

The Overlooked Cases of Female Hikikomori: Visual Representation in Manga

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Abstract

A large amount of Western and Asian consumers has started to watch anime (Japanese animation) and read manga (Japanese comics) resulting in them thinking of Japan as 'exceptional' and 'relaxed'. It has also resulted in Japan possessing soft power globally through visual mediums leading to several debates and discussions from various perspectives. One such debate remains the lesser-known gendered portrayal of Hikikomori, a phenomenon pointed out by Michael Dzieszinski in his paper "Hikikomori as a Gendered issue" (Dzieszinski, 2004). This paper attempts to bring light to the marginalized portrayal of female hikikomori and argues for a bridge between the existing reality and the portrayal in anime and manga (in Japanese pop culture). Through a thorough analysis of selected manga, it begins with a discussion on hikikomori via the lens of gender studies. It will also further discuss the stark difference between the status of female hikikomori in Japanese society, where media creates a biased perspective by prioritizing a view of hikikomori as male. It will then present an in-depth analysis of female hikikomori among selected manga, and how manga communicates using 'visual language theory' through concrete examples. Lastly, the paper brings up suggestions about more contemporary implications from gendered perspectives, media & Japanese visual language and communication and hopes to encourage future discussions.

Keywords: Hikikomori, Manga, Gender Studies, Pop Culture

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Introduction

This paper seeks to shed light on the phenomenon of Hikikomori in Japan, focusing on the broader scope of this condition before narrowing it to the relatively underexplored cases of female Hikikomori.

First, what is a hikikomori? To understand this phenomenon let's break the word into its components: the first is "hiki", from the verb hiku, meaning to pull inwards, and the second is "komori", from the verb komoru, meaning to confine. It refers to people who confine themselves within their homes for a long period of time. The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare has defined hikikomori as a condition in which the affected individuals refuse to leave their parents' house, do not work or go to school and isolate themselves away from society and family in a single room for a period exceeding six months (Itou, 2003). The word hikikomori was first coined by Japanese psychiatrist Saito Tamaki in the year 1998 in his book 『社会的ひきこもり—終わらない思春期』 which was later translated into English by Jeffrey Angles as *Hikikomori: Adolescence without an end* in the year 2013. The term was later added to the Oxford English Dictionary in the year 2010. The dictionary defines Hikikomori as "an abnormal avoidance of social contact, usually by adolescent males" (Stevenson, 2010), also ignoring that it affects girls and women too. Adding "hikikomori" to the Oxford English Dictionary indicates that this social withdrawal phenomenon, originally observed in Japan, has gained enough global recognition and relevance to be acknowledged in the English-speaking world.

While there is a lot of awareness within the media of men suffering from this phenomenon, women in the same circumstances are often overlooked. The reason for this is that in Japan, as in many other societies, traditionally men work outside the house, while for women not working outside the home isn't considered as outside the norm. Although more and more young people no longer identify with these traditional values, and the Japanese economy makes it impossible for many to live off just one income, it is still assumed by older generations that women will eventually get married and be taken care of by their husbands. A young woman living with her parents is not regarded as a problem, unless by a certain age she refuses to leave the house even for marriage.

“In Japan, boys go outside; girls (stay) in the house. Therefore, boys who don't go outside are a problem. Because girls who stay inside the home come outside for the purpose of marriage, the parents don't (see) a problem. So, a girl becomes a little withdrawn, a hikikomori. But the parents don't yet understand this: “Ah, you are staying in the home, that's fine”, they think.” (A participant in the study quoted in Dziesinski, 2004)

There are individuals who experience prolonged phases of isolation, lasting from six months to several years, or even until death. Some people prefer to live in isolation, choosing to live and die alone in extreme cases. Most of them desire to change their current state but are unsure how to do so. For these individuals, psychological treatment and support groups can be a crucial source of assistance. A common misconception about hikikomori is that they are lazy and unwilling to engage in society. Society often views them as unproductive if they are not participating in the workforce. For women, being married is often considered a success according to societal norms. Marriage creates a convenient curtain for society to hide the issues that women face extreme cases of social withdrawal as well (Saito, 2013: 93).

Literature Review

Comics are not languages, comics are written in visual language, and in this book, Neil Cohn attempts to explore just that. The book that I am referring to is "The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images" by Neil Cohn. It is a pioneering work in which he explores the cognitive and structural elements of how comics communicate through visual language.

Concept

When we look at the popular anime Naruto. In the entirety of the manga and the anime adaptation we can see from the beginning that there is a particular swing on a tree right in front of the ninja academy where Naruto is always swinging or sitting alone as a child, which depicted that he was a social outcast without any friends. This swing became so famous among the fans due to its long screen time that they even named it Swing Kun. This panel was repeated various times in the manga and anime when illustrating the flashbacks and such. Many authors consistently use the same panels repeatedly, this does not mean that they are copying the same panels it reflects the storage of these panels in their mental lexicons (Cohn, 2014: 51).

Terminologies

The most recognizable morphemes from comics are thought bubbles and speech balloons. Thought bubbles and speech balloons in comics are visual cues that can be instantly recognized as "bound morphemes" (Cohn, 2014: 35) This means they need to be connected to a character or object to convey meaning—specifically, someone thinking or speaking. Just like how in English affixes cannot mean anything without their root these bound morphemes also cannot stand alone and have meaning. Thought bubbles and speech balloons fall under a broader category of visual lexicon known as carriers, which hold the text or images and connect it to a root which is the thinker or speaker through a tail. In the case of speech balloons, the balloon itself is the carrier, the speaker is the root, and the balloon's tail points toward the speaker, anchoring the speech to its source (Cohn, 2014: 35).

As mentioned Before, Saito Tamaki's book translated by Jeffery Angles called *Hikikomori: Adolescence Without an End*, delves into the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of hikikomori in its first part and the second part explores how to deal with individuals who are socially withdrawn.

Michael Dzieszinski's paper called "Hikikomori as a Gendered Issue" explores the media's focus on male hikikomori while largely ignoring female cases that perpetuate gender biases and social stigma in Japan. This oversight basically neglects the reality that young women also experience social withdrawal and are often labeled differently.

Finally, in their paper "Self and Salvation: Visions of Hikikomori in Japanese Manga", Ulrich Heinze and Penelope Thomas analyze the representation of male hikikomori in the manga NHK によろこそ(Welcome to NHK). They assert that manga featuring female protagonists as hikikomori often depict them as merely socially inept "loners" in adolescence, and therefore, not radical enough to truly embody the hikikomori label. Moreover, they argue that to effectively challenge Japan's social norms, manga often resorts to male characters, as they are seen as more representative of the phenomenon.

While I acknowledge their point about the predominance of male hikikomori characters in manga, I would like to contest the first part of their argument. Through a case study of Hikikomori Niizuma, I will demonstrate that the portrayal of female hikikomori, in this instance, transcends the depiction of a socially awkward loner and embodies the deeper psychological withdrawal that characterizes the hikikomori experience. The female protagonist in Hikikomori Niizuma is not simply inept due to adolescence but is a fully realized hikikomori grappling with the similar yet gendered existential and societal pressures as her male counterparts.

That said, I do concur with the second part of Heinze and Thomas' thesis, which highlights the tendency of manga creators to favor male protagonists when addressing the hikikomori phenomenon. However, this should not be interpreted as a denial of the existence or significance of female hikikomori. Rather, it underscores the broader gendered dynamics in the portrayal of social deviance in Japanese media. While male characters dominate the discourse, the experiences of female hikikomori are equally complex and deserve deeper exploration.

Objectives and Research Questions Addressed

In Japanese society, the remnants of deeply rooted traditional norms often lead to distinct social expectations for men and women (Belarmino, Roberts, 2019: 273). These expectations not only contribute to the marginalization of female Hikikomori but also obscure the unique factors that drive women into social withdrawal. By addressing these gendered dimensions, this paper aims to reveal the specific social pressures and biases faced by the protagonist in the data, which, in turn, can give some insights into significant causes for female Hikikomori to retreat from society.

In the second part of the analysis, which is the primary focus of this paper, visual language theory is applied to examine the manga Hikikomori Niizuma as a case study. This manga, an autobiographical account by the author, offers a valuable lens for exploring the portrayal of female Hikikomori in Japanese popular culture. Through this medium, the study analyzes two key aspects: first, how female Hikikomori are represented, and second, the societal issues that are brought to light through this representation. Hikikomori Niizuma provides a nuanced perspective on the personal and systemic factors that contribute to the experience of female Hikikomori, offering insights that might otherwise be neglected in a male-centered discourse.

This paper's exploration of Hikikomori Niizuma therefore serves as a critical examination of how social withdrawal among women is not only stigmatized but also shaped by societal norms. By bringing attention to these overlooked narratives, this study attempts to highlight the need for understanding of female Hikikomori within both academic and popular discourse.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework Used

The methodology that I have used in my research is mainly qualitative, encompassing, content analysis and dialogue analysis using visual language theory and manga expression theory respectively. The primary data for analysis is a manga called Hikikomori Niizuma.

This manga was drawn by Mangaka Ura and published in the year 2020. There are a total number of 11 chapters in the manga. There are 2 main reasons I chose this manga as my primary data for my research:

1. It is an essay manga meaning it is the autobiography of the mangaka.
2. The protagonist of this manga is a woman struggling with social withdrawal.

Theoretical Framework

“When we talk about languages, [...] structured sequential sounds become spoken languages of the world, structured sequential body motions become sign languages, and structured sequential images literally become visual languages.” (Cohn, 2014: 3)

The proponents of this framework are Modality, Meaning, and Grammar of Visual Languages Graphic Structure of JVL (Japanese Visual Language) - Big eyes, big hair, small mouths, and pointed chins (Cohn, 2014: 154). This style came into fashion after the God of comics Osamu Tezuka. Other mangakas started using the same style. This way of drawing the manga became so normal that it was quite difficult to differentiate between characters, so artists started using different hairstyles and colors to make characters stand out (Natsume, 1998; Rommens, 2000).

Female Hikikomori

When I first started my research three years ago, these two were one of the first questions that popped up in my head. Do female hikikomori even exist? And if they what percent? reason being all the data that I had consumed mentioned that most men suffer through social withdrawal in Japan. They do exist and are around the same percentage as men.

“While hikikomori was often associated with young men, recent studies have shown the extensive number of older hikikomori as well as the increasing number of women hikikomori, who accounted for 52.3 percent for those between 40 and 64 in the 2023 survey. In response to these new findings, former female hikikomori-turned-advocates have praised the representation of women in the statistics and called for governments to implement women-specific hikikomori measures” (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2023d).

Recent studies show an apparent increase in female hikikomori cases which raises the question: does it reflect genuine growth in female *hikikomori* cases or rather the acknowledgment of an already existing group that was previously overlooked? Historically, societal expectations and cultural biases may have rendered female *hikikomori* cases less visible, framing *hikikomori* as a male-centered issue and obscuring the struggles of women facing similar isolation.

And as a result, the media and public are curiously silent on the matter of female hikikomori. It almost approaches a collective denial about something clearly observable in the field (Dziesinski, 2005: 26-27). The accepted discourse is that it is young males who suffer from social withdrawal in Japanese society. Taking the example of the parasite single and the media framing it as a female issue, what appears to be occurring is that the focus of public discourse in Japanese society is to ‘blame’ those ‘victims’ of these phenomena for not behaving in traditional ways that conservative society expects: Males should go out and work upon attaining adulthood and so the segment of young men classified as hikikomori seem to have public scorn and alarm heaped upon them for not fulfilling the expected role in society

that is proscribed for them. For young women who socially withdraw, concern only develops when they don't eventually leave the house to marry and raise a family.

Thus, drawing a parallel to the "parasite single" stereotype, which the media often frames as a female issue, it becomes evident that public discourse in Japan tends to blame the "victims" of such phenomena for not adhering to traditional societal expectations (Dziesinski, 2005: 23). Specifically, young men who become hikikomori face public criticism and concern for failing to assume the conventional role of entering the workforce upon reaching adulthood. In contrast, concern for socially withdrawn young women only arises when they do not eventually leave their homes to marry and start families.

One reason is our society has embraced a set of rules that says, "If you don't work, you don't deserve to eat." (Saito, 2013: 93) As a result, we tend to take an overwhelmingly negative attitude toward social withdrawal, we deny that it is a problem with real roots and causes. In other words, there is a tendency to pretend that it is not there at all, even when it exists right before our very own eyes (Saito, 2013: 93). When society pretends that male hikikomori does not exist, it exacerbates the situation for women experiencing social withdrawal, making it even less likely for their condition to be acknowledged. As discussed in the book *Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End*, three main systems that affect hikikomori are the individual, society, and family (Saito, 2013: 82). When a man socially withdraws and fails to meet societal expectations, such as going outside and securing a job, it becomes a significant concern first for his parents and then for society at large.

In contrast, when a woman experiences social withdrawal, traditional mindsets often downplay its seriousness. Society may rationalize her behavior with notions such as,

"It's acceptable if she doesn't work or only holds a part-time job; she doesn't need to go out much. Someone will eventually take care of her; she just needs to do housework and get married." (Saito, 2013: 93)

These entrenched norms dismiss the dreams and aspirations of the individual woman, making it even more difficult for her to seek help or even have her condition recognized. Consequently, the social and familial systems that already marginalize male hikikomori are even more neglectful towards female hikikomori, perpetuating their isolation and hindering their access to necessary support and acknowledgment.

The specter of traditional values is still prevalent in some parts of Japanese society, however, entering the 2000s, there was a rapid change in values among younger people, the author of the manga *Hikikomori Niizuma* is also of this generation, where young women do get an education with the aim of building a career outside the home, regardless of whether they get married or not (Aronsson, 2020: 571). In the manga, as explained below, the author struggles with the gap between traditional and non-traditional values, because they contradict in many ways.

Summary – Hikikomori Niizuma (Data)

The protagonist Ura has a Job in Tokyo, she has been dating her boyfriend since college and they went long distance because their jobs demanded different locations. Ura then decides to marry her boyfriend. She envisions a bright happy married life which takes a drastic turn due to her mental health and relocation. After marriage she moves to her husband's place in

Osaka, leaving behind her whole ecosystem, her friends, acquaintances, and job in Tokyo. Her situation becomes like a fish out of the pond. She quits her job and hopes to find another one in Osaka, and it turns out that finding a suitable job while having all the qualifications required is quite difficult as a married woman. Companies do not want a newly married woman who would then bear a child and take leave. She lived seven years of her life by herself, and she found it quite difficult to accommodate another person. She succumbs to depression, isolates herself, goes through a lot of physical pain due to stress, and even considers committing suicide.

Data – Hikikomori Niizuma – Panel Analysis

Pages 4 and 5

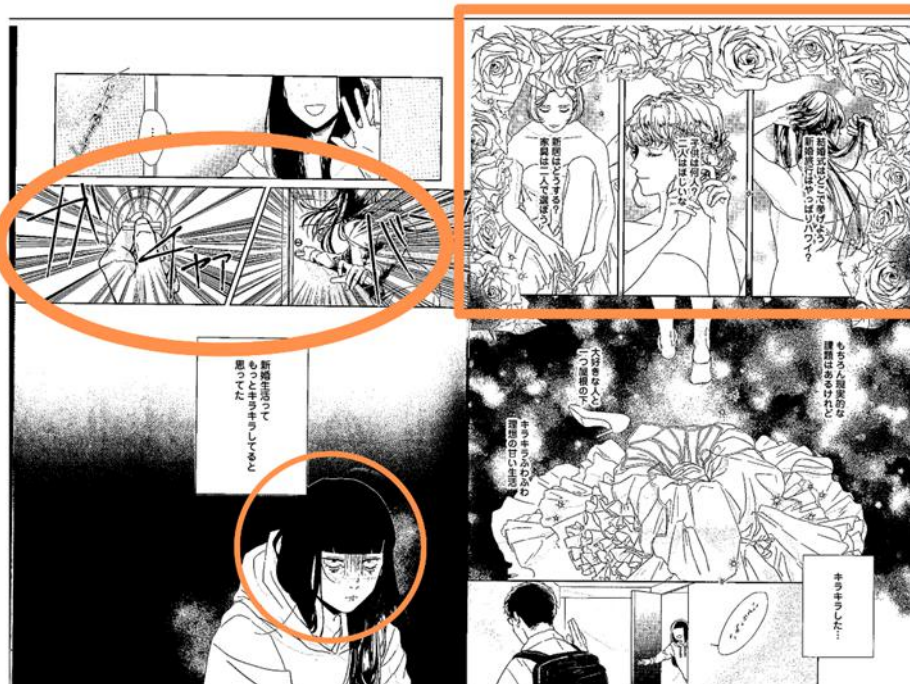


Figure 1: Hikikomori Niizuma, 2020: 5 and 4

The visual depiction of panel borders on page 4, adorned with flowery designs, serves as a symbolic representation of love and marriage. These flowery motifs are commonly employed in shōjo manga to signify romantic or erotic moments, often evoking a sense of joy and idealized love. In this case, the bright and decorative imagery suggests that the protagonist envisions a blissful and perfect marriage, reflective of romanticized ideals. However, this symbolism is disrupted when the protagonist is shown stepping out of her wedding dress, an act that signifies her transition from the fantasy of a "sparkly" and idealized union to the sobering reality of a depressive and unfulfilling marriage.

The contrast between pages 4 and 5 is striking, particularly in the shift from the flowery and light aesthetic to one characterized by sharp lines and a dark, oppressive layout. This shift visually mirrors the protagonist's descent from hopeful anticipation into despair. Notably, the change in the protagonist's hair color is also of significance. While hair color might appear trivial at first glance, a close reading of the entire manga reveals that the protagonist's lighter hair is consistently depicted during moments of happiness, which comprise 20 to 30 percent of the narrative. In contrast, during scenes that convey her struggles with mental health and isolation, her hair is shown as growing out, darker, and often unkempt. This visual cue

highlights her declining emotional state, suggesting a lack of energy or desire to maintain her physical appearance, further reflecting her inner turmoil.

Pages 6 and 122

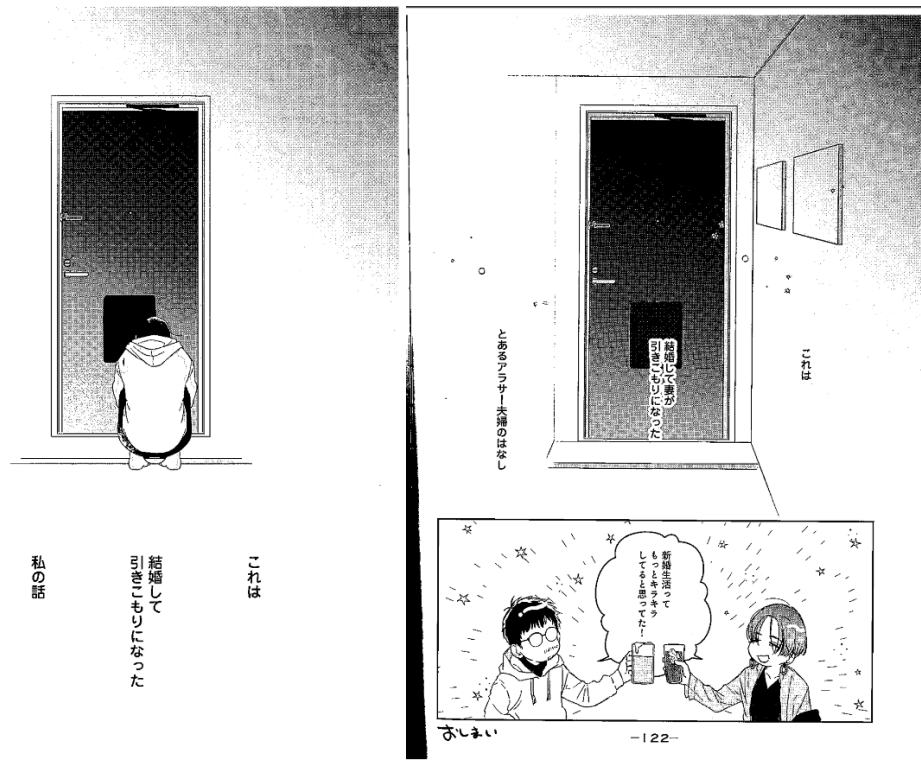


Figure 2: Hikikomori Niizuma, 2020: 6 and 122

In the subsequent pages of the manga, the visual lexicon established in earlier panels is reappropriated and recontextualized to convey different narrative meanings. On page 6, from the opening chapter, we encounter the protagonist crouched in front of a closed door, a poignant visual metaphor marking the onset of two significant developments: first, the emotional decline that characterizes her oppressive marriage, and second, her progressive withdrawal from social life. The door, in this context, becomes a powerful symbol of both physical and psychological confinement, accentuating her entrapment within an environment that fosters isolation and despair.

In stark contrast, on page 122—from the final chapter of the manga—the door is depicted with no figure standing before it. The background is subtly brightened, evoking a sense of openness and potential. Beneath this panel, we see a brighter, more hopeful scene in which the protagonist is sharing drinks with her husband, suggesting the beginning of her healing journey. The absence of the protagonist before the door visually signifies her liberation from the emotional entrapment that dominated the earlier narrative. Together, the brighter composition and the convivial moment with her husband signal a shift towards reconciliation, particularly with herself, as she moves toward a state of emotional recovery and reintegration into social life. This progression is masterfully articulated through the transformation of the door motif, which evolves from a symbol of isolation to one of renewed possibilities.

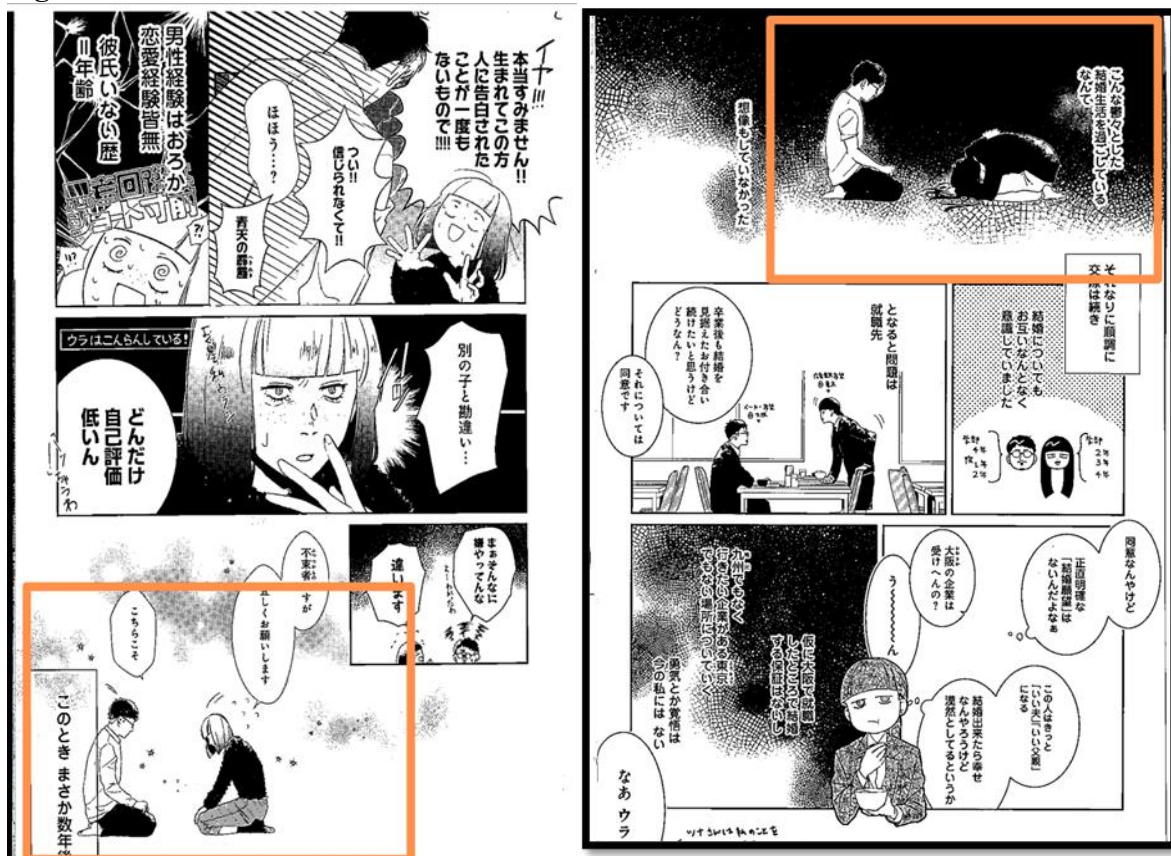


Figure 3: Hikikomori Niizuma, 2020: 11 and 12

Let us turn our attention to pages 11 and 12 of the manga, where we observe a compelling visual contrast in the marked panels. In the highlighted panel on page 11, the protagonist is depicted against a bright, sparkly background, performing a 35-degree bow while uttering the phrase, "yoroshiku onegaishimasu." This bow, traditionally signifying respect and a wish for favorable relations, in this context conveys a sense of optimism and joy, encapsulating the beginning of the protagonist's relationship. The radiant background reinforces this sentiment, symbolizing the hopeful and positive energy surrounding the nascent stage of their courtship.

However, the tone undergoes a dramatic shift on page 12. Here, the background behind the protagonist turns markedly dark, and she is now depicted bowing deeply, her forehead touching the ground. This form of bow, often associated with profound apology or submission, serves as a visual metaphor for the disillusionment and emotional burden that characterizes her marriage. The stark contrast between the two panels not only highlights the shift in the protagonist's emotional landscape but also speaks to the broader narrative arc of her relationship, from its hopeful beginnings to its painful decline.

The narrative above the marked panel on page 11 centers on the protagonist's college relationship with her boyfriend, representing the early stages of their romance. In contrast, the marked panel on page 12 reflects a moment from the future, after their marriage, and serves as a symbolic portrayal of the disheartening reality that her relationship has become. The rest of the page juxtaposes this post-marriage scene with events from a period in their relationship when they were separated due to work commitments, navigating a long-distance relationship. This narrative structure is both intricate and cohesive, seamlessly intertwining three distinct time periods, their initial courtship, the stability of their long-distance relationship, and the

subsequent unraveling of their marriage. Through this complex temporal layering, the manga effectively charts the protagonist's emotional journey from optimism and connection to the eventual strain and disappointment of her married life.

