual distortion on the time devoted to media consumption and a hyper-valuation of the tool as a vehicle of emotional and social regulation. All these prototypical characteristics taken together are attributable to addiction to the Internet and electronic devices (Parrella, Caviglia, 2014).

etc.) who express a vision of their condition in terms at odds with those of the *hikikomori* themselves. The social fact of COVID-19 enters the processes of signification and social construction of the reality of these young people, contributing to restructuring their sense of self and their culture of reference (Berger, Luckmann, 1997).

The first section of this contribution will discuss the Italian *hikikomori* phenomenon through a critical reading of Mazzetti's essay.

In the second section, we will summarise the results of a netnographic survey on the psychological, social, and imaginary dimensions of young Italian *hikikomori* on COVID-19 containment measures during the first lockdown (between March 9 and May 4, 2020).

1. The *hikikomori* phenomenon: A sociological outlook

Mazzetti's essay offers a sociological viewpoint on young Italian *hikikomori*. It highlights the limits and shortcomings of previous analyses focused on framing the phenomenon under purely psychological lenses. Such studies often dismissed the social aspects as a very generic set of recurring elements, referable to the idea of "a society that is generically narcissistic and overly competitive, exaggerated in its pressures, particularly on males" (*ibid.*: 8). The scholar dwells particularly on the superficial way in which these texts compare Japanese and Italian society, tracing common elements and differences, and placing a particular emphasis on the psychological discomfort and relationships that young *hikikomori* individuals express by voluntarily choosing self-isolation. The resulting image is that of a young person whose ability to act is strongly compromised; a subject shaped by external forces, by a society perceived as oppressive at both work and school level.

We will now clarify Mazzetti's theoretical premises. These allow us to frame the themes she focuses on in analysing the *hikikomori* phenomenon. She refers to Bourdieu's theory (1992) and his concepts of *field* and *habitus*, thus painting young *hikikomori* individuals as active and conscious subjects in evaluating the choice of voluntary self-isolation. This choice does not occur in a social vacuum but is co-constructed in a web of "meaningful" relationships that *hikikomori* subjects continue to entertain in and outside of their room. The habitus – the expression of beliefs and socially situated representations – is generated by investing in a specific field[3] (often coinciding with the spaces of online sociality) that produces codes, meanings, and languages typical of a subculture that is shared, participated in, and self-feeding with positive and negative references from Japanese and Italian society.

This analysis allows us to grasp the processual character of the self-definition of young *hikikomori*: identity – which always needs social recognition – does not appear as an acquired state, a product of external forces suffered unconsciously, but a process made of continuous self-definitions and redefinitions, adaptations, and readjustments (Mangone, Masullo, 2015), in a game in which the comparison with others and the overlap between online and offline realities are constant. Mazzetti's analysis, which considers the relationships that hikikomori entertain, highlights the

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[3] He specifies that "the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of the immanent necessity of a field or of a set of intersecting fields […] it is a relation of knowledge or *cognitive construction*. Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one's energy (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127).

plurality of forms that this condition can take in its Italian variant. Mazzetti starts from Bagnato's most current definition (2017) which describes *hikikomori* "as those subjects who do not reject society *a priori*, indeed they do everything to be able to be part of it, but because of both specific individual and contextual factors and negative emotional states consequently triggered, they do not succeed and come to mature the idea of not being suitable" (*ibid.*: 17). She then points out, first form a theoretical and then an empirical point of view, that "not all *hikikomori* individuals suffer from a sense of inadequacy, but it is possible to find cases, (…) in which confinement is not an extreme response to suffering, but a precise option, conscious and configurable as self-determined, which identifies living at home as preferable to participating in a life outside" (*ibid.*: 24). The strategy implemented by the Italian *hikikomori*, which Mazzetti defines as "a hiccup" – distinguishing it from the "extreme" strategy implemented by their Japanese counterparts – seems to find its distinctive space on the web. Unlike their Japanese peers, Italian *hikikomori* use technology not only pass the time but also to "interact with others, introduce new interests and maintain access to the outside world" (*ibid.*: 25). Italian *hikikomori* individuals also often manifest a strong need to maintain a positive relationship with their parents, "especially with the mother, defining a new type of withdrawing from the outside world but not necessarily from the family" (*ibid.*: 26).

Regarding this last point, Mazzetti brings forward some crucial observations on the characteristics assumed – in both a structural and relational sense – by the family as a social institution. The family is a much-explored area in the literature on *hikikomori*, particularly highlighting the typical features of Italian society compared to the Japanese one.

