Expanding Sources of Recognition: Towards an Experience-Driven Framework for

Reengaging Hikikomori and Semi-Hikikomori

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Authors' contributions

Xuebing SU: Developed the conceptual framework, conducted data analysis, wrote up the manuscript and co-edited the manuscript.

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Ethics approval statement & consent form

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the

ethical standards of the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Hong Kong. All participants

were well informed about the objectives of the research and signed a consent form before joining

the research.

Abstract

Hikikomori, also known as young people with prolonged social withdrawal behaviours (YPSW),

is a pronounced and growing youth issue.

Purpose: The aims of the present study were to 1) introduce an experience-driven (ED)

framework informed by recognition theory and the expanded notion of work model, and 2)

examine how the ED framework can add value to interpreting the vulnerabilities of hikikomori/

semi-hikikomori, and to strengthening the delivery of reengagement interventions.

Method: Six participants were purposively selected based on the stages of their user journey in a

Regain Momentum Program, namely early, intermediate, and final stages of user journey. With the

use of thematic analysis, the study thoroughly examined six transcripts collected from post-

intervention individual interviews.

Results: The results showed that hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori are deprived of self- and social-

recognition due to a lack of a socially recognized status and paid work experiences. Applying the

ED framework, social workers were capable of facilitating hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori to leave

their comfort zone, enter a secured comfort zone, rebuild connections, enhance self-efficacy, and

care for non-human beings through providing interest- and work-based activities.

Discussion: The study provides empirical evidence to elaborate how the ED framework can

inform future practice and research on reengaging hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori.

Keywords: hikikomori, semi-hikikomori, prolonged social withdrawal behaviours,

recognition, expanded notion of work, experience-driven framework

Expanding Sources of Recognition: Towards an Experience-Driven Framework for

Reengaging Hikikomori and Semi-Hikikomori

As a subgroup of young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), hikikomori have been growing in number and attracting increasing attention from both practitioners and academics in developed economies in particular (Rooksby et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020). The term hikikomori originated in Japan (Saito & Angles, 2013), also called youth with prolonged social withdrawal behaviours (YPSW) in Hong Kong (Li & Wong, 2015; Wong et al., 2019), refers to those who have been avoiding face-to-face social interaction with people other than their family and disengaging from participation in formal institutions of education, employment or training for at least six months (Kato et al., 2018; Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015). Hikikomori may spend most of their time in their comfort zone largely confined to their home, their bedroom or even their bed, whereas some of them may step out of their home for a stroll or buy some stuff alone in silent streets (Wong, 2009, 2012). Some recent studies (Genda, 2013; Kato et al., 2019) also paid attention to another vulnerable group called semi-hikikomori, who share similar characteristics of hikikomori such as having NEET status, and spending most of their time alone, yet are able to keep a relatively higher frequency (e.g. at least once a month) of hanging out with others.

Existing studies have revealed the negative outcomes of disengagement from institutions and

deprivation of face-to-face social interactions suffered by hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori including

but not restricted to increased social interaction anxiety, decreased self-efficacy and strong

resistance to reengagement in the society (Wong, 2012). Moreover, prolonged self-seclusion of

young people also causes economic and sentimental burden to the family, and bring great cost to

the society at large (Li & Wong, 2015; Samoilenko & Carter, 2015). However, the conventional

pathways for reengaging these youth may not be effective particularly in view of their low

intention to engage in social interaction and seek help from others (Rooksby et al., 2020; Wong,

2020). Youth practitioners, including but not restricted to social workers, career practitioners,

teachers and counselors, are facing challenges in reengaging hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori.

Informed by recognition theory and the model of expanded notion of work to be deliberated in the

next section, the present study aimed to introduce how an experience-driven framework was

applied by social workers in Hong Kong to interpret the suffering of hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori

and inform intervention programs for reengaging these youth.

Towards a Recognition Theory for Interpreting the Suffering of Hikikomori/ Semi-

Hikikomori

Recognition theory, a pronounced critical theory, has shown its great power in interpreting

the marginalization of youth-at-risk and informing the delivery of corresponding social work

services (Kauhanen & Kaukko, 2020; Marshall et al., 2019; Mitchell, 2020). Kauhanen and

Kaukko (2020) have applied recognition theory to review the experiences and unaddressed needs

of unaccompanied children and youth in Europe. Marshall et al. (2019) have suggested to develop

a recognition-based community for children in residential care. Mitchell (2020) has highlighted

the benefits of applying recognition theory in family group conferencing, as the theory provides a

thorough understanding of negative outcomes caused by family misrecognition. Two different yet

complementary streams of recognition theory were respectively developed by Nancy Fraser

(1995, 2000) and Axel Honneth (1995, 2001, 2012). Both authors identified the roots of their

work in Hegelian philosophy, which emphasizes the fundamental importance of mutual

recognition in social relations and structures and suggests that a failure to be recognized will lead

to misrecognition (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Yet, as far as the interpretation of the states of

recognition and misrecognition experienced by people is concerned, Fraser's focus was more on

the level of social structures whereas Honneth's emphasis was placed more on the level of

interpersonal relations (Dotolo et al., 2018).

Fraser (2000) examined recognition through a lens of social status and focuses on the

institutional and structural dimensions in relation to controlling the distribution of equal rights of

active participation in social structures. According to Fraser (2000), formal and informal

discourses in social structures are constructing people's participatory power such as the right to

vote based on their positions. Fraser also emphasized interpreting the injustice suffered by

disadvantaged individuals and groups from an economic and cultural perspective (Garrett, 2010).

Honneth (2001) placed an emphasis on interpreting the social recognition in interpersonal

interactions and suggested that the misrecognition suffered by individuals are connected with their

gender, age, position, race, unemployment status, etc. For example, same-sex marriages are

defined illegal in some societies and the citizenship of migrant workers is politically denied by the

majority of the population in some other societies. Recognition theory conceptualized by Honneth

(1995, 2001, 2012) proposed three forms of social recognition, namely love, respect and social

esteem. Love refers to care and support from significant others, respect refers to the rights of

being treated as an independent and capable person to take part in civil society and societal

decision, and social esteem denotes the recognition of one's contribution to the community based

on one's unique skills and qualities. According to Honneth (1995, 2001, 2012), these three forms

of social recognition are central to the development of self-concepts in relation to how people feel,

perceive, think, and evaluate themselves. That is, being loved will lead to self-confidence, being

respected will foster self-respect, and being esteemed as a valued person will enhance self-esteem.

This article prefers using an integrated approach to applying both Fraser's and Honneth's

recognition theories to interpret the suffering of marginalized youth, as Frazer's theory highlights

the importance of holding sensitivity towards the hostility faced by youth, which is caused by

structures and mainstream cultures whereas Honneth's theory provides an interpersonal solution

for helping youth in disadvantaged circumstances (Dotolo et al., 2018). The rationale for using

this integrated approach is supported on three grounds. First, Frazer's recognition theory provides

a contextual understanding on the negative influences of social discourses on hikikomori and

semi-hikikomori. The sociocultural conditions are hostile to hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori by

limiting their 'sources of recognition' (Horiguchi, 2018; Rubinstein, 2016) for improving their

self-esteem, as the mainstream society has put a premium on educational credentials and paid

work experiences. Like other young people who are not in education, employment or training

(NEET), hikikomori and semi-hikikomori are not recognized as active agents in mainstream

society (Su et al., 2020a, 2020b). They may be misrecognized or disrespected by their family,

friends, and the public for not making contributions to the community (Horiguchi, 2018). Second,

following Honneth's logic, it is not difficult to understand that the prolonged self-seclusion at

home may distance them from care and social support from people other than their family (Wong,

2012). Finally, an integrated approach provides a comprehensive perspective to understand in

what ways hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori themselves may internalize the social discourses,

demoralize the meaning of what they have been doing, and further exacerbate their low self-worth

and harm their relationships with others (see Anderson & Honneth, 2005). When hikikomori/

semi-hikikomori fail to make sense of their self-secluded life, it is difficult for them to make

positive changes by means of autonomous actions. The journey of struggling for recognition

(Honneth, 1995) will become an insurmountable one if sustainable support from different stakeholders such as parents, employers and mentors is not available (Li et al., 2018).

Expanding Sources of Recognition: The Experience-Driven Framework

In order to enhance the self- and social-recognition of NEET youth by expanding the sources of recognition, the expanded notion of work (ENOW) model was developed by Wong (2015). Youth unemployment has been an important issue in many developed countries such as European nations (Eurofound, 2018; World Bank, 2019). In the past decade, the European Commission has been working on some mega projects such as *The Youth Guarantee* (European Commission, 2015) and *Investing in Europe's Youth* (European Commission, 2016) to motivate and reengage NEET youth. But there has been an in-depth critique on overemphasizing the value of paid work experiences in an exclusionary manner and overlooking the importance of unpaid work (e.g. volunteer work and care work) for the sustainable development of youth (Addati et al., 2018; International Labour Organization, 2017).

Aligned with this trend, Wong (2015) deliberately expanded the notion of work to inform the development of reengagement programs targeted at NEETs and NEETs-at-risk. According to Wong (2015), paid work is of two categories, namely, a) employment and entrepreneurship, and b) work trials, paid internship, and trial-run business. The world of unpaid work is categorized into four, namely, a) vocational education and training, and other work exposure programs, b)

volunteering activities organized or delivered in organizational settings, c) domestic and

neighborhood provisioning delivered on a voluntary or obligatory basis such as self-care, family

care, pet care and neighborhood care, and finally d) serious leisure theorized as an intensive and

committed pursuit of a free-time or leisure-time activity (Stebbins, 2017) such as street dancing,

cosplay, online gaming, music busking, and bottom-up activism such as animal rights advocacy,

and heritage and environmental protection. Such an expanded understanding of work shows that

both formal and informal economic activities (Watts, 2015; Wong & Yip, 2019) are the constituent

and transferable elements of the holistic landscape of work and work experiences.

Informed by recognition theory and the expanded notion of work model, the experience-

driven (ED) framework has emerged as a practical framework for delivering career support

services for a wide spectrum of NEET youth groups in community-wise settings (Wong & Su,

2019; Wong & Yip, 2019). Against the sociocultural background that paid work is much highly

valued over unpaid work and the backdrop that many NEET youth are deprived of career

development opportunities for their lack of paid work experiences, the ED framework informed

by the ENOW model aims to facilitate the career and life development of NEET youth by

expanding their work experiences. This ED framework adds values to career support services

targeted at marginalized youth, as youth practitioners and other stakeholders such as parents and

employers can use this framework to acknowledge youth's abilities developed from their daily

routines and interest-based activities undertaken in their comfort zone, and work together to provide a wide spectrum of interest activities, volunteering, and workplace learning to youth on the margin of society for expanding their choices of work experience. For example, youth practitioners can work with business stakeholders such as a pet store owner to provide internship opportunities to those NEET youth who are interested in caring for animals. Such kind of expanded work experience is taken as the basis for developing transferable values, attitudes, skills and knowledge which are potentially transferable across different domains of life and conducive to supporting the career transition of youth (Su et al., 2020a, 2020b; Wong & Su, 2019; Wong & Yip, 2019).

Purpose of the Present Study and Research Questions

However, so far, the ED framework has been practiced mainly with the NEET group as a whole rather than with the hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori and no research studies have been conducted to examine how the ED framework works with this marginalized youth group. This study aimed to fill in this research gap by examining how the ED framework can be used to interpret the suffering of hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori and informing interventions in a program called Regain Momentum (Wong et al., 2017) for reengaging hikikomori and semi-hikikomori. This program is a multi-component intervention project for enhancing the positive development of hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori in Hong Kong by adopting a case management model aimed at

addressing a wide range of concerns of these youth by enhancing their self-esteem,

accommodating their presenting needs, decreasing their social interaction anxiety, and enhancing

their self-efficacy. Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) with dogs and related job placements were

introduced as core components of the program. Specifically, social workers employed in a social

service organization in Hong Kong, namely the Chinese Evangelical Zion Church, reengaged

hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori through the program by delivering individual counseling,

conducting group-based activities, and providing job placement opportunities. A pilot study

(Wong et al., 2019) had reported significant pre- and post-intervention development of youth

participants after joining the program in terms of enhanced self-esteem and decreased social

interaction anxiety. The research questions for the present study were formulated as follows:

Q1. In what sense are hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori experiencing misrecognition due to their lack

of recognized social status and paid work experiences?

Q2. How does the experience-driven framework function to reengage hikikomori/ semi-

hikikomori?

Method

Sample

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic information, pre-intervention status, duration of pre-

intervention status, presenting problems, and pre-intervention routine activities of participants.

Table 2 presents the information of participants' post-intervention status, daily activities at the

time point of interview, and participation in interventions in the Regain Momentum program. To

assure personal privacy and confidentiality, gender-specific pseudonyms are used.

Recruitment and Data Collection

This study conducted semi-structured individual interviews with 17 service users, who had

joined the Regain Momentum Program, among which four were semi-hikikomori and 13

hikikomori before they enrolled into the program. The pre-intervention status of the participants

was confirmed by their social workers. Social workers provided their professional judgement of

participants' pre-intervention status based on two criteria: the first criterion was their NEET status

and the second was their encounter of deprivation of social interaction in the past six months.

Both hikikomori and semi-hikikomori participants were NEETs before they joined the program,

and they both kept a low level of social interaction (i.e. no more than once a week) with people

other than their family members. Nevertheless, compared with hikikomori who spent almost all

time at home, semi-hikikomori had kept hanging out with others at least once a month. In total,

175 hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori participants had joined the program and they all received an

invitation to join qualitative interviews from the research team through their social workers. It

turned out that only 17 participants were able to join the qualitative interviews and the rest

rejected to join the interview for personal reasons or did not reply to the interview invitations.

The experiences of the participants in the program were subject to the length of time they

spent in the program; those who had spent a longer time in the program were able to joined more

activities provided by the program. To fully reflect the experiences of participants in the program

based on the different stages of their user journey in the program, we decided to include

participants who were at early stage (i.e. less than three months), intermediate stage (i.e. three

months or above), and final stage (i.e. completion of interventions and case close) of the program.

Among the 13 hikikomori participants, two were in early stage, six were in intermediate stage,

and five were at final stage. Regarding the four semi-hikikomori participants, all were in early

stage of the program. We finally selected six participants, including two semi-hikikomori

participants who were at the early stage, three hikikomori participants were at their intermediate

stage, and one hikikomori participant was at the final stage of use journey. All the interviews with

youth participants, lasting for about an hour, were conducted in Cantonese, the mother tongue of

the participants.

Instrument

The youth participants were encouraged to share about their personal experiences within and

beyond the service scope and evaluate their own growth experience during the user journey. The

interviewer guideline developed by the research team asked the youth participants open-ended

questions including the following areas: 1) some basic sociodemographic information, including

age and educational attainment, 2) pre-intervention status, presenting needs, and obstacles against

their positive development before using the service, 3) daily activities before and after receiving

interventions, 4) social life before and after receiving interventions, including who they keep

contact with, frequencies, and means of social interactions, 5) critical incidents and significant

others they encountered in the program, 6) self-perceived changes during and after the user

journey, and finally 7) current status at the time of interview.

Design

Prior to the study, the corresponding author obtained ethical approval from the research

ethics committee of the University of Hong Kong. Before conducting the semi-structured

individual interviews, the research team held two meetings to review the interventions provided to

the participants in the program, and discuss about the interview guideline and the procedures of

the interviews. The second author, who was a research postgraduate student at that time conducted

the research interviews with the participants on a one-on-one basis. After explaining the purpose

and scope of the study to the participants, informed consent was collected from each of them prior

to the start of the interview. An audio recorder was used to record the interviewing process. Every

participant received a thank-you note after the interview specifying the office telephone number of

the research ethics committee of the University of Hong Kong for reporting any personal concerns

related to the interview process as necessary. All data collected were treated confidential and only

accessible to the research team. All recordings were later transcribed into Chinese by the second author. The Chinese transcripts were also sent back to the participants to seek their approval. To assure personal privacy and confidentiality, gender-specific pseudonyms are used.

Data analysis

Based on a deductive-inductive approach, a thematic analysis using both theory-driven and data-driven methods was used to explore the themes and subthemes and meanings embedded within the collected narratives, which are consistent with the theoretical framework informed by recognition theory and the ENOW model discussed above. Specifically, narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) was used to understand participants' interpretation, visualization and narration of user or intervention journey and any meanings and reflections assigned to their experiences (Lam & Chan, 2004).

The transcripts were in the first place analyzed in Chinese, rather than English, in order to better identify nuances in the language and represent the participants' lived experiences and perspectives. The Chinese transcripts were read and reviewed by the first and second authors who analyzed the content of transcripts and identified the meaning units and themes embedded within the narratives. Next, common or related meanings were categorized together to constitute an initial theme, which is a 'recurrent pattern of human intention' and make up 'the level of story concerned with what the characters in the narrative want and how they pursue their objective over time'

(McAdams, 1993, p. 67). Related themes were then connected and compared. The structure of narratives was also examined (Riessman, 2008). In this study, plot development was identified by considering how the participants selected, connected and sequenced separate episodes of experience within and beyond the user or intervention journey (see Papathomas et al., 2015). In addition, the cultural resources and broader interpretive frameworks that the participants may have used to make sense of their user-journey experiences were also considered. Emergent themes and their potential connections were continuously reviewed in preparation for writing up the finalized themes to describe in the section of Results. Finally, representative verbatim quotes consistent with the theoretical framework which could capture the main perceptions/ experiences of each participant were labelled.

To assure the rigor of the study, the following actions were taken for data analysis. Before data analysis, the first and second authors had a meeting to discuss and come up with a list of potential codes and themes based on theoretical framework. Second, informed by the list of potential codes and themes, the first and second authors analyzed the Chinese transcripts separately. Third, the research team had a meeting to discuss the representative verbatim quotes that represent the codes and themes derived from the theoretical framework, and capture the main perceptions/ experiences of each participant for reaching a consensus. Finally, selected verbatim quotes were translated into English by two student helpers, and reviewed by the research team to ensure accuracy.

Results

Based on a thorough thematic analysis of the transcripts, the study identified themes and subthemes accordingly. Table 1 and 2 were developed based on the basic information collected in the interviews. Table 3 displays the themes and subthemes revealed and summarized encompassing one theme about the deprivation of recognition suffered by hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori, one theme with three subthemes about how experience-driven interventions work to reengage hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori, and one theme with two subthemes about the strategies used by social workers in the program.

Theme 1: Deprivation of self- and social- recognition due to a lack of a socially recognized status and paid work experiences

Table 1 shows the educational attainment of participants. All participants only had a secondary school education credential at the time of interview, and most of them had encountered difficulties at school to fulfill the academic requirements. Some participants had experience of being bullied at school for their poor academic results and thus they would not consider going back to school. Moreover, their prolonged seclusion at home made it even harder if not impossible for them to gain paid work experience. As the mainstream society has put a premium on paid work experiences and educational credentials, the participants were stuck in an unfavorable situation of which they did not enjoy access to job opportunities or even to job interviews and

gained no recognition from their peers because of their hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori status before

receiving interventions from the program. Compared Table 1 and 2, we can find the change of pre-

and post-intervention status of the participants: one semi-hikikomori and two hikikomori have

changed as EETs (youth in education, employment or training) at the time point of interview, and

two participants have changed from hikikomori (abbreviated as hiki) to semi-hikikomori

(abbreviated as semi-hiki), and one semi-hikikomori remained his pre-intervention status.

> *I did not deserve to have a relationship when I was still neither employed nor studying at*
>
> *this age. Cuz' this is how the society works. Nowadays some girls are looking for boyfriends*
>
> *with prospect, and that's why I am seeking for a job. The whole thing is a paradox. I cannot*
>
> *have a girlfriend as I do not have a stable job. I have to make money to have a girlfriend. I*
>
> *think that the society is sick.* (Anson, from semi-hiki to EET, 19)

Their internalization of the mainstream discourse also led to their self-blaming for *'not being*

able to fulfill the expectations from others' (Adam, remained as a semi-hiki, 21). Their low self-

recognition was manifested in their self-concept as having feelings of inferiority, poor self-esteem,

worries of exposures to outsiders, avoidance of attention and critiques from others.

> *A feeling keeps haunting me that people will stare at me and take me as an odd person. I am*
>
> *scared. Maybe it is caused by my low self-esteem… I have a gap year in my CV. Personnel*
>
> *officers will find it strange and they will have a concern with it in job interviews. I won't tell*

my friends about my worries. My friends go to work every day, it will be odd for me to have

any self-disclosure with them. (Adam, remained as a semi-hiki, 21)

Prolonged period of self-seclusion at home led to a sense of loneliness, feelings of being

locked in time and space, and the loss of a sense of being and belonging. The participants were

aware of what their withdrawn behaviors had caused to their families. Their self-awareness of

making low contribution to their families had increased their sense of guilt to their parents. They

felt inferior when comparing themselves with other young people of their age. They wanted to

make some achievements of which their parents would feel proud of them. Some participants'

families were of poor socioeconomic status, which exacerbated the sense of guilt suffered by the

participants.

While I was staying at home after my graduation, my mother started to work as cleaner,

which was a very challenging job. She had complained a lot about her work and her

injured foot. I wished she could shut up. Her words had made me feel more inferior and

shamed. I feel that I owe her a lot. I felt lonely and detached from the whole world, just like

that I have never existed. (Betty, from hiki to semi-hiki, 16)

Playing online game was a usual practice conducted by the participants to gain recognition

from their cyber social circles and some of them spent plenty of time on it. Their self-recognition

as an esteemed person was subject to their achievement in playing online games and winning

glories with their partners. However, the recognition they achieved in the online world was not

able to be transferred to the offline world. Those who had enjoyed high social recognition in the

virtual world of online games found a big discrepancy between their online and offline self-

concepts.

> *When I was playing the game, I felt superior and invincible, which was something that I*
>
> *could never experience in the real world. You will choose to stay in the world where you*
>
> *are more successful, that is the internet world. Even if you are the top in the game, you*
>
> *are still nobody in the reality.* (Calvin, from hiki to EET, 24)

Theme 2: Interest- and work-based reengagement

Hikikomori/ Semi-hikikomori participants found it hard to keep a healthy routine when they

were staying all day at home. They ended up spending too much time lying in bed for having no

ideas about what to do.

> *It felt like wasting a whole day for doing nothing when staying at home. It was very boring*
>
> *and a waste of youth. Sometimes I didn't want to get up then I slept for a whole day. Then*
>
> *my health got worse. For example, I fell asleep at two or three o'clock in the early*
>
> *morning and woke up at three or four in the afternoon.* (Bella, from hiki to EET, 14)

Subtheme 1: Self-initiated interest- and work-based activities to prevent against a dramatic

downward spiral effect

The ED framework focuses on expanding the sources of self- and social recognition of participants by engaging them in interest- and work-based activities, which can be initiated by the participants on their own or by some significant others. Some participants proactively conducted home provisioning, did some reading, chatted with online friends, and joined some new social circles. Refer to Table 1 for the pre-intervention routine activities of the participants. Conducting home provisioning led to *'a sense of contribution to the family'* (Benny, from hiki to semi-hiki, 17). Benny assigned work to himself at home such as doing some house cleaning. Sometimes he went out alone for a while. He also tried to enjoy reading but it was hard for him to keep doing this because he felt empty after reading stories or novels looking alike.

> *I have known a few friends via Facebook since primary school. I have kept in touch with them on the net by playing online games which required collaboration and finishing tasks and missions. We were chatting while playing, someone preferred to talk with the mic, while I preferred typing. We have got a platform which was similar to MSN.* (Benny, from hiki to semi-hiki, 17)

Some participants such as Calvin preferred keeping an active social life through hanging out with friends met online, which decreased their sense of loneliness, and increased their sense of being and belonging. He met some close friends by playing online games, who had helped expand his social circle. His online friendship was followed by face-to-face social interaction.

There was a girl. I attacked people on the game while the she was supporting me. We

worked so well as a team and thus I ranked the first in that game. Then she invited me to

join the Union with her friends. I refused it at first. But I joined them afterwards as they

kept inviting me. We started to talk. And then they suggested to have a gathering. I rejected

the first one, but then I joined the second. It was a BBQ gathering. I started to have friends.

(Calvin, from hiki to EET, 24)

Subtheme 2: Co-presence in service center for rebuilding connection

Interaction with online friends may compensate part of the need of social interaction, but it

was not enough for our participants. In order to enable hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori to enjoy

access to more meaningful engagement, practitioners arranged for them some interest- and work-

based activities, including hiking, playing music instruments, running, etc. In the service center,

youth participants were able to enjoy co-presence with social workers, other youth participants,

and therapeutic dogs without showing a high level of engagement in terms of interacting with

others. Refer to Table 2 for the intervention's participants joined the program and their current

routine activities at the time point of interview.

At the center, although nobody listens to me, I can still talk to the dogs and cats. I can share

happiness and unhappiness with them. The therapeutic dog Fat Fat is my good friend. (Bella,

from hiki to EET, 14)

Subtheme 3: Enhancing self-efficacy by caring for others

Participants were offered opportunities to participate in a job placement to take care of

animals. For example, they joined a placement of pet grooming at the service center under the

supervision of pet care professionals. The participants fed the animals (i.e. dogs or cats), did

animal bathing, hair brushing, house cleaning and walking with dogs. Participants were also

offered opportunities to join some animal-assisted therapeutic groups s, in which they interacted

with therapeutic dogs and observed their behaviors. In animal-assisted therapeutic groups,

participants learned to show empathy to the therapeutic dogs. Betty reflected that she was not a

very caring person before she knew the therapeutic dog Fat Fat at the service center and she

became more discerning of the needs of others after an incident happening to Fat Fat.

