

Original Research

Hikikomori and Sōshokukei-danshi: A semantic analysis of Japan's social deviants

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This study is a semantic analysis that examines the meanings of two contemporary Japanese labels, hikikomori and sōshokukei-danshi. This duo has often been linked to the late marriage age, declining marriage rate, shoushika (low birth rate), and koureika (the aging society). The goal of this article is to define these individuals according to the perceptions of native Japanese speakers and to convey the definitions by using the reductive paraphrase methodology. Accordingly, cultural values reflected in the labels will be revealed. The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach and corpus analysis are the chosen methodology. NSM is a universal mini metalanguage, while corpus analysis is a tool that can analyse data from online sources. Combined, these methods support the goal of delivering explications that reflect the labels from a Japanese perspective. Results from the study show that the values of Japanese society and the duos are at odds with one another, subsequently, fuelling the negative stigma directed towards both cohorts: Hikikomori are individuals who are emotionally withdrawn and bound to the house for the most part. Furthermore, their condition is something they feel they cannot change so easily; and Sōshokukei-danshi are young men who are uninterested in romance or attaining stereotypical male positions in the workforce. Moreover, they would rather invest time in their hobbies. Through this study, a better comprehension of what these words mean is acquired.

KEYWORDS: Japanese society, Japanese culture, hikikomori, sōshokukei-danshi, Natural Semantic Metalanguage, corpus analysis, ethnosemantics



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1. INTRODUCTION

This study analyses the meaning of two stereotypes found within Japan, *hikikomori* and *sōshokukei-danshi*. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to articulate the problems with currently accepted definitions and create new explications that will reflect the words as understood by native Japanese speakers. As a result of the investigation attitudes and expectations about people that permeate the culture will also be highlighted.

The two labels chosen for semantic analysis share one commonality: they refer to individuals who differ from the expected behavioural norm in Japanese society (Morioka, 2013; Saito, 2013). These labels are as follows: *hikikomori* 引きこもり (lit. social withdrawal), and *sōshokukei-danshi* 草食系男子 (lit. herbivores). In particular, data has shown that the values of both groups have shifted from cultural expectations and that individuals are either uninterested or unable to participate in what is perceived as standard life achievements, such as moving out

from home, marrying, and having children. While not intentionally harmful, it has been observed that both roles are perceived to contribute to undesirable trends in Japanese society, including low marriage levels, low birth-rate (*shōshika* 少子化), and the increasing aging population (*kōreika* 高齢化). Consequently, the masses view these stereotypes negatively (Goodman et al., 2011; Ronald & Alexy, 2010). An additional shared trait is that the exact characteristics associated with each group are a topic of debate (Miles, 2017; Morioka, 2013), leaving understanding of both currently lacking. It is for these reasons of shared cultural deviation and absence of defined characteristics that these words have been selected for semantic analysis.

Additionally, from examination, it is easy to see that there are many elements that are not contained in the original definitions. Individuals such as researchers or language learners must peruse at least several articles and dictionaries to gain a respectable understanding of either word. Even then, some attributes

may be missed or misunderstood due to cultural differences. Having refined explications could solve this problem by allowing for easier comprehension.

To achieve the aforementioned, the primary aim of this investigation is to explain the semantics of the chosen words in a way that can be easily translated. Moreover, it aims to ensure that the translations align with an ethnosemantic approach. This means that the final definitions cannot be skewed by the connotations and nuances of words in other languages (Birx, 2006; Dirven & Verspoor, 2009). To this end, this investigation will utilise the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2002; Goddard, 2012; Peeters, 2006; Bowker et al., 2019). Two crucial benefits of this method are that it supports the ethnosemantic goal of this paper and that it is presented in a simple manner.

As previous studies have focused on these labels in a sociological context, and research in NSM and semantics has spotlighted Japanese grammatical particles, verbs, nouns, and emotions (Charlebois, 2013; Farese, 2018; Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2009; Miles, 2017; Saito, 2013; Uegaki, 2018), this study is one of the first to consider these terms in a linguistic context. In other words, the literature will be expanded. Additionally, due to Japan being classed as a collectivist society (Sugimura & Mizokami, 2012; Dasgupta, 2012), the information herein can be useful as a point of reference for members of individualistic societies in understanding Japanese culture. More specifically, this research will highlight the values displayed by the pair and the societal attitudes towards such behaviour. This will be beneficial for students studying the Japanese language or those who plan to live and work in Japan. It can create cultural awareness, which can then be reflected in their own conduct when living or working in the country (Kim, 2020). Moreover, it has been posited that acquiring any type of cultural information can create further motivation for language learning (Celik & Yunus, 2019; Goddard, 2006), so this work can inspire students to continue studying Japanese.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Hikikomori

In 1998, the word *hikikomori* was brought into Japanese society and popularised by acclaimed psychiatrist, Tamaki Saito (Teo, 2009). He posited that these individuals are a type of hermit who has not ventured from their household for at least six months. Furthermore, this disengagement from everyday life cannot be explained by a symptom from another psychiatric disorder (Saito, 2013). Although this description provides an image of who this *hikikomori* may be, it leaves some gaps within a potential profile.

Firstly, it is not strictly specified which gender may be more prone to this *hikikomori* state. It is left open to interpretation in the above description. Ronald and Alexy (2010) and Teo (2009) have stated in their studies that the cohort is said to be only male or predominately male. However, other scholars and studies have suggested that women are more pronounced, or

that they are not being accounted for since it is deemed acceptable for females to withdraw into the household (Furlong, 2008; Nagata et al., 2011; Kondo et al., 2011). Given the examples, both genders should be delineated as prone to withdrawing. Secondly, a major component of being a *hikikomori* is the inability to leave the house. Ronald and Alexy (2010) dispute this claim through a survey that demonstrated 83.72% of this cohort venture outside of the household and that common places they visit are twenty-four-hour convenience stores. However, there is no explanation as to why they do this or why they do not venture elsewhere. It could suggest that *hikikomori* have an issue with engaging in face-to-face social activities and prefer solitary activities. Lastly, the cohort at times has been attributed to violent behaviour. The most prominent cases include a young boy stabbed to death by a twenty-one-year-old *hikikomori* at a playground in 1999; a girl found by police in the room of a thirty-seven-year-old recluse in 2000; and a commercial bus passenger stabbed by a seventeen-year-old deemed to be withdrawn, also in 2000 (Goodman et al., 2011). However, Saito (2013) remains adamant that these solitary individuals are no more likely of performing violent acts than the average person.

To understand the meaning of *hikikomori*, one would have to source a dictionary, but there are issues with these sources. For example, Tréguer (2022) asserts that *hikikomori* is usually male and that they typically avoid social interaction with others. Unlike Saito's (2013) summary, it does not acknowledge their hermit-like behaviour, the duration of it or even whether it is related to a separate condition. The longevity of the phenomenon also does not pervade, and it is entirely glossed over as a situation that would not be disabling to the individual. The definitions from Jisho (2024a), Nihongo Master (2024a) and Tangorin (2024) similarly misrepresent the severity of the condition. Instead, it sounds like something one may choose to do willingly and is a state that can be easily reversed. Without a label that adequately encapsulates essential aspects of a *hikikomori*, there may be people who are wrongly diagnosed with this condition or who incorrectly identify with it.

One way people could be misdiagnosed or misinterpreted as *hikikomori* is if they are mistaken for an *otaku* おたく (nerd). Such individuals are known to be a Japanese-centric stereotype and are sometimes referred to as recluses who live within the confines of their own minds (Ito et al., 2012). For outsiders, this description may sound similar to the one given by Saito (2013) for *hikikomori*. Even within Japan, these two characterisations may be confused for one another by citizens if they have not come across either in real life or in the media. In this case, the only difference may be due to their interests, which for *otaku*, as stated by Jisho (2024b) are related to nerd culture such as anime, manga or videogames.

Even with this information, it may still be difficult to distinguish the two. For example, if a *hikikomori* is usually found within the confines of their household or room, it is likely that they are consuming some sort of media. How then does one know whether this interest in the aforementioned hobbies is what is

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keeping them at home? This is where the lines between *otaku* and *hikikomori* blur. Further research for a more refined definition can extinguish this dilemma.

To conclude, a semantic analysis would be especially beneficial for this label because the findings by different sociologists, along with common dictionary definitions are guilty of omitting information. There additionally may be some difficulty differentiating this stereotype from the *otaku*. Furthermore, a refined explication could be the basis for further research into the study of this individual, some of which may extend into treatments.

2.2. Sōshokukei-danshi

This term was originally coined by Fukasawa (2009). He describes these individuals as young men who are not interested in marrying, courting, or having sexual relations with a woman (Fukasawa, 2009). This description sounds straightforward enough. However, equally renowned in 2000s studies of the cohort was scholar Morioka (2013). Unlike Fukasawa (2009), he contends that some *sōshokukei-danshi* are simply held back from relationships due to low confidence. He even states that they are one of the best choices for a long-term partner as they value the woman for herself and not just her body. That being said, most will require the female to be the initiator in the relationship (Morioka, 2013). As an outsider or someone in Japan who does not know much about this stereotype, it may be difficult to decide which definition is accurate.

Furthermore, non-Japanese individuals may not recognise that there can be some stigma directed towards *sōshokukei-danshi* for other reasons. The description above by Morioka (2013) seemingly paints them in a somewhat positive light, however, they may be viewed as quite naïve and effeminate within the Japanese community. Women searching for a partner may especially be displeased. According to Chen (2012, p. 284), Japan 'was once considered the most masculine society in the world'. Therefore, men have been expected to lead and perform in the breadwinner role. This expectation is apparent in a different label, the *sararīman* サラリーマン (salaryman). Often, the *sōshokukei-danshi* is analysed and negatively compared to this esteemed figure in scholarly articles (Matsuda, 2019; Miles, 2017; Toivonen, 2012). More specifically, they are considered inferior to the *sararīman* – it is seen as both difficult and desirable to achieve a lifetime-employment position and thus *sararīman* are

perceived as being dedicated, hard-working employees. Conversely, the *sōshokukei-danshi*'s dedication to work is often interpreted as lacklustre (Miles, 2017).

Given these clashes, it is currently difficult to discern whether *sōshokukei-danshi* are romantically inclined, as Morioka (2013) states them to be, or if they are simply uninterested in romance, as originally discussed by Fukasawa (2009). This is one reason why an explicit definition may be of use as a tool to determine exactly who is a *sōshokukei-danshi*. But beyond this, there is a further reason why an explication is necessary for cross-cultural understanding. Similarly to *hikikomori*, dictionary definitions have notable issues. For example, Jisho (2024c) states that the literal translations of *sōshokukei-danshi* are herbivores or grass-eating boys. Some of the following explanations are also provided: 'young men who are not competitive in traditional male stereotypes, the pursuit of money or sex, who may also be kind, cooperative and family orientated', or even, 'a man who eschews romantic relationships' (Nihongo Master, 2024b). Regarding the former explanations, they could be taken literally. And even if one did correctly assume this was in relation to *sōshokukei-danshi* and women, being labelled an herbivore in English seems an odd choice. Based on the information found in the above articles, it seems that these young men want to date, only that they are not competitive in doing so. If they were true herbivores, it would make sense for them to be asexual. As for the latter definitions, although they are richer in description, they are still in contradiction to Morioka's (2013) claims.

Thus, both the sociologists' definitions and the dictionary sources lack information and are contradictory. Moreover, due to the little research done on the cohort, not much else is known about their characteristics. As a result, this makes it difficult to identify them, especially in a cross-cultural context. Previous studies also fail to convey the negative associations of this individual, as the cultural relevance of revering masculinity and the *sararīman* is lost to outsiders. A semantic study completed on the *sōshokukei-danshi* could provide less confusion for both Japanese and non-Japanese individuals, and the revised meaning may better assist in determining who aligns with this label.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)

The approach that will be used to analyse and propose refined explications for this paper is the NSM method, a tool created by Anna Wierzbicka (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2002; Wierzbicka, 1996). Essentially, NSM aims to convey the precise meaning of any word from a native perspective and reformulate it into a recognisable format for cultural outsiders. The theory behind this methodology posits that semantic analysis is always best conducted with the use of simple terminology, otherwise known as reductive paraphrase. Wierzbicka's (1996) empirically tested tool delivers the means to achieve this with a mini lexicon set comprised of basic words found in various languages. These simple units are often referred to as semantic primes (Goddard, 2010).

