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Japanese Youth Marginalization Decreases Interdependent Orientation

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### Abstract

Under the influences of globalization and a long recession, there is an increasing population of marginalized Japanese youth referred to as NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training). Past studies have suggested that the social withdrawal of these individuals is a manifestation of a denial of the dominant cultural value of interdependence and a lack of motivation to adhere to it. To present additional evidence, this study addressed the cognitive and emotional consequences of NEET tendencies by examining interdependent orientation measured by one's desire to engage in social activities (Study 1) and spontaneous attention to vocal tone (Study 2). As expected, an increase of NEET tendencies was associated with a lower desire to engage in social activities and a reduced attention to vocal tone. These results suggest that NEET tendencies decrease interdependent orientation in the Japanese cultural context. (138 words)

*Keywords:* Japanese youth marginalization, NEET, interdependence, social activities, vocal tone

### Japanese Youth Marginalization Decreases Interdependent Orientation

In Western cultural contexts, the construction of self has been characterized as relatively independent and separate from other people, while in Eastern cultural contexts it has been viewed as involving a greater degree of interdependence and connection with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These culturally divergent views of the self are closely associated with various psychological processes. For example, Japanese people are more likely than European-Americans to report that they adjust their behavior to match the expectations of others (Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002) and work harder in response to failure to fulfill a standard or others' expectations (Heine et al., 2001). Such a comparison between two cultures differing maximally in their histories has contributed to demonstrating a corresponding relationship between cultural practices and one's psychological processes (see Ishii, 2013, for a recent review of the literature).

Researchers have recently begun to focus on variations within a culture, which always exist alongside cross-cultural differences. Such research seeks to specify how psychological tendencies emerge as adaptations to the surrounding socio-ecological factors, including social class (e.g., Snibbe & Markus, 2005), residential mobility (e.g., Oishi, 2010), daily economic activities (e.g., Nisbett & Cohen, 1996), and voluntary settlement (e.g.,

Kitayama, Ishii, Imada, Takemura, & Ramaswamy, 2006). The purpose of the present research aligns with the goals of these past studies by examining variations within a culture. In particular, we have focused on the influences of globalization and recession on Japanese youth, seeking to determine whether the marginalization of Japanese youth leads to deviance from mainstream Japanese society (Toivonen, Norasakkunkit, & Uchida, 2011; Noraskkunkit & Uchida, 2011, 2014). The population of this group has increased as a result of rapid economic and social structural changes in Japanese society, resulting in reduced value being placed on the dominant cultural value of interdependence.

Over the last few decades, globalization and a long recession have placed traditional Japanese social and economic systems (e.g., the seniority-based system) under pressure to change. Although the old systems still partially persist, the coexistence of different systems has given the middle-aged generation a considerable advantage as protected core workers over the young generation (Toivonen et al., 2011). This situation has caused the young generation to face competitive pressure for secure and regular jobs due to a dwindling number of opportunities and companies' focus on labor cost reductions. Unable to secure a good job, some youths have chosen to drop out of this competition, becoming marginalized in society. This disenfranchised population continues to increase. Often referred to as NEET

(Not in Employment, Education, or Training) or *hikikomori* (social isolates), these individuals are recognized as being withdrawn from society and having no relationships outside of the family for a prolonged period (Saito, 1998).

Recent findings have suggested that the social withdrawal of marginalized youth in Japan is a manifestation of the denial of the traditionally dominant cultural value of interdependence. Adapting the experimental paradigm used by Heine et al. (2001), Norasakkunkit and Uchida (2011) examined the influence of an individual's NEET tendencies with regard to motivation. Similar to Heine et al. (2001), Norasakkunkit and Uchida (2011) found that a majority of Japanese participants with a low risk of becoming NEET were more persistent in working on a related task when they received failure feedback than when they received success feedback. This tendency reflects a motivational style of self-improvement broadly shared in Japanese culture. In contrast, the tendency was not apparent in those with a high risk of becoming NEET. Rather, they were likely to persist more when they received success feedback than when they received failure feedback. Moreover, Norasakkunkit and Uchida (2011) found that Japanese individuals with a low risk of becoming NEET had higher degrees than Japanese individuals with a high risk of becoming NEET of self-reported interdependent self-construal measured by a scale developed by

Singelis (1994) and implicit interdependence measured by an implicit association test. These findings suggest that NEET tendencies are associated with a lack of orientation toward participating in an interdependent cultural system such as that characterizing Japan. In addition, Norasakkunkit and Uchida (2014) found that high-risk individuals did not follow the majority in their decision-making processes, indicating that they have a marginalized identity.

The initial findings of Norasakkunkit and Uchida (2011, 2014) are intriguing. At the same time, these findings are limited to specific dimensions of psychological functions (e.g., motivation and conformity) in showing the marginalization of NEET tendencies. Thus, it remains unknown whether and to what extent these tendencies can be generalized, especially in the social engagement dimension. As indicated by the word “*Hikikomori*” (social isolates), some observations suggest that an individual’s NEET tendencies could lower the desire for social engagement (e.g., Zielenziger, 2006). To our knowledge, however, no empirical research has directly addressed this relationship, especially in terms of emotional and cognitive aspects. In the present research, we thus focus on the interdependent orientation as indicating one’s preparedness to engage in social relationships, investigating its relationship with NEET tendencies in Japan by examining individuals’ desire to engage in social activities

(Gray, Ishii, & Ambady, 2011) in Study 1 and by adopting the vocal Stroop task (Ishii, Reyes, & Kitayama, 2003; Kitayama & Ishii, 2002) in Study 2. Past studies have shown that as one's interdependent orientation increases, one's desire to engage in social activities becomes higher and one's spontaneous attention to vocal tone becomes greater as revealing a cue to the speaker's relational attitude (e.g., Gray et al., 2011; Ishii, Kobayashi, & Kitayama, 2010). If Norasakkunkit and Uchida's (2011, 2014) findings were replicated with different behavioral measures of interdependent orientation, we predicted that increased NEET tendencies would lead to a lower desire to engage in social activities and a reduced attention to vocal tone.

### **Study 1**

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine the relationship between NEET tendencies and the desire to engage in social activities. To provide a more comprehensive examination, we used not only a measurement of self-reported interdependent orientation (need to belong), but also a behavioral measurement of social engagement. We also included Singelis's independent-interdependent self-construal scale to replicate Norasakkunkit and Uchida's (2011) findings. If our hypothesis was correct, an increase in NEET tendencies would be associated with a lower degree of interdependence as indicated by these three measurements.



## Method

Participants were recruited from a website posted on Micromill, a Japanese web survey company, with the requirement that 1) they be male and 2) they be neither regular employees nor students. A total of 206 Japanese adults ( $M$  age = 33.0 years,  $SD$  = 5.05) participated in the study. They were compensated with a small amount of money.

Approximately 77% of the participants described themselves as either non-regular employees (90 people) or as unemployed (69 people). Only 5% of the participants (11 people) were married.

Using a task developed by Gray et al. (2011) measuring the extent to which people enjoy engaging in social activities, we first asked participants to “list all the things you would like to do right now.” They were allowed to describe up to 10 things in response to this prompt. Following Gray et al. (2011), we analyzed the first five responses, which are considered to be the most relevant for participants. In the analysis, we excluded 10 participants who did not describe anything or listed fewer than five things. Two Japanese coders, who were not informed of the hypotheses, independently classified each statement using a coding system suggested by Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) and counted the number of social activities listed. As observed by Gray et al. (2011), social activities by definition (e.g., see my mother,

date, get married) and activities explicitly including another individual or group of people (e.g., sleep with my daughter) were counted as “social activities,” but recreational activities involving another person or people were excluded (e.g., traveling, going out for dinner). Agreement between the coders was quite high (Cohen’s kappa’s = 0.95).

Participants were then asked to complete a questionnaire including the “freeter lifestyle preference” subscale of Uchida and Norasakkunkit’s (2011) measure of NEET tendencies (14 items), the need to belong scale (10 items, Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013), and the self-construal scale (24 items, Singelis, 1994). Uchida and Norasakkunkit (2011) developed the 27-item NEET-Hikikomori risk scale to measure individual differences in NEET tendencies by sampling attitudes and behavioral patterns reported in published books written by sociologists, psychologists, and psychiatrists. The scale contains three factors. First, the “freeter lifestyle preference” refers to one’s tendencies to freely choose not to work due to a greater emphasis on one’s personal life rather than the stability and fulfillment of work. Consisting of 11 items, the second factor is “lack of self-confidence,” which refers to subjective feelings about low social skills and difficulty communicating with others. With two items, the third factor is “unclear ambition for the future.” Uchida and Norasakkunkit (2011) found that NEET tendencies measured by the scale were negatively

correlated with interdependence measured by the self-construal scale (Singelis, 1994). In addition, the tendency was clearly present when the “freeter lifestyle preference” subscale was investigated. Due to a constraint on the number of questions in this web survey, we used only the “freeter lifestyle preference” subscale in the current study. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1: strongly disagree, 7: strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha was .77. The need to belong scale measures one’s needs with regard to belonging. We used a Japanese version of the scale, which was translated and whose validity was confirmed by Kobayashi, Taniguchi, Kimura, and Leary (2006). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha was .77. Singelis’s self-construal scale measures one’s explicit belief with regard to independent and interdependent selves. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha was .77 for the independence subscale and .80 for the interdependence subscale. Overall, the internal consistency was adequate for the ratings of all scales.

## **Results and Discussion**

Table 1 illustrates the mean scores and correlations of the measures. If a higher

NEET tendency is associated with reduced interpersonal orientation, the desire to engage in social activities, the need to belong, and the level of interdependence should decrease as NEET tendencies increase. Consistent with this prediction, NEET tendency was negatively correlated with the desire to engage in social activities ( $r = -.22, p < .01$ ), the need to belong ( $r = -.26, p < .01$ ), and the level of interdependence ( $r = -.25, p < .01$ ).

## Study 2

We expanded our investigation to understand the relationship between NEET tendencies and interdependent orientation by using a more implicit measurement: spontaneous attention to vocal affect. Previous studies demonstrated that automatic attention to vocal tone increased as a function of attunement to social relationships. By using a vocal Stroop task (Ishii et al., 2003; Kitayama & Ishii, 2002; see the method section for more details), researchers found that the interference effect of to-be-ignored vocal tone was greater when participants were reminded of their social rejection experiences (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). This effect also occurred when they were induced to feel sadness, which is typically accompanied by an affiliation motive (Gray et al., 2011). The interference effect by vocal tone is greater for people with a higher need for belonging (Pickett et al., 2004). Moreover, those in interdependent cultural contexts are more relationally attuned compared to

people in independent cultural contexts (Kitayama, Duffy, & Uchida, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In addition, they are more likely to rely on high-context communication in which contextual and nonverbal cues play a relatively larger role (Hall, 1976). Therefore, Japanese and Filipino individuals are more likely than North Americans to be interfered by vocal tone even when intensities of stimulus word meanings and vocal tones were carefully controlled for equivalence across cultures and languages (Ishii et al., 2003; Kitayama & Ishii, 2002). The interference effect by vocal tone also becomes greater when an individual is exposed to human faces and when one's interdependent orientation increases (Ishii et al., 2010). These findings suggest that the interference effect of vocal tone in the vocal Stroop task is a reliable marker of one's interdependent orientation as well as a good tool to detect group differences in interdependence at the cultural level. Thus, if the results in Study 1 are replicated, increased NEET tendencies should lead to less interference from vocal tone.

## **Method**

Sixty-four Japanese undergraduates at Kobe University (27 females and 37 males) participated in this study. Tested individually, they first performed the vocal Stroop task. The participants were informed that they would hear a series of emotional words spoken in different emotional vocal tones (pleasant or unpleasant). Their task was to judge whether the

meaning of each word was pleasant or unpleasant as accurately and quickly as possible while ignoring the tone of voice. The experiment consisted of 32 trials, which were preceded by 10 practice trials. The order of the trials was randomized for each participant. The response time for each trial was measured from the onset of the stimulus word. The vocal Stroop task includes a set of eight positive (e.g., *grateful* and *warm*) and eight negative (e.g., *bitter* and *sly*) words developed by Ishii et al. (2003). In the Ishii and colleagues' study, the emotional meanings of these words were determined by a pretest and were then spoken in either pleasant (e.g., smooth and round) or unpleasant (e.g., harsh and constricted) tones by two male and two female speakers. The spoken words were subsequently low-pass filtered to preserve basic information on vocal tone while making it impossible to notice the attendant word meaning, and were pre-tested for the perceived emotional valence of the tones. The perceived valence was equivalent between word meaning and vocal tone (see Ishii et al., 2003 for more details on emotional words used and the mean pleasantness ratings for word meanings and vocal tones of spoken words used).

The participants were then asked to complete the NEET risk factor scale (Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2011). As in Study 1, the participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1: strongly disagree, 7: strongly agree).

We used all of the items on the scale in the current study. Cronbach's alpha was .83, indicating that the internal consistency of the ratings was adequate.

## Results and Discussion

We excluded one participant from the analysis for failing to achieve accuracy at the level of chance. We analyzed the data from the remaining 63 participants (27 females and 36 males). As in the previous research (Norasakkunkit & Uchida, 2011), there was no gender difference for the score on the NEET risk factor scale ( $M_{female} = 3.27$ ,  $M_{male} = 3.42$ ,  $t(63) = 0.97$ ,  $p = .33$ ). There was no significant effect of gender in the vocal Stroop task ( $F_s < 1.5$ ,  $p_s > .20$ ); thus, gender was excluded in the analyses.

The accuracy of the judgments was relatively high ( $M = 97.7\%$ ). Response times for correct responses were averaged for each participant and submitted to an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with two within-subject variables (word meaning: pleasant and unpleasant; vocal tone: pleasant and unpleasant). Consistent with previous findings, the overall interaction between word meaning and vocal tone was significant:  $F(1, 62) = 12.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .20$ . When word meaning was unpleasant, the response was significantly slower for utterances spoken in a pleasant vocal tone ( $M = 1507$  ms,  $SD = 741$  ms) than for utterances spoken in an unpleasant vocal tone ( $M = 1339$  ms,  $SD = 677$  ms),  $t(62) = 3.07$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $r = .36$ . The

tendency for the response to be slower for incongruous utterances ( $M = 1656$  ms,  $SD = 737$  ms) than for congruous ones ( $M = 1548$  ms,  $SD = 746$  ms) was also found when word meaning was pleasant,  $t(62) = 1.97$ ,  $p = .053$ ,  $r = .24$ .

We then calculated the correlations between NEET risk factor and the magnitude of vocal tone interference (i.e., one's attention to the to-be-ignored vocal tone) calculated by subtracting the mean response time for congruous utterances from that for incongruous utterances for each participant. As predicted, the magnitude of vocal tone interference was significantly negatively correlated with NEET risk factor ( $r = -.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ), suggesting that people with a higher risk of becoming NEET tended to experience less interference from vocal tone.

Moreover, the accuracy of the judgments was not significantly correlated with NEET risk factor ( $r = .01$ ,  $p = .93$ ). This finding suggests that the effect of NEET tendencies toward vocal tone interference on response time did not result from participants with higher NEET tendencies responding less carefully and more randomly.

### **General Discussion**

The present research offers additional evidence for Japanese NEET tendencies being associated with lower orientation to following the culturally dominant value of



interdependence. Previous study showed that NEET tendencies moderate one's motivation to follow the traditional and dominant styles in Japanese interdependence, such as not improving oneself in response to failure (Norasakkunkit & Uchida, 2011) and not conforming to the majority (Norasakkunkit & Uchida, 2014). The current study extended these findings by addressing the behavioral cognitive consequences of NEET tendencies relating to lower interdependent orientation, as indicated by one's desire to engage in social relationships (Study 1) and insensitivity to vocal tone (Study 2). The present research is particularly worthwhile because it empirically shows a relationship between NEET tendencies and lower interdependent orientation in a large general population (i.e., non-student Japanese adults). It also demonstrates that the influence of NEET tendencies becomes manifest even in relatively automatic responses, such as spontaneous attention to vocal affect.

As shown in Table 1, NEET tendencies were not related to self-reported independence, as measured by the Singlis's scale. This pattern is consistent with that reported in Norasakkunkit and Uchida (2011). Although self-reported independence became higher as the need to belong decreased, it did not relate to the number of social activities. These results suggest that Japanese NEET tendencies do not necessarily relate to greater independence in response to seen lowered interdependence. Future work should further examine the

relationship between NEET tendencies and independence by adopting other measurements to assess the generality of the evidence.

Globalization would seemingly lead to a convergence of cultural values and a lessening of cultural differences. However, globalization can also activate exclusive and defensive reactions to foreign cultures, particularly when they are perceived to threaten one's own culture (Chiu, Gries, Torelli, & Cheng, 2011). Globalization has increased the number of marginalized youth in society, and these individuals have experienced difficulty adjusting to global culture (e.g., Arnett, 2002). As a result, one could speculate that marginalized youths would support traditional values and have anti-social attitudes toward the mainstream elite.

While the findings of a series of studies including the current one on Japanese NEET tendencies suggest that they simply tend to deny the culturally dominant value of interdependence, which seem to be inconsistent with this speculation (Norasakkunkit, Uchida, & Toivonen, 2012), it remains unclear whether they are also likely to engage in antisocial behaviors. Also, it is unclear to what cultures this speculation applies. Given the feature of globalization as a homogenizing force, rebellion to globalization leading to aggressive behaviors may be prominent among marginalized youth, particularly those who lost out on a job opportunity due to economic recession after globalization which produces worldwide

labor cost competition. Especially in Western cultures emphasizing the value of independence and uniqueness, such rebellion might be reinforced. Future research should further investigate the cognitive and emotional consequences of globalization on marginalized youth across cultures with a variety of psychological tendencies, including aggressive behaviors and feelings of anger and frustration toward society to address their anti-societal attitudes.

Moreover, it would be informative to further examine the phenomenon linking NEET tendencies to lower interdependent orientations: is this phenomenon specific to Japanese society against the backdrop of globalization, recession, and traditional societal and economic systems (e.g., a seniority-based system)? Japanese NEET or *hikikomori* are characterized as being withdrawn from society and lacking relationships outside of the family for a prolonged period (Saito, 1998). There are even cases of such individuals avoiding interactions with their own family members by shutting themselves in their bedrooms or showing aggression towards family members, even though they depend on their families economically. Despite this behavior, their family members are likely to continue caring for them based on the cultural value of interdependence. They can live with a relatively acceptable lifestyle without making any effort to improve and interact with other people. This ability is attributable to the wealth of Japan, which has experienced a long recession but is not yet on the verge of

economic collapse. Thus, the unique situation of Japan may contribute significantly to the emergence of the social withdrawal of NEET or *hikikomori*. The association between marginalized youth and their lower interdependence may not be as apparent in other East Asian countries that also embody the value of interdependence. On the other hand, independently of the unique situation of Japan, marginalization may express itself as the denial of a traditionally dominant cultural value, and consequently the manifestation in psychological processes may be different depending on cultural contexts and the embodied values: marginalized youth in East Asian countries may be less interdependent, whereas those in Western cultures emphasizing the value of independence and uniqueness may be less independent. This possibility could be tested cross-culturally in future research. Although the present research examined the within-culture variation for the interdependent orientation in Japan, it poses an interesting direction for future cross-cultural research. The present research implies that the consequences of cultural change (e.g., globalization) might differ depending on the given cultural environment. We believe that this implication is useful for cross-cultural psychologists.

One important research goal is to expand the findings based on self-reporting and behavioral measurements and to examine neural processes that may vary depending on the

level of NEET tendencies. For example, Ishii et al. (2010) demonstrated that a negative ERP component called N400—a reliable neurobiological marker of the detection of semantic incongruity (Kutas & Hillyard, 1980)—appears greater for incongruent utterances than for congruent utterances when Japanese participants judged word meaning while ignoring vocal tone in the vocal Stroop task. This tendency became stronger as a function of the Japanese participant's orientation toward interdependence in a condition where the attention to vocal tone was activated with exposure to schematic faces. Taken together, if the current results are replicated, the negative ERP component might be less pronounced as NEET tendencies become greater among Japanese individuals.

Ultimately, the present research has provided additional evidence of the cognitive and emotional consequences of NEET tendencies by examining interdependent orientation measured by a desire to engage in social activities and a spontaneous attention to vocal affect. Further investigation is needed to confirm the validity of the current findings based on correlations among variables.

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Table 1. The mean scores and correlations of the measures in Study 1.

Measure	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Number of social activities	0.48	0.83	---				
2. NEET tendencies	3.96	0.79	-.22*	---			
3. The need to belong	2.90	0.61	.32*	-.26*	---		
4. Independent self	3.32	0.54	.08	-.03	-.23*	---	
5. Interdependent self	3.25	0.56	.33*	-.25*	.49**	-.08	---

\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .001$