> *Fat Fat was there sitting quietly at the animal-assisted therapeutic group. All the youth*
>
> *participants were touching the hair of Fat Fat. The activity lasted too long. Suddenly, I*
>
> *found that the floor was wet. There was some urine leaking from Fat Fat onto the floor. It*
>
> *was very unusual. Fat Fat never did that before. He must be suffering for not being able to*
>
> *go for a pee. I felt terrible about it. Fat Fat cannot say no to those who need him. He cannot*
>
> *even say 'I have to leave for toilet!'* (Betty, from hiki to EET, 16)

The animal-related job placement or animal-assisted therapeutic programs not only enabled

the participants to care for others but also empowered them to answer the questions regarding

their current status. Half a year ago, Anson started to join the job placement of caring for animals.

He was interested in this kind of job and wanted to give it a try. After that he wanted to learn more

about pet grooming, therefore he found a relevant training course available elsewhere, which was

very expensive. He discussed with his parents and luckily, they agreed to lend him money to

enroll for the course.

> *At least I have something doing at hand. In the end, job placement is also a type of work.*
>
> *When people ask me 'where are you going?' I can say 'Oh, I am on the way to do*
>
> *placement'. I also feel easier to interact with others. When I do placement at the center, I*
>
> *can talk to different people, work with them. I feel happy to acknowledge my own*
>
> *competence. I am also closer to my families now.* (Anson, from semi-hiki to EET, 19)

Theme 3: Experience-driven strategies used by social workers

Two experience-driven strategies were used by social workers in the program to reengage

hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori. First of all, social workers acknowledged the daily activities that

hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori conducted in their comfort zone and secondly, social workers

facilitated the participants to try out various interest- and work-based activities in a secured

comfort zone.

Subtheme 1: Starting from where the youth clients are

In the case of Adam, who was a semi-hikikomori, the social worker had visited his home for

four times before he decided to go to the service center. According to Adam, social workers could

not find other proper ways to offer help unless they tried to know more about what he had been

thinking about at home. It took time for social workers to know the reasons why young people

secluded themselves at home and design tailor-made home-based interventions. Benny suggested

that social workers could consider inviting some ex-users to join home visits, as the latter may

have *'more common topics of conversation'* with secluded youth like him. In order to engage the

youth clients in discussion, social workers need to talk about topics that could appeal to their

interest.

> *I don't think social workers can understand me fully. I mean it. When I was at home, I*
>
> *usually played computer games. I guess my friends are in the same situation. Social workers*
>
> *are often older. They will be more willing to talk to you, but you will feel like being forced to*
>
> *talk.* (Benny, from hiki to semi-hiki, 17)

Subtheme **2: Facilitating reengagement in a secured comfort zone**

When the youth clients were willing to welcome practitioners to enter their comfort zone, it

does not mean that they were ready to go out and reengage themselves in any institutions (Wong,

2014). In order to facilitate the youth clients to leave their comfort zone defined in terms of

avoiding social contacts and interaction and foreseeable embarrassment and social anxiety,

practitioners need to invite their clients to enter into the social service center as a 'secured comfort

zone' in the first place (Su and Wong, 2019). Secured comfort zone is a term to describe a space developed in a place other than the original comfort zone where the youth clients can engage in face-to-face interactions with people such as social workers or others that they trust or feel secured and comfortable to talk. In a secured comfort zone, youth participants were assured that they *'would not be forced to join any social activities against their own will and choice'* (Calvin, from hiki to EET, 24). Social workers had to make efforts to facilitate the participants to leave their comfort zone and enter the secured comfort zone.

> *I stepped out from my room. I stopped and pondered for several minutes. Would it be a waste of time going out? I could have bought and sold some game accessories to earn more money instead. I could have watched a few more anime episodes instead…I finally decided to leave home and head to the centre... After a few chats, I started to wonder how come he knows so much about gaming? He didn't need to wait for me for half an hour the second time I visited him.* (Calvin, from hiki to EET, 24)

In this program, youth participants enjoyed company of the social workers and of a therapeutic dog named Fat Fat in the secured comfort zone. They talked about topics that interested them such as computer games. Adam was not willing to interact with animals at the beginning of the program, as he was afraid of being bitten by Fat Fat. The social worker guided Adam to build up trust with Fat Fat on a step-by-step basis. For example, the social worker

conducted individual counseling with Adam when Fat Fat was around. Later on, the social worker

encouraged Adam to touch the hair of Fat Fat and they talked about topics related to Fat Fat.

Adam started to like Fat Fat after several times of counseling with Fat Fat's companionship and

he was not aware of how time did fly when Fat Fat was around.

> *When I visit the centre, I have to consider whether it is crowded. I might choose to walk by if*
>
> *it is full of people. It was uneasy for me to be with a lot of people. The first time I visited the*
>
> *centre was like today. There was a gathering for dog owners and dog lovers…I gradually*
>
> *feel more comfortable even though there is a crowd.* (Adam, remained as a semi-hiki, 21)

Discussion

Using the experience-driven framework informed by recognition theory and the expanded

notion of work model, this study answered two questions in relation to how hikikomori/ semi-

hikikomori are experiencing misrecognition due to their lack of recognized social status and paid

work experiences and how the experience-driven framework function to reengage these young

people in the Regain Momentum program.

First of all, this study echoed Honneth's recognition theory (1995, 2003) by revealing that

hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori are lack of a socially recognized status and the ability to regain

recognition from others through face-to-face interaction following their prolonged seclusion at

home. This finding suggested that their prolonged disengagement from socially recognized

activities such as paid work activities and formal education has reduced the social recognition

they can receive from their significant others, including their parents and friends. As the

mainstream society delimits the semantic sources for social recognition to paid work experiences

and educational qualification, the sociocultural contexts are unfriendly to hikikomori/ semi-

hikikomori. It is embarrassing for these young people to answer questions from others regarding

what they have been doing, as they are not able to give them a socially appropriate response.

Compared to their peers who are enjoying a 'normal' routine of going to work or to school,

hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori are more likely to show the signs of an inferiority complex. This

would aggravate their low self-esteem and thus they may avoid interactions with their prior school

friends. Poor socioeconomic status of the family exacerbates the guilty feelings of the youth

clients and thus leads to more self-blaming. In this connection, this finding will suggest to expand

the interest- and work-based experiences of hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori as an important way out

to help this group of young people, which can provide them additional sources of self- and social

recognition.

Second, this is the first study examining how the ED framework can be used to inform

interventions for reengaging hikikomori and semi-hikikomori. Consistent with prior studies (Su &

Wong, 2020; Wong & Su, 2019) on the efficacy of the ED framework on working with NEET

youth through the provision of interest development and workplace learning opportunities, the

findings emphasized the importance of exposures to and experience of interest- and work-based

engagement activities for hikikomori and semi-hikikomori. A surprising finding of the present

study is that hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori may proactively do some activities at home which are

conducive to preventing a dramatic downward spiral, such as doing home provisioning, doing

some reading, taking care of pet at home, and also interacting with friends through playing online

games. However, these self-initiated activities were not able to facilitate the youth participants to

regain momentum and foster sustainable positive changes as no post-activity reviews were

provided. Moreover, the competencies they developed and the honors they received from the

cyber social circles by winning online games and developing supportive online friends in gaming

did not lead to an autonomous transfer of recognition to the offline life world, as these

competencies and honors are not recognized by the mainstream society.

Third, we found the positive changes of social status of participants and the routine activities

undertaken by the participants before and after joining the program. Wong (2014) has revealed

that a prolonged period of self-seclusion at home without receiving any interventions will lead to

continuous spiral-down effect of these young people and it is hard for them to make positive

changes on their own with their current modest level of resources, opportunities, and networks.

Consistent with the study finding of Wong (2014), our finding implied the importance of

expanding interest- and work-based experience of youth participants by the involvement of

multiple parties, including social workers, therapeutic animals, and family members of youth

participants. Our finding also echoed the structural viewpoint of Fraser (2000) regarding the

influence of social structure on the distribution of recognition and suggested a practical way to

enhance the social recognition enjoyed by hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori by leveraging the

involvement of multiple stakeholders in delivering interest- and work-based activities available in

community settings. This finding is also consistent with recent studies (Li & Wong, 2015;

Rubinstein, 2016; van der Voort et al., 2014) which have shown the significant role played by

parents in facilitating the reengagement of youth in social withdrawal. Social workers have to

collaborate with family members to reengage the youth clients in the program. For example, our

finding showed that family members were the informants to offer the social workers information

with regard to the interest and daily activities of the youth clients to make it possible to deliver

professional interventions both within and beyond the home setting.

Finally, this study also revealed two experience-driven strategies used by social workers to

reengage hikikomori and semi-hikikomori. The first strategy is to start where the clients are by

entering their comfort zone and initiating interaction and/or conversation with the clients around

topics of interest to them. This finding echoed some existing literature regarding the efficacy of

home visits conducted by social workers to reengage hikikomori (Funakoshi et al., 2021; Li et al.,

2018). When the right timing came, social workers facilitated the youth clients to leave their

comfort zone and enter a secured comfort zone co-constructed-at the service center. In the service

center, the youth clients were able to enjoy co-presence with the therapeutic dogs, learn about how

to care about others, and participate in interest- and work-based activities through which they

were able to identify their own competencies and rebuild face-to-face social connections with

human and non-human partners. The second strategy is to facilitate the youth clients to enter a

secured comfort zone. This study revealed that the therapeutic dogs, which were loyal and

nonjudgmental, served as an important medium through which the youth clients healed their scars

caused by their NEET status and deprivation of social interaction, and gradually rebuilt their

confidence to interact with others. The youth clients also developed a sense of contribution to

others through caring for the animals. The activities and social interactions joined by the youth

clients prepared them to enter an adventure zone in which they were able to join some activities

with a larger group of participants and explore more interest- and work-based activities and even

seek opportunities to go back to school or to find a paid job. All this prepared them to enter into

the adventure zone without confining themselves in the secured comfort zone co-constructed in a

service setting.

Limitations

There are some limitations of the present study. The non-representative nature of the sample

will limit the generalizability of the findings. We only interviewed 17 out of the 175 participants

who joined the program and only six interview transcripts were purposively selected to include

participants at different stages of their user journey for this study. Therefore, cautions should be

taken when one tries to extend the findings of this study to represent all participants in the

program. Quantitative studies are needed to validate the findings of this study. For example, future

quantitative studies with more rigorous study design are needed to verify the efficacy of different

types of paid and unpaid work activities and the two strategies used by social workers for

reengaging hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori. Second, as all participants were not degree holders, it

remained unknown how the ED framework can be applied to hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori who

hold a sub-degree or a Bachelor's degree. For those University degree holders, their prolonged

self-seclusion at home without taking any paid job or attending any educational or training

programs may lead to self- and social-doubts from their surroundings with regard to the return on

their education (see Entrich, 2018). Future studies are needed to examine how prolonged self-

seclusion at home and out of education, employment or training for six months or above are

harmful to their self- and social-recognition and how the ED framework can be used to reengage

them. Finally, the roles played by family members and parents in particular in the reengagement

process were not fully revealed by the present study. Future studies are needed to examine how

parents can work with social workers to motivate their youth to leave their comfort zone, enter a

secured comfort zone and further into an adventure zone, and how social workers can engage

multiple stakeholders such as employers and NGO mentors in particular to facilitate youth clients

to regain self- and social recognition.