To clarify, basic in this context means these words cannot be broken down and reduced further than they already are. A brief example includes words such as *I, good, do, because, when, think, and want* (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2002). According to one of the latest research articles on NSM, there are now 65 primes at the dispense of semanticists (Ye, 2017). The current number may not appear to be a large amount to some; however, it has the ability to create an array of combinations, and NSM has

been viewed as an expressive semantic approach (Gladkova et al., 2015). Since *hikikomori* and *sōshokukei-danshi* relate to humans, this method will be especially useful for illustrating their different attributes.

A further point to note is that study into this method for use with Japanese and English has already been completed. Below is an adapted table of the English semantic primes (Sadow et al., 2020) (Table 1).

Table 1
Semantic primes (English exponents)

I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, ~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	Substantives
KIND, PART	Relational Substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER, ~ELSE	Determiners
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH, ~MANY, LITTLE, FEW	Quantifiers
GOOD, BAD	Evaluators
BIG, SMALL	Descriptors
KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	Mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	Speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE	Actions, events, movement
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	Location, existence, specification
(IS) MINE	Possession
LIVE, DIE	Life and death
WHEN, ~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	Time
WHERE, ~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH	Place
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	Logical concepts
VERY, MORE	Augmenter, intensifier
LIKE, AS	Similarity

Regarding the semantic primes, one must abide by certain syntactic rules when using these with the NSM method. The approach's developers have hypothesised that certain combinations of primes are universal; these are often referred to as canonical sentences (Wierzbicka, 1996). For example, take the words, *someone, thinks, something, good, you*. Regardless of the language, one should be able to compose a sentence like this: *someone thinks something good about you*.

Within NSM, there is another facet that will allow for producing precise definitions, and these are semantic molecules. While there are primitive words, there is at times a need for non-

primitive terminology to assist the structure of the explications. An example of this would be the word *bird* in place of *eagle* or *sparrow*, or *body parts* in place of *hands* and *face*. Molecules are denoted by the symbol, $[m]$ (Goddard, 2011).

Using the above, one can then construct their own definitions. Unlike previous semantic analysis tools and dictionaries, NSM is free from standard problems such as circularity and obscurity. The aforementioned nature of this method, reductive paraphrase, essentially eradicates both of these issues (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2002). It is additionally important to note that it is free from terminological ethnocentrism (Bromhead, 2011).

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The latter will be especially useful in providing the insider perspective of the stereotypes, *hikikomori*, and *sōshokukei-danshi* in Japanese culture.

In this article, one explication will be proposed for both *hikikomori* and *sōshokukei-danshi*, respectively. This paper claims that not only will the refined definitions be simple enough for anyone to comprehend, but they will also reflect the Japanese understanding of these individuals in their own society. In order to create these explications, an investigation of the labels was conducted with corpus analysis.

3.2. Corpus analysis

The corpus analysis method allows a user to collect information on words through the various frequencies and patterns that emerge in either manual searches or computer assisted programmes (Burgess & Cargill, 2013). Both written and online text are considered adequate (Vaughan & O’Keeffe, 2015), though only the latter was utilised for the purpose of this work. Once the patterns are apparent, it is then up to the researcher to analyse the comprised information, distinguish which features are the most salient and to delineate what order the characteristics should be organised in within the definition or explication.

For this study, to ensure that an accurate definition of each label was depicted, an array of online texts were perused, from formal to informal genres. Those used are thus as follows: journal articles, well-known Japanese newspapers (Asahi Shinbun and Yomiuri Shinbun), blogs, and media-related reports.

3.3 Methodology limitations

The most obvious limitation to the chosen methodology is that explications using the NSM method are often long, and this may not be appealing to the general public, who are so accustomed to short dictionary definitions. Moreover, although the definitions are explained in simple terms, due to the length and the use of canonical sentences (in which the grammar differs from English ever so slightly), there may be some confusion for those not as well versed with NSM (Goddard, 2006, 2010). As for the corpus method, since it was comprised of only online material, it is possible that the examples provided will not always necessarily be available in the future. Lastly, although corpus

analysis can acquire real-life patterns without bias, it would be interesting to test whether the majority of Japanese individuals agree with the definition. However, the latter is outside the scope of this study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Semantic analysis of *Hikikomori*

As specified previously, there are issues with the current definitions of *hikikomori*. For instance, it is difficult to differentiate the term from *otaku* due to shared attributes, and it is unclear whether the cohort always remains at home or if they have violent tendencies. This section will discuss the findings of the analysis on *hikikomori* and provide an explication of the term. The sources are taken from well-known online Japanese newspapers, websites and blogs where the label appears. To start with, the cause of this stereotype will be discussed:

(1) 1971年生まれ以降のいわゆる「就職氷河期」世代が、バブルの崩壊のあおりで、大学卒業後の就職活動が思うように行かず、仕事を転々としたあげく、いまは引きこもり状態になっているというケースもよく聞く (*I often hear it is the case that the so-called period of poor employment opportunities generation was born after 1971. With the burst of the bubble economy [1992], after people graduated from university, job hunting did not go as they expected, they moved from job to job, and now they are hikikomori*) (Ikegami, 2011).

(2) 学生時代のいじめが原因で5年前までひきこもり生活を送っていた (Up until five years ago, I had been living as a hikikomori because of bullying when I was a student) (ASD, 2020a).

In (1) and (2), the source behind the individual’s state in both examples is a negative event in the individual’s life. It is this circumstance that changes them from an average person to someone who is different, a *hikikomori*. In (1), the misfortune that occurred was the collapse of the bubble economy, which stripped Japanese society of easy pathways to long and stable work (ASD, 2020b; Fujimura, 2009). In (2), it was an incident of bullying. Research for this analysis found that social anxiety was another contributing factor (Nonaka et al., 2022). The next quotations will discuss and reveal how *hikikomori* differ from the average person by introducing two of their main characteristics:

(3) 「ずっと自宅にいる」しんどさ 引きこもりへ理解進むか (Forever in one’s house, will there be an improvement in understanding the tiresome hikikomori?) (ASD, 2020b).

(4) ひきこもりとは、家族以外との人間関係がなく、社会参加をしていない状態を指します。必ずしも家に閉じこもっているわけではなく、外出をするような方でも家族以外の方との親密な対人関係がない状態は引きこもりに含まれます (Hikikomori is identified as a condition in which one has no relationships with anyone aside from family members. Not always necessarily secluding oneself in the home, even those who do go out do not embrace personal relations) (Medical Note, 2017).

In (3), it is suggested that the withdrawn never leaves the house and that this is a notion considered tiresome for others. Moreover, the word *zutto* ずっと (forever; a long time) is also

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used to describe the length of time one remains this way. In (4), it asserts that even if an individual does leave the home, they have no intention of developing interpersonal bonds with others. In this sense, the cohort is not simply bound to a physical place, but also the confines of their mind. How *hikikomori* thinks about their own situation will now be assessed:

(5) 「親が病気になったら」40代ひきこもりの現実。「きょうも何もできないと落ち込んで、どんどん世間から離れていく。悪循環ですね。親が病気になったらと思うと不安だけれど、対策も立てられない。」(If my parents become ill, the reality of a forty-year-old hikikomori. Today when I can't do anything, and I'm depressed, I rapidly separate myself from the world. It's a vicious cycle, isn't it? When I think about if my parents become sick, I feel uneasy, but I can't carry out any countermeasures) (Takahashi, 2019).

In (5), the dialogue of a *hikikomori* is presented. It is apparent within this excerpt that despite feeling concerned about their current situation, the individual thinks they are unable to do anything about it. This was a common belief visible in many texts. As it is difficult to remove oneself from this state of being, it would be best to next contemplate what would happen if the cohort remained this way for an extended period of time:

(6) ひきこもる50代 80代親 お金なくなれば餓死かも (Hikikomori fifty years old, parents eighty years old. If the money runs out, they might starve) (ASD, 2017).

(7) 8050問題 背景はひきこもりの長期高齢化 (80-50 problem (parents eighty years old and hikikomori fifty years old). The background is the long-term aging society of hikikomori) (Takahashi, 2019).

Quotations (6) and (7) exhibit that Japanese individuals believe this cohort will meet with a negative outcome if they remain this way for too long. However, (6) specifically focuses on what this means for the *hikikomori* themselves and their family. Since *hikikomoris* do not socialise with others, entering the workforce is difficult. If something happens to their parents, such as an illness or accident, the cohort will likely have issues with finance and surviving independently. In (7), the focal point is the stereotype's influence on others, which is the direct link to the aforementioned aging society, *kōreika*. Although it is assumed others would not think positively towards such people, a precise sample is necessary:

(8) 脱ひきこもり一助に冊子 (Pamphlet to help stop being hikikomori) (Yomiuri Shinbun, 2020).

In (8), the news article displays that the *hikikomori* is viewed so unfavourably that there is a desire within society to help them cease this aspect within themselves and presumably return them to the way they were before. Moreover, there are

means to assist with this outcome, such as informative pamphlets with suggestions on how to improve the situation. Lastly, there has been recent mention of *hikikomori* existing within other societies:

(9) 「ひきこもり」は日本だけの課題ではない (Hikikomori' is not a unique issue in Japan) (ASD, 2019).

In (9), the news article illustrates that *hikikomoris* are indeed located in other countries. The text then further specifies that the withdrawal phenomenon is being observed throughout Europe, especially in France (ASD, 2019). If such individuals are located within these areas, it is justifiable to suggest they may additionally exist in other parts of the world. As one of the goals is to ensure that people identify as these individuals correctly, suggesting this in a description is imperative.

The label *hikikomori* can be expressed as so in NSM:

- (a) people of one kind;
- (b) something bad happened to this someone;
- (c) because of this, this someone is not the same person anymore;
- (d) this someone is at home [m] all the time for a long time;
- (e) this someone does not do many things in other places;
- (f) if this someone does something at other places, this someone does not want to do anything with other people;
- (g) this someone feels something very bad towards themselves;
- (h) at the same time, this someone thinks they cannot do anything about this;
- (i) if this someone lives like this for many years [m], bad things can happen to this someone;
- (j) if many people live like this for many years [m], bad things can happen to Japan [m];
- (k) other people think it is bad if someone lives like this;
- (l) because of this, people want this someone to be like other people;
- (m) there are people like this someone in many countries [m];

To begin, component (a) establishes that the explication will be about a type of person; (b) articulates that a negative experience has occurred within this individual's life. However, it is not specified what this is as the causes appear numerous and are bound to what the person themselves believes is distressing; (c) then states that as a result of this, they are no longer the same person they once were; component (d) illustrates that the individual is known for spending much of their time at home, in fact this lifestyle of sorts can continue for a lengthy period of time; (e) demonstrates that they also very rarely venture outside; (f) highlights that *hikikomori* are not just physically withdrawn but also emotionally detached; components (g) and (h) provide an insider perspective, as it is established that such a person can feel negatively towards their own situation, however, concurrently they cannot fathom how to help themselves; component (i) communicates that a plethora of unfortunate circumstances will happen to the cohort if this phenomenon is left to continue for a lengthy period of time; (j) further elucidates that if a large

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quantity of these individuals live in this way, it will begin to also affect outsiders as they contribute to *kōreika*, which in turn also impacts *shōshika*; component (k) expresses society's opinion on this matter, which is an unfavourable one; (l) discloses that the public wishes for this particular individual to be the same as everyone else in society, i.e., to fit into the social norm; finally, component (m) indicates that *hikikomori* are located in various places of the world.

4.2. Semantic analysis of *Sōshokukei-danshi*

In the literature review, it was argued that there are issues with both sociologist and dictionary definitions. For example, both Fukasawa (2009) and Morioka (2013) are at odds with one another in their understanding of who a *sōshokukei-danshi* is. Furthermore, the translation of the word itself in dictionaries is a contradictory one.

This section will attempt to rectify the current issues by explaining the findings of the analysis and providing an explication at the end. Sources for this stereotype have been found within online message boards, blogs, and advertisements where the label frequently arose.

To begin this investigation, the gender of the cohort and when they first appeared in society will be examined through a set of examples:

(1) 草食系というのは日本サブカルチャー的な造語ですんで、「草食系男子」と訳してもそのままではネイティブは分かりません。日本だって、10年前にはこの単語ありませんでしたよね (Sōshokukei is a coined word of Japanese subculture, and even if it is translated as 'herbivorous boys', this translation cannot be understood by natives of the English language. Even in Japan, this word did not exist ten years ago) (Nagasawa, 2017).

In (1), the comment is a response to a question on a forum about the meaning of the word *sōshokukei-danshi* in English. A responder ascertains that such individuals are regarded as only male, in particular, young males. Moreover, she states that the word for this stereotype did not exist a decade from 2017. Therefore, the exact occurrence of this cohort in society would have been around the year 2007. This suggests either that men who fit this category were not in existence before then or that

they were not as noticeable until this time period. The main attributes of this stereotype will now be considered, the first one being the most noticeably visual:

(2) 「草食系男子」コーディネート (Sōshokukei-danshi coordinate) (Wear, 2020).

(3) 菜食系男子 恋愛にガツガツしておらず、競争より調和を好む、おしゃれ やスキンケアを怠らず、堅実。スイーツが好きで携帯電話を手放さない (Without being voracious in love, the *sōshokukei-danshi* prefers harmony over the competition. Fashionable and skin care solid. Loves sweets and never lets go of his mobile phone) (Bransel, 2017).

In (2) and (3), one of the main interests of the *sōshokukei-danshi* is highlighted: fashion. This hobby was the most prominent throughout the analysis. It is therefore plausible that this attribute could be viewed as a partial means of distinguishing *sōshokukei-danshi* from other men. Instance (2) is the title for an online clothing shop with different ensembles of outfits advertised to the cohort. This leaves the impression that such people are highly invested in apparel and that they have a specific style that is different from the average man. Instance (3) supports this idea and asserts that, in general, they have an affinity for clothes and are concerned with their outward appearance. There is a predominant stereotype that enjoying fashion is a woman's hobby, so these men could be viewed as desiring clothes to the same extent as females. The *sōshokukei-danshi's* attitude towards women and romance will be analysed next:

(4) 草食系男子は、恋愛に対しての優先順位が低いのが特徴です。趣味や仕事に熱中している人も多く、「恋愛するなら他のことに時間を使いたい」と考えます (For the *sōshokukei-danshi*, the priority of romance is low. There are lots who are invested in hobbies and work. They would think, 'if I fall in love, I want to spend my time on other things') (Shiina, 2019).

(5) 世の中には「恋愛なんて面倒くさい」「彼女はいらぬ」と恋愛に対して消極的な「超草食系男子」もいます (In the world, there are also 'ultra *sōshokukei-danshi*', who are unmotivated towards romance. They say things like, 'Romance is troublesome' and 'I don't need a girlfriend') (WX, 2016).

In (4) and (5), it is illustrated that men of this cohort are overall uninterested in relations with a woman, ergo, they are unlikely to take the time to build a partnership or romance with one. (4) states that the main reason for this disregard is that they would rather devote their attention to pastimes or their workplace. (5) further explains the attitude that *sōshokukei-danshi* have to women in this aspect, and it is negative. It is something that would require a lot of effort and is deemed unnecessary. Similar to *hikikomori*, possible outcomes of this stereotype's lifestyle were regularly voiced.

(6) このまま草食系男子が増え続けたらどうなるか? 結論はズバリ、晩婚化が加速し、少子化問題が深刻となり日本の人口がますます減少する (What will happen if the number of *sōshokukei-danshi* continues to increase? The conclusion will be that the late marriage age will accelerate, the declining birth rate will become more serious, and the Japanese population will continue to decline) (Tominaga, 2016).

'Although there is some stigma associated with these individuals, society wishes more so for the hikikomori to return to their original state; and a sōshokukei-danshi is a fashionable man who believes romance is a tiresome matter and would rather spend his time involved in his hobbies. Due to the very nature of how both the hikikomori and sōshokukei-danshi live, they are also tied to shōshika and kōreika. Therefore, they are expected to receive some criticism from the Japanese population'

In (6), it is shown that Japanese society believes the continued existence of this stereotype will only result in negative events, such as those listed. Though not explicitly mentioned, the late marriage age and the aging society would also be tied to this individual due to their very nature of being essentially uninterested in romantic relationships. Lastly, as with the other labels, it was discussed that the individual may exist outside of Japan.

(7) 海外草食系男子が増えてるのは日本だけのことじゃないよ、最近では欧米でも増えてるんだ (It's not only in Japan that sōshokukei-danshi are increasing, but recently overseas even in the West, they are increasing too) (Livedoor Blog, 2019).

In (7), the example carries the belief that sōshokukei-danshi can be located not just within Japan but also in the West. Consequently, it is not believed to be a stereotype bound to Japan alone.

The label sōshokukei-danshi can be expressed as so in NSM:

- (a) people of one kind;
- (b) this someone is a man [m];
- (c) this man [m] has not lived for a long time;
- (d) many men [m] were not like this someone before;
- (e) this man [m]'s clothes [m] are not like other men [m]'s clothes [m];
- (f) this man [m] wants clothes [m] like women [m] want clothes [m];
- (g) men [m] like this someone think like this: when I am with a woman [m] for a long time, I feel something bad. I want to do something else;
- (h) men [m] like this someone do not want to touch another woman [m]'s body like other men [m] when they feel something very good towards a woman [m];
- (i) if many men [m] live like this for many years [m] many bad things can happen to Japan [m];
- (j) there are men [m] like this someone in some countries [m].

To start, component (a) illustrates that the explication will be about people of one kind, sōshokukei-danshi; (b) specifies that they are male; (c) highlights that they are young men; (d) spotlights that there were not many men of this kind before, so this kind of stereotype is relatively new; (e) reveals one of the characteristics that others will initially take notice of, their fashion style, which is distinct from the norm; component (f) expands

on the topic of clothes by mentioning that these men want them as stereotypically as women do, subsequently, they could be viewed as slightly feminine; (g) shows that they do not regard romance as high in their priorities and are therefore not willing to take the time to build a relationship. Instead, they are more vested in other things, such as hobbies. The inclusion of the cohort feeling something bad is because they would not be feeling something positive in such a situation whilst also simultaneously preferring to be involved in their interests; (h) extends the negative/unambitious attitude to this subject by illustrating that the individual will not romantically proceed physically further with a woman. It then contrasts them with the behaviour displayed by typical men when they are with a love interest; component (i) identifies that unfortunate events can occur if a copious number of men are sōshokukei-danshi for too long. With their disinterest in matters of love, very few would marry or have families, thus they will contribute to the decline in marriage, shōshika, and kōreika; and at last, component (j) articulates that there is a belief that people like this can also be found in some countries other than Japan.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the meanings of hikikomori and sōshokukei-danshi as conceived by Japanese individuals, and then proposed refined, ethnosemantic explications using the NSM method. Through this process, misunderstandings from prior English translations and previous studies have been demystified. In addition, this methodology helped form definitions from the perspectives of those observing the labels. To summarise, the main attributes of these words are as follows: hikikomori, someone who rarely leaves the household due to a traumatic experience or social anxiety, and if they do, they do not socialise with others.

Although there is some stigma associated with these individuals, society wishes more so for the hikikomori to return to their original state; and a sōshokukei-danshi is a fashionable man who believes romance is a tiresome matter and would rather spend his time involved in his hobbies. Due to the very nature of how both the hikikomori and sōshokukei-danshi live, they are also tied to shōshika and kōreika. Therefore, they are expected to receive some criticism from the Japanese population. In other words, Japanese individuals value people who contribute to society via employment and the procreation of the next generation. Men especially should retain stereotypical male characteristics by taking the lead in a relationship and being proactive in their employment, therefore likely leading them to the breadwinner role.

As for students or travellers who wish to live in Japan for some amount of time, the following behaviours should be avoided to prevent fractured relationships or ostracism: not socialising with others, not contributing to the workforce, taking an interest in fashion if one is male, and men not being proactive when courting a woman. These actions can be detrimental to one's social integration and acceptance within Japanese society.

Along with the above information, this study has also reflected the need for ethnosemantic explications when it concerns words, especially labels from different cultures. In this way, the translation not only carries the original intent behind its creation, but it can also be understood by outsiders. The two explications that have been presented in this paper can be cross translated into the Japanese language. Consequently, future studies could check the authenticity of these definitions with native speakers.

Another suggestion for future research is looking into the meanings of other labels concerning young people found within Japanese discourse. These could further clarify what cultural values are upheld, how the youth's place in the community is viewed, and how younger generations are changing. Additionally, a study of English labels or even ones found in other countries may provide striking and subtle differences for comparison. More importantly, studies featuring a semantic analysis of labels found within other cultures can deepen one's understanding of the values of their society and those of others. In this sense, such research can assist both business and personal cross-cultural relations.

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