Pages 32 and 42

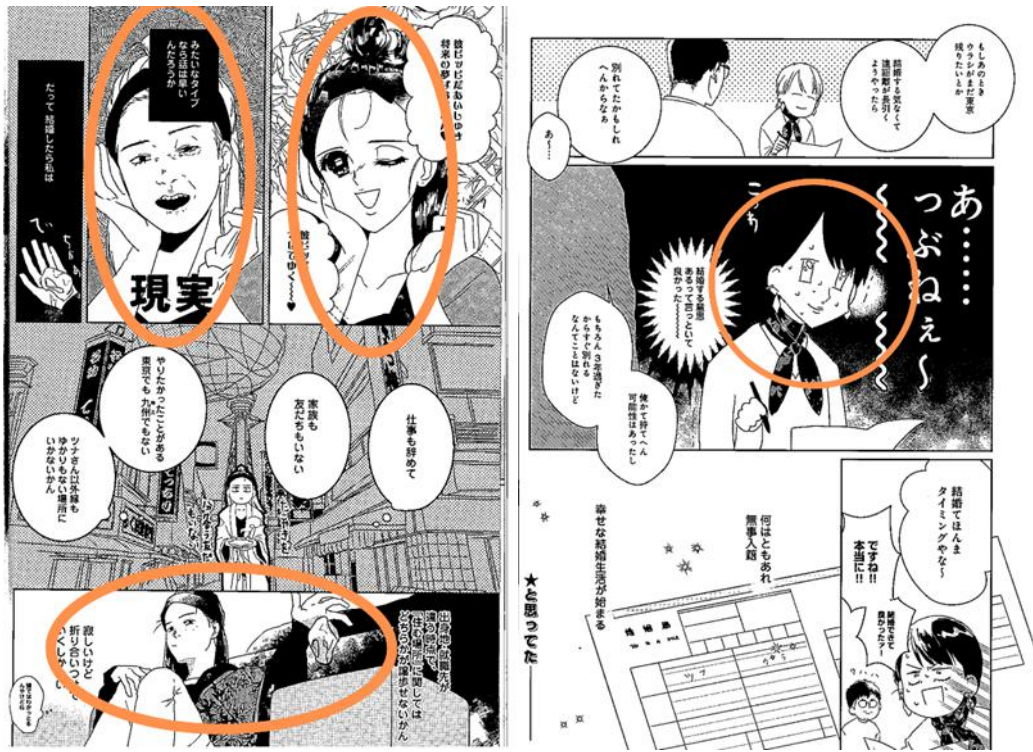


Figure 4: Hikikomori Niizuma, 2020: 32-42

On pages 32 and 42 of this manga, we once again encounter the use of shōjo manga visual conventions within key panels. On page 32, the mangaka has drawn herself employing typical shōjo features—large, luminous eyes, glossy hair, and a charming smile—attributes that are conventionally used to emphasize feminine beauty. This aesthetic invites multiple layers of interpretation.

First, it reflects the societal idealization of female beauty, as portrayed through shōjo manga's exaggerated and idealized visual tropes. Second, it conveys the protagonist's self-perception, rendered in a self-deprecating image that distorts her face, suggesting her low self-esteem and internalized critique. Finally, we observe a more neutral portrayal of the protagonist, positioned somewhere between these extremes, serving as a more balanced depiction of her reality. These three visual perspectives effectively juxtapose societal expectations of beauty, the protagonist's self-image, and her actual physical appearance, thereby illustrating the tension between external ideals and internal identity.

Additionally, shōjo manga stylistic elements are used on page 42 to depict the protagonist's panic upon encountering a marriage registration form. In this instance, features such as large eyes, a sharp, pointy chin, and beads of sweat on her face are employed to visually express her heightened anxiety and emotional turmoil. These exaggerated elements capture the intensity of her panic, utilizing familiar shōjo aesthetics to convey a moment of psychological distress. Through these techniques, the mangaka artfully uses shōjo manga's visual motifs to reflect complex emotional states and societal pressures on female identity.

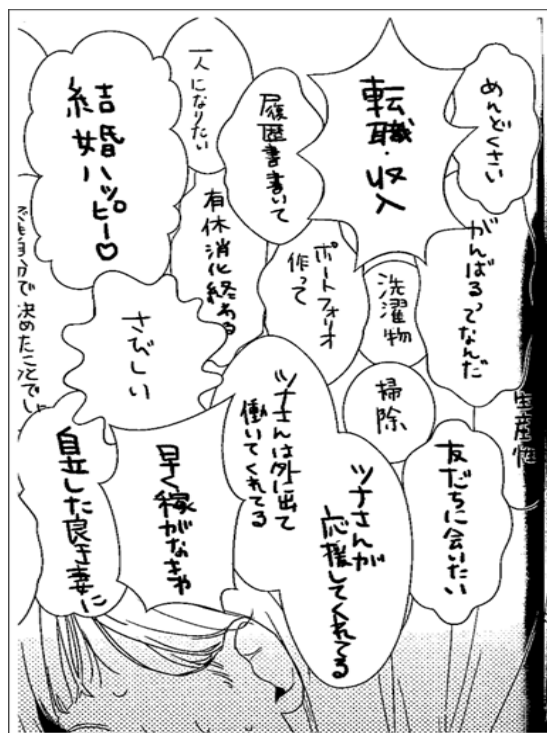


Figure 5: Hikikomori Niizuma, 2020: 57

On page 57 of the manga, we encounter a significant deviation from conventional paneling as the page is entirely filled with bound morphemes, rather than traditional visual frames. The type of carriers employed here is known as private carriers—thought bubbles that can only be interpreted by their root, the thinker, and are inaccessible to others. Typically, these carriers are connected to the speaker through a tail, signifying the link between the abstract thought and its origin. However, on this page, the thought bubbles lack any such tail. Instead, we see the protagonist's face, downcast in dread, with the entire page engulfed by her inner thoughts. In this case, the protagonist herself functions as both the root and the tail, as her overwhelming emotional state visually dominates the page, rendering her as the direct source of her thoughts without the need for traditional visual connectors.

Upon closer examination of the content of these thought bubbles, five distinct types of pressures emerge, each reflecting the internal struggles the protagonist is facing. Four thoughts are emotionally charged and depict moments of breakdown, which can be categorized as emotional pressure. Eight thoughts revolve around the need to find employment and become more productive, representing economic pressure. Another five thoughts focus on fulfilling societal expectations of being a good wife, classified as household pressure. Two thoughts center on self-blame, with the protagonist attributing her difficulties to her own perceived failures. Lastly, one thought expresses a physical complaint, with the protagonist noting that her stomach hurts, highlighting her physical distress. Throughout the manga, the protagonist frequently illustrates various physical ailments, such as headaches, insomnia, and fatigue, culminating in an entire chapter dedicated to her seeking medical attention due to severe stomach pain.

This page serves as a poignant visual and textual representation of the protagonist's mounting pressures, blending the absence of traditional panel structure with an overwhelming flood of thoughts, effectively conveying the suffocating nature of her inner turmoil.

Conclusion

My initial analysis of this essay manga featuring Ura identifies three specific social issues she personally contends with within contemporary Japan: limited job prospects after marriage, high and restrictive beauty standards, and pressures to excel in both career and household responsibilities—a phenomenon often described as “Superwoman Syndrome.” Through Ura’s perspective, this manga reveals the nuanced ways these challenges manifest in her life, offering an intimate view into how societal expectations impact her sense of agency and self-worth.

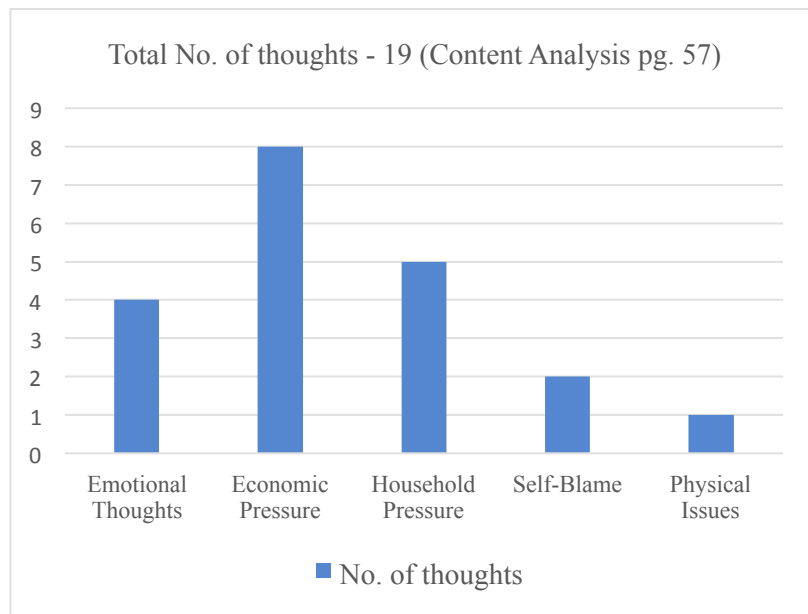


Figure 6: The Number of Monologues the Protagonist Is Thinking (Content Analysis of the Monologues)

Firstly, Ura’s difficulty in securing employment after marriage reflects a complex challenge. For her, marriage appears to signal a shift in how she is perceived professionally, impacting her opportunities and adding to her frustration. The manga’s portrayal of this struggle presents Ura’s unique experiences as she navigates a workforce that can sometimes appear restrictive or unaccommodating to married women.

The manga also delves into Ura’s interactions with beauty standards. Here, we see how specific ideals shape her day-to-day experiences and emotional landscape, including pressure to maintain a particular appearance and demeanor—always polished and smiling. These pressures, for Ura, seem ever-present and contribute to an ongoing struggle with self-perception. The work’s emphasis on Ura’s inner conflicts captures how such standards uniquely affect her, rather than implying a uniform experience across Japanese women.

Lastly, Ura’s experience with “Superwoman Syndrome” conveys her internal conflict as she tries to balance her career ambitions with domestic expectations (Heinze, Thomas, 2014: 159). This pressure to excel on multiple fronts is, for Ura, a significant source of strain and self-doubt. The manga explores how this dual burden affects her outlook and personal fulfillment, providing insight into her negotiation of societal expectations without if all women face this in the same way.

Additionally, I aim to expand the scope of this research by incorporating more essay manga that feature female hikikomori protagonists. By doing so, I hope to provide a comparative framework that captures a broader spectrum of experiences related to social withdrawal and gender in Japan. This approach will contribute to a more diverse and robust data set, allowing for an analysis that highlights the varied, yet interconnected, experiences of women who defy or struggle within prescribed social roles.

Through this combined approach, my research seeks to deepen our understanding of how contemporary manga reflects and critiques the gendered social structures in Japan, particularly as they impact women's lives and identities. This study will ultimately contribute to the discourse on manga as a medium for social commentary and as a site of resistance against traditional gender norms.

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