Conclusion

The present study applied the ED framework informed by recognition theory and the

expanded notion of work to interpret the suffering of hikikomori/ semi-hikikomori and inform the

analysis of the Regain Momentum program to reengage these young people. Interest- and work-

based engagement are mechanisms through which these young people can prevent dramatic

downward spiral from taking place in their comfort zone, and they can enjoy co-presence to

rebuild connection with the outside world at a pace they feel comfortable, enhance their self-

efficacy, and care for others in a secured comfort zone. Future studies are needed to examine how

ED framework can support the sustainable development of these youth clients by leveraging on

stakeholder engagement and parental involvement.

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Table 1. Demographic information, pre-intervention status, duration of pre-intervention status, presenting problems, and pre-intervention routine activities of participants

Partici pant [a]	Case code [b]	Gender	Age at the time of attending interview	Educational attainment	Pre-intervention status	Duration of pre-intervention status	Presenting problem	Pre-intervention routine activities
Anson	Semi-hiki_A9	M	19	Senior secondary school	Semi-hikikomori	6 months	Lack of clear goals	Undertook self-provisioning, watched video online, and played online games
Adam	Semi-hiki _A1	M	21	Senior secondary school	Semi-hikikomori	12 months	Lack of clear goals	Undertook self-provisioning, went to church, and watched video online
Benny	Hiki_B5	M	17	Junior secondary school	Hikikomori	48 months	Suffering from mental health issue	Played online games, undertook self-provisioning, cooking, communicated with Mum
Betty	Hiki_B9	F	16	Junior secondary school	Hikikomori	3 months	Lack of clear goals, having been immersed in ideal world of cartoon	Watched cartoon at home, hanged out alone, joined cartoon festival, communicated with sisters about cartoons
Bella	Hiki_B11	F	14	Junior secondary school	Hikikomori	6 months	Lack of clear goals	Played online games, communicated with game players, watched TV, and tried a job placement at dessert store

		M	24	Senior secondary school	Hikikomori	36 months	failed to go to senior middle school or find a job, lack of clear goals	Pre-intervention routine activities
Calvin	Hiki_C5							

Note. a. Pseudonyms are used to name the participants. b. Three letters ABC were used to identify the stages of user journey that the participants were at the time point of interview: Code A suggested that cases have been receiving ongoing interventions for less than 3 months; code B suggested that the ongoing interventions has lasted for 3 months or above; code C suggested that interventions for the cases were completed and the cases were closed.

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Table 2

Post-intervention status, daily activities at the time point of interview, and participation in interventions in the project.

Participant [a]	Post-intervention status	Current routine activities at the time point of interview	Interventions in the program [b]
Anson	EET	Join psychological counseling and group interventions, AAT job placement, and pet grooming	Group intervention (6), gathering with dogs (6), pet grooming (20), job placement (28), individual counseling (30), AAT individual counseling (3)
Adam	Semi-hikikomori	Registered an online training course, will study Secondary school Form Six soon	Gathering with dogs (1), job placements (1), individual counseling (24)
Benny	Semi-hikikomori	Join AAT job placement, keep visiting psychologist	Group intervention (2), gathering with dogs (2), psychological assessment (3), job placement（11），individual counseling (58), AAT individual counseling (1)
Betty	Semi-hikikomori	Join AAT job placement	Group intervention (1), gathering with dogs (5), pet grooming (11), AAT job placement (4), individual counseling (10), AAT individual counseling (4), AAT group intervention (6)
Bella	EET	Join AAT job placement, hang out alone, and attend cooking course	Group intervention (1), gathering with dogs (3), pet grooming (9), job placement (4), individual counseling (34), AAT individual counseling (5), AAT group intervention (5)
Calvin	EET	Working as a part-time security, join AAT job placement, hang out with friends, attend activities at the service center, think about future, keep joining cosplay, and showing company to the therapeutic dog	Group intervention (1), job placement (39), individual counseling (45)

Note. a. Pseudonyms are used to name the participants. b. numbers in the brackets refer to the number of sessions that participants had joined in each type of interventions in the program before the interviews.

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Table 3

Themes and Subthemes Derived from the Interview Transcripts.

	Subtheme 1	Subtheme 2	Subtheme 3	Subtheme 4
Theme 1: Deprivation of self- and social-recognition due to a lack of a socially recognized status and paid work experiences	NA	NA	NA	NA
Theme 2: Interest- and work-based reengagement	Subtheme 1: Self-initiated interest- and work-based activities to prevent against a dramatic downward spiral effect	Subtheme 2: Co-presence in service center for rebuilding connection	Subtheme 3: Enhancing self-efficacy by caring for others	NA
Theme 3: Experience-driven strategies used by social workers	Subtheme 1: Starting from where the youth clients are	Subtheme 2: Facilitating reengagement in a secured comfort zone	NA	NA