

# THE INFLUENCE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES ON THE SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL (HIKIKOMORI SYNDROME) AMONG DEVELOPED COMMUNITIES, INCLUDING POLAND

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## Abstract

*Hikikomori social withdrawal syndrome was first diagnosed in Japan and means a person who has been isolated from society to an extreme degree. She/he does not attend school or go to work. They do not attend university, they constantly remain at home and most often keep contact with the outside world using new technologies. Hikikomori syndrome is most often recognized as a characteristic problem occurring among Asian societies. Meanwhile, the growing dependence on new technologies among Western societies, and in particular, on the Internet, has caused social withdrawal to become a global problem. Human relationships began to move from the real world to the virtual world, which nowadays is full of communication facilities and allows people to establish relationships with other people without leaving their homes with the help of social media, which are currently packed with advanced solutions connecting people of similar interests or views. All this means that nowadays it is easy to withdraw from physical social life without losing virtual contact with others.*

**Keywords:** hikikomori syndrome (social withdrawal), Internet addiction, social media, new technologies.

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## Introduction

Hikikomori is a social phenomenon that most often affects young people avoiding direct contact with their environment. It is particularly noticeable in Japan where for almost three decades it has become a reality. Recently, it has also been noticeable in other areas of the Western world, including Poland. The development of new technologies forces changes in social behavior, especially in communication. Hikikomori, results in resigning from direct interpersonal relations, leading to a life in a virtual world, where communication with others is simpler and requires no physical involvement from them.

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The aim of the article is to present the impact of new technologies on the expansion of the phenomenon of social withdrawal among the societies of developed countries, including Poland, which in 2017 ceased to be a developing country and was promoted to the group of the 25 most developed markets in the world.

### **Hikikomori syndrome**

The concept of Hikikomori arose as a result of combining two Japanese words “hiku” to withdraw, give up, go away and “komoru” which means to be in a castle and protecting yourself, remain in the temple and pray, enter and hide, and be inside and not go out<sup>2</sup>.

In 1998, the word “hikikomori” was added to the dictionary Oxford Dictionary of English<sup>3</sup> thus joining other existing Japanese expressions such as “otaku” meaning a person who has obsessive interests and “karoshi”, the expression translated as death from overwork. Hikikomori syndrome is most often defined as an abnormal avoidance of social contact by young male persons. This term was first presented to the public in 1992 by a Japanese psychiatrist Tamaki Saito in a book entitled “Social Withdrawal (shakait-eki hikikomori): A Neverending Adolscence”. Saito described hikikomori as a phenomenon depicting people completely withdrawn from social life, remaining in their homes for more than six months. From that moment, the term hikikomori spread throughout Japan, and the phenomenon itself began to be described in the medical press of other countries. In May 2010, a group of researchers supported by the government of Japan published guidelines for the diagnosis and treatment of hikikomori. These directives defined the syndrome as a phenomenon in which social units become loners avoiding various social situations (i.e.: school attendance, professional work, domestic or social interactions) in a period of not less than six months. This definition accepts a fact that these people may move away from their homes, but without entering into any relationship with other people. An important issue is also that people with hikikomori syndrome are considered to have no psychological problems<sup>4</sup>.

Until now, no scientific agreement has been reached which clearly explained the reasons for this phenomenon of social withdrawal. From the psychological point of view, a large number of reports and scientific articles points out the relationship between hikikomori and traumatic childhood experiences. Many cases (people) described experiences of experiencing social withdrawal during this period of their lives. It is worth noting that an introverted personality and shyness also can lead to the development of this syndrome. The immediate family can undoubtedly be responsible for hikikomori by rejecting or overprotecting a child. It even happens that poor academic performance combined with the high expectations of parents may cause the development of the hikikomori syndrome. From the sociocultural point of view i.e. urbanization, technological progress or globalization, these elements may also have an impact on the spread of the hikikomori syndrome. A particular example is the Internet, due to which people have invented new ways of interacting with each other. Internet tools such as social media have changed the methods of communication, thus giving new grounds for the development of social withdrawals<sup>5</sup>.

### **Internet addiction and the hikikomori syndrome**

As in the case of hikikomori, the definition of Internet addiction is still an area of

2 Kalita K. (2013), Psychospołeczne wymiary „wycofania społecznego” na przykładzie Japonii, „Zeszyty Naukowe WSOWL”, No. 1, p. 74.

3 Oxford English Dictionary <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/276284;jsessionid=5A27A2C42B22BBEAE1860118E2859BF6>

4 Tateno M., Woo Park T., A Kato T., Umene-Nakano W., Saito T. (2012), Hikikomori as a possible clinical term in psychiatry: a questionnaire survey, „BMC Psychiatry”, 12:169, p. 1

5 Stip E., Thibault A., Beauchamp-Chatel A., Kisely S. (2016), Internet Addiction, Hikikomori Syndrome, and the Prodromal Phase of Psychosis, „Frontiers in Psychiatry”, Volume 7, Article 6, p. 3

scientific debate. The term refers to the problematic use of the Internet mostly. It contains such behavior as: internet gambling, cybersex and internet sex addiction, addiction to online social contacts, addiction to computer games and computer, information overload and addiction to online shopping. People affected by this phenomenon are characterized by the following symptoms: a greater amount of time spent online until satisfaction is achieved, the repeated and unsuccessful attempts to cut themselves off from the Internet, feelings of anxiety and depression, irritability resulting from attempts to limit access to the network, staying "online" longer than was intended, or even using the Internet as an escape from problems<sup>6</sup>.

The first scientist who drew attention to this phenomenon was the American psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg, who in 1995 used the term Internet Addiction Disorder. At the time, he treated it as a form of a joke, not knowing yet that in the future it would become a phenomenon of global reach. Currently both, the classification of mental diseases DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) and the ICD 10 system (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems) do not treat addiction to the Internet as a disease. Watching videos on YouTube, shopping online or logging on to social media does not mean an addiction. The addiction appears when the above-mentioned activities have a negative impact on our private lives. Some researchers say that the amount of time spent online or rather the way we use it is the most troublesome. Others explicitly say that using the Internet in excess affects human brain as destructively as drugs or alcohol<sup>7</sup>.

Hikikomori is widely attributed to Japanese residents, yet social withdrawal phenomena also occur in other parts of the world. For example, in South Korea, Internet addiction is a serious problem that is increasingly common among young people in this country. Internet addiction has many features in common with hikikomori. Internet addicts do not leave their homes because they are completely absorbed in their life "on the web", but also because they are avoiding physical interaction with others. It is generally accepted that young people in South Korea become hikikomori, precisely because of their addiction to the Internet<sup>8</sup>.

Hikikomori and Internet addiction can even overlap in some cases. People affected by these syndromes display a lack of interest in establishing physical relationships with other people, do not participate in social life, and the Internet is often used as an escape from depression and everyday life. It is worth noting that as many as 56% of the people affected by hikikomori may be in the area at risk of Internet addiction. On the other hand, it should also be emphasized that access to the Internet in the case of hikikomori may be beneficial for them (in contrast to people addicted to the Internet) in terms of improving the quality of social life, as it gives them the opportunity to meet people in the virtual world (social media) with common interests and similar problems. This fact is used by doctors in attempts to make contact with people affected by hikikomori. Often this is the only possible form of communication with them. In the case of people addicted to the Internet, this way of establishing a doctor-patient relationship is difficult<sup>9</sup>.

### **The impact of social media on social withdrawal and social isolation**

The PWN dictionary defines social media as "Internet and mobile technologies that enable contact between users through the exchange of information, opinions and

6 Craparoa G. (2011), Internet addiction, dissociation, and alexithymia, „Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences”, 30, p. 1051

7 PSYCOM [www.psychom.net/iadcriteria.html](http://www.psychom.net/iadcriteria.html)

8 Suwa M., Suzuki K. (2013), The phenomenon of "hikikomori" (social withdrawal) and the socio-cultural situation in Japan today, „Journal of Psychopathology”, p. 193

9 Stip E., Thibault A., Beauchamp-Chatel A., Kisely S. (2016), Internet Addiction, Hikikomori Syndrome, and the Prodromal Phase of Psychosis, „Frontiers in Psychiatry”, Volume 7, Article 6, p. 4

knowledge"<sup>10</sup>. Social media users quickly adopted online social communication as an essential part of their everyday life. The biggest websites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube are developing at a surprising pace, presenting their users with new functionalities and solutions. With such huge power, these media primarily influence the younger generation of people who can potentially experience their negative effects. Many scientific studies draw attention to the correlation between the use of social media and their adverse effects, such as an increase in anxiety, stress, depression or loneliness. In fact it is loneliness that is one of the main concerns for doctors, since it is closely related to the serious health problems of social media users. Loneliness can be interpreted as a discrepancy between the desired level and the practical level of social contacts in the life of the social unit. A lack of control of the use of the Internet in time enhances the feeling of loneliness, and increases emotional loneliness among the younger generation. The British foundation Mental Health claims that 60% of young Internet users aged between 18 and 34 admit to being lonely despite using social media. There are also studies in which young Facebook users declare that the more friends they have on this site, the lonelier they feel<sup>11</sup>.

Social isolation is a state in which an individual has no physical contact with others and, above all, lacks a sense of belonging to society. Social media such as Facebook can alleviate the effects of this phenomenon because people in social isolation have the opportunity to establish virtual relationships with other users. Such relations may also have the character of social support. It is worth noting, however, that people of all ages use social media, and above all, they are young people. For example, in the United States, up to 90% of young people use social media, and most of them visit their websites at least once a day or use their applications. Therefore, it cannot be stated that the use of social media can increase (especially among young people) social isolation. For example, a person who uses Facebook on a daily basis can replace physical interaction with others in favor of this virtual one. Instagram, which is a photographic social medium, often shows images of other people as perfect and faultless (usually strongly exaggerated and untrue), which can be interpreted as photos of happy people, and this means that other users of this site can feel socially isolated, especially when they start to compare their lives to these "fortunate" people. The study, which was carried out on 1787 American citizens aged 19-32, shows a strong correlation between the use of social media and social isolation. An interesting result of this study was also the statement of a large group of respondents that do not equate online interaction with real social relations<sup>12</sup>.

### **Social withdrawal syndrome in Poland**

The phenomenon of hikikomori in Poland was discovered by a psychiatrist Marek Krzystanek PhD, who was addressed by a mother of a high school student in 2001, she noticed that her son had stopped leaving the house situation lasted for more than two years and the decision on not leaving the house was made in the first grade before the end of the school year. It was very strange as, according to the mother's description, the high school teenager was a talented and good student. In the same year, Krzystanek described this disorder in the publication entitled "Hikikomori. The shadow of the city"<sup>13</sup>.

Currently, there are no official statistics on the occurrence of hikikomori cases in Poland. A small number of Polish psychiatrists specializing in this field feel that the

10 Słownik PWN <http://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/media%20spo%C5%82eczno%C5%9Bciowe.html>

11 Słownik PWN <http://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/media%20spo%C5%82eczno%C5%9Bciowe.html>

12 Primack B. A., Shensa A., Sidani J. E., Whaitte E. O., Lin L. yi, Rosen D., Colditz J. B., Radovic A., Miller E. (2017), Social Media Use and Perceived Social Isolation Among Young Adults in the U.S., „American Journal of Preventive Medicine”, 53, p. 1-3, 5-7

13 Andrzejewska A. (2014), Samobójstwa z inspiracji sieci, „Zagrożenia cyberprzestrzeni. Kompleksowy program dla pracowników służb społecznych”, p. 131

parents of young people affected by the hikikomori syndrome try to deal with this problem on their own. One of the Polish experts in the field of social withdrawal is Professor Maria Siwiak-Kobayashi, a former director of the Anxiety Clinic at the Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology in Warsaw. She first came across the phenomenon of hikikomori in the 1970's when she was on an internship in Kyoto, Japan. The term hikikomori was not widely known during this period, but at that time she was dealing with patients for whom this term would fit. Most often it was not the patients asking for help, but their parents, who were afraid that after their death their children would not be able to cope with life. Professor Kobayashi emphasizes that the problem of social withdrawal affects inhabitants of developed countries, where people can afford isolation from others, because it is their immediate family that most often pays their living costs. Almost half a century has passed since her internship in Japan, and European societies, including Polish society, have matured and today are struggling with similar diseases of civilization as those in Japan. Professor Kobayashi claims that what she encountered many years ago in the Land of the Rising Sun, today it is a global phenomenon with a global reach. Doctor Krzystanek says that the hikikomori syndrome crosses the borders of Japan and that it is difficult to determine how many cases of the syndrome are currently in Poland, especially since many of them are simply poorly diagnosed. According to him, the lifestyle in Poland is not yet comparable to that in Japan, yet we aspire to it and therefore, we must realize that such phenomena will also appear more often in our country. Professor Kobayashi observed that Polish patients often give up the real world in favor of a virtual world. A fear of life as well as increasingly high standards of it, intensify social isolation, and all of this can contribute to an increase in the number of patients diagnosed with the hikikomori syndrome. The scale of this problem can be particularly seen on Polish Internet forums, where a large number of groups are dedicated to lonely people. The PhobiaSocialis.pl website attracts people with symptoms of social phobia. So far, over 8,500 people have registered on this website, and almost 340,000 posts have been added to it. PhobiaSocialis.pl users consider the creation of a hermitage that would help them to fight their fears or explain what separation from society should look like<sup>14</sup>.

In Poland, this phenomenon was, to a certain extent, also presented to a wide audience in 2011, when the movie "Sala samobójców" directed by Jan Komasa, was shown on the screens of Polish cinemas. The on-screen character of Dominik Santorski, played by Jakub Gierszał, shows a sensitive and slightly lost teenager, the son of wealthy parents, who is suspected by classmates of being homosexual. These types of accusations, most often reported on the Internet forums, cause the humiliated hero of the film to refuse to attend school and prepare for his high school final exams. Without leaving his home, on the Internet, Dominik meets a girl who is fascinated by death and self-harm. As the story develops, the student cuts himself off from physical interactions with others and completely transfers his life to the virtual world. The actions of the main character of the film showed behaviors characteristic of the hikikomori phenomenon. The story of the movie was not based on a true story, but it provoked a discussion on whether an addiction to the Internet and the virtual world is present among young Poles.

Statistics show that in Poland people addicted to or at risk of becoming addicted to the Internet, are most often those up to 34 years of age. In 2017, the Representative of Children's rights appealed to the education and health ministers for more effective prevention regarding the so-called e-addictions. It can be observed that every tenth Polish teenager is in a group threatened by addiction or addicted to the Internet. Teenagers spend an average of over three hours a day on the Internet, but there is also a large group of people who spend most of their free time online<sup>15</sup>.

14 Newsweek Polska <http://www.newsweek.pl/polska/spoleczenstwo/ludzie-zamknieni-przed-swiatem-kim-sa-polscy-hikikomori-artykuly,421674,1.html>

15 Biuro Rzecznika Praw Dziecka [http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/wyst\\_2016\\_01\\_23\\_mz\\_](http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/wyst_2016_01_23_mz_)



## Summary

Since the Internet addiction of young people in Poland has been noticed by the highest officials of the Polish state, it was shown that the problem is real and serious. Today, a young man who is able to spend most of his free time on the web is exposed to many dangers, such as the hikikomori syndrome. Currently, the phenomenon is characteristic not only to Asian societies, it has become a global phenomenon that can be also found in Poland. The development of modern technologies has a lot of advantages for humanity, but it also has many threats and dangers. Social isolation in the "offline" mode does not mean the isolation from others in the "online" mode. There has been a certain migration of social behavior from real to virtual life. Social media effectively help the development of this trend. Today, media users can successfully divide their friends into the ones they know physically and those with whom they have never made physical contact; yet they know each other through the web and write to them on Internet forums, groups, or "video chat rooms" like the website "Omegle," with its motto: "Talk to strangers." Steven Spielberg in his latest film entitled "Ready Player One" tells us that in the year 2045 people will find relief in a virtual universe called OASIS. In OASIS, you can travel, experience adventures and be anyone you want. The only limitation is your own imagination. The race of technological giants in the area of computer games and virtual reality, can give the impression that this science fiction scenario could one day become a reality and will affect part of the Earth's population with the hikikomori syndrome.

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