Japanese social organization is a classic example of a "collectivist" society that emphasizes the interdependence within the community and the priority of collective goals over individual ones (Sagliocco, 2011). Personal satisfaction, therefore, is achieved only when one's individuality and ideas are expressed at the service of collective ideas. For Bagnato (2017), the Italian society grants great importance to the personal interests of the subject, often at the expense of the interests of the group to which he belongs; these aspects bring the scholar to define it as a society with an "individualist" vision of social action.

As Mazzetti points out, the "family" context has undergone major metamorphoses since World War II, due to social progress. They transformed Italy, as well as Japan, from a predominantly agricultural/rural country to one of the main industrial powers. This aspect also determined the passage from the extended patriarchal family to the nuclear family (Saraceno, 2003). The contemporary family has been in recent decades characterised by a *child-centred* vision. In the past, the children sacrificed themselves for the broader objectives of the family. Today, conversely, it is the family that conforms to the needs of its youngest. This aspect has transformed the family system from an institution that carried out fundamental tasks of social and cultural reproduction, to a private system of relationships regulated by affection norms and codes (Di Nicola, 2017). If, in the past, the family institution was oriented by normative references and values, which stood alongside those that accompanied other vital areas in which subjects moved, today we are increasingly witnessing a fracture between the family and other institutions of society (including schools). Therefore, the condition of Italian *hikikomori* could be seen here also as an extreme view of the family that has become for contemporary individuals a preferential "refuge" in which to seek protection from the disappointments of the reference society.

2. Representations of COVID-19 among Italian *hikikomori*: A netnographic survey

We summarised above the critical issues highlighted by Mazzetti on the Italian hikikomori phenomenon. The following section will present the results of a netnographic[4] research investigating the psychological, social, and imaginary aspects of young Italian *hikikomori* individuals on COVID-19 containment measures during the first lockdown (between March 9 and May 4, 2020).

Specifically, the study aimed to examine the opinions and attitudes of young *hikikomori* about:
- COVID-19 containment policies, particularly self-isolation and social distancing;
- the massive and necessary use of online communication and socialization mediated by digital platforms.

We selected a specific community of Italian *hikikomori* as the virtual context of our study: a Facebook group that counts about 4590 members.

We observed the community from March 9 to May 4, 2020, and analysed 253 posts, particularly those touching on the COVID-19 emergency.

We adopted a hermeneutic process for analysing and interpreting the data. In other words, we sought to enhance the point of view of the subjects, the motivations driving them to self-isolation, its value at the level of identity in the light of the COVID-19 emergency, and the "definition" of their experience to distinguish their condition from the imagery and representations of the general population in this pandemic.

The analysis shows that the posts containing opinions, judgments, considerations, and representations about the COVID-19 containment measures, specifically home confinement and social distancing, are polarised on two dominant positions. One is *conservative* and attentive to the defining processes of the hikikomori phenomenon; the other is *critical* and predisposed to a de-stigmatization process of social isolation.

The first position emerges from the analysis of the posts that consider home confinement and social distancing *not superimposable* to the *hikikomori* condition. Indeed, the latter requires the subject's voluntary choice of self-isolation, unlike the compliance with the government dispositions during the COVID-19 health emergency.

This position, which we could define as *conservative*, strongly emphasizes and reiterates the clinical, social, and experiential characteristics of the *hikikomori* condition, demonizing the "out of place" juxtapositions often formulated by the mass media.

Another position that emerged within the complex and articulated set of opinions, beliefs, and judgments expressed by *hikikomori* individuals on COVID-19-related measures is the *critical* one. This viewpoint shifts the focus of the discussion to the moral, social, and cultural aspects of society as a whole, using them as arguments to support a process of de-stigmatization of social isolation[5].

The *hikikomori* individuals embracing this position consider social interactions and, more generally, the Western cultural system, the basis of the main "sociopa-

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[4] A qualitative method that adapts and reworks ethnographic techniques to the analysis of virtual contexts, online communities, and web society (Kozinets 2010; Masullo, Addeo, Delli Paoli, 2020).

[5] For a more detailed analysis of the research results in the article Coppola M., Masullo G. (2021), *Autoisolamento sociale volontario ed emergenza Covid-19: uno studio netnografico tra i giovani Hikikomori italiani durante la pandemia*, in «Cambio. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali», OpenLab on Covid-19. DOI: 10.13128/cambio-10399

thies" of the contemporary individual. They see the measures aimed at containing and preventing the coronavirus infection as a "godsend", a way to demonstrate to all the "others" how social isolation and deconstruction of face-to-face social relationships can be "solutions" to the personal malaise.

2.1. Online sociality during the Covid-19 pandemic: The opinion of young Italian hikikomori

The post selected for our investigation contained opinions, judgments, considerations, and representations about online sociality. Their analysis showed that many young people emphasized the characteristics of *functionality*, *speed*, and *non-corporeality* of virtual sociality.

As far as *functionality* is concerned, many posts underlined how, during the lockdown, the use of social media, chatrooms, and videocall platforms helped, supported, and channelled the social, relational, productive, and pedagogical needs of millions of people, in Italy as in the rest of the world.

These virtual social interactions have made it possible to reach places and spaces (as well as fill time) otherwise unreachable during the pandemic.

The characteristics of immediacy and speed have been reaffirmed as fundamental for preferring online over offline sociality. The possibility of directly, immediately, and quickly ranging over various virtual territories has allowed the diffusion and consolidation of forms of virtual social aggregation previously considered "peripheral" or only in terms of momentary *loisir*. This led to the formation of real articulated communities, which have developed and, in some cases, consolidated specific subcultures within which we have tried to understand the pandemic from the point of view of its meaning. This unprecedented opportunity has allowed *hikikomori* individuals to reaffirm the specificity of these virtual contexts, their sociality in some ways distinct and preferable to the offline one.

Another important parameter that guides the choice of *hikikomori* individuals towards an online versus face-to-face sociality is that of *non-corporeality*.

The analysis of the posts showed a strong tendency to a *bodiless* interaction conveying thoughts, opinions, psychological characteristics of the self. This contrasts with the centrality granted in offline interactions to the anthropometric features and aspects, which represent for most of the *hikikomori* individuals a strong source of frustration and anxiety.

Regarding the emotions, the analysis of the posts highlighted three main predominant emotional states: *anger*, *fear*, and *motivation to start anew*.

It is important to point out that the emotions that emerged from the analysis have a different motivational matrix than those experienced by other people.

For members of the broader society, the anger, fear, and motivation to start anew are centred on the pandemic and its social, health, and economic consequences. *Hikikomori* individuals experience the same emotions, but for different reasons.

Specifically, their *anger* takes the form of an *outburst* against society and the world of "adults" considered to be the real culprits of the health emergency and the ensuing global crisis.

Fear is not related to concerns for their health but to the anxiety of necessarily having to entertain relationships with family members, who are homebound by lockdown measures. This aspect shows the "ambivalent" relationship between young *hikikomori* and family members who, contrary to previous assumptions, from a "protective" factor can become a further cause of "discomfort".

A reversal of the typical condition of the *hikikomori* is represented by the *motivation to start anew*. The posts show that some *hikikomori* harbour an unexpected desire to "get out and go out". Thanks to stay-at-home orders, they can "break" their home isolation and use the exceptions envisaged by the rules to resume contact with the outside world. At a time when a large part of sociality is concentrated in domestic places while external places of sociality are becoming deserted, the latter ideally constitute preferential areas for shelter from encounters with others and wider social expectations.

Conclusions

The analysis of Mazzetti's essay, *Il viaggio bloccato dell'eroe: il punto di vista sociologico* (The hero's blocked journey: the sociological point of view) allowed us to highlight a typical feature of the Italian *hikikomori* phenomenon. The author linked it to the issue of self-determination rather than to the conditions of discomfort and marginality emphasized by most studies on the phenomenon. Without minimising the psychological and medical consequences of such a situation[6], Mazzetti provides a more complete outlook, accounting more clearly for the point of view of the young *hikikomori*. This viewpoint expresses neither discomfort nor complete isolation; on the contrary, it is the product of meaningful interaction with the other within relationships both offline (the family) and online (through a specific subculture expressed in digital platforms). These aspects also transpired by how the boys confronted the issue of COVID-19 on the Facebook group *"Hikikomori Italiani"* that we investigated through a netnographic survey.

The pandemic is an important moment for them to reach a clearer identity construction and a sharper definition of their subcultural references. The need to *de-pathologize* and *de-stigmatize* voluntary self-isolation and the choice of pulling back from sociality expresses a double wish. On the one hand, the desire to encapsulate the clinical, social, and defining criteria of the *hikikomori* condition within precise boundaries, without creating dangerous overlaps that could trivialize or create conceptual and interpretative distortions. This is especially true for a phenomenon already little treated and little recognized outside the scientific community. On the other hand, they took advantage of the "social fact" posed by the COVID-19 health emergency as an argument to de-stigmatize social self-isolation and exclusively virtual sociality, considered "dysfunctional", "pathological" and/or synonymous with malaise before the pandemic but suddenly became virtuous, necessary, and legitimate.

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[6] It is also necessary to consider the effects of the pandemic in reinforcing the choice of self-isolation, as pointed out by Marco Crepaldi (2019), psychologist, founder of *Hikikomori Italia*. See https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10161084137126151&id=179618821150&sfnsn=scws pmo.

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