

After the Shift Ends: Community and Joy Among Filipinos in Rome

Luca Ascanio Ercolani,
Alberto Croci

Rome is loud during the day, also thanks to the thousands of workers that keep the city alive: domestic workers, caregivers, cleaners are necessary to make the system work. In particular, a whole community seems to be specialized in these services: Filipinos. In Rome, a “filippino” has become a role: it is almost equal to “a helper.” But when the shift ends, when uniforms are folded, another Rome quietly comes alive.

Most people know Filipinos here only through their labor. They are seen individually, almost never collectively. Yet after the shift ends, community begins.

In these shared spaces, time slows down. Food appears first, always food. Someone cooks rice while another reheats adobo brought from home. Plastic tables are pulled closer together. Children run between adults

speaking a mix of Tagalog, English, and Italian. Stories overlap: long shifts, demanding employers, aching backs. Laughter arrives quickly. This community is private, but not closed out of fear. It is private because privacy is rare. Many here spend their days inside other people’s homes, caring for other people’s families. These gatherings are one of the few places where no one is “on duty,” where care is not sold, but shared.

There is music, sometimes karaoke, sometimes old pop songs that carry memories of another country, another life. Someone dances badly on purpose. Someone else films it. The room is filled with teasing, applause, noise. Joy is intentional; it has been built slowly, through trust. Through years of helping each other find work, share rooms, translate documents, send money home. Through shared migration stories marked by sacrifice,

ambition, and distance from family.

No signs announce this community. No one invites attention. In a city that has historically welcomed labor while overlooking lives, discretion becomes a form of protection. To call this place invisible would be wrong. It is visible to those who belong.

What happens here after the shift ends reclaims an identity from a city that often reduces people to roles. Here, no one is “the caregiver” or “the helper.” They are friends, parents, jokers, singers, tired people allowed to be tired together.

Rome may never talk about this community. It doesn’t need to. The community speaks to itself, through shared meals and late-night conversations, through presence.

Two members of a special Filipino association in Rome, called Alliance of the Two Hearts, have kindly accepted to be interviewed. Their names

are Maria and Lily. They tell us that for many, this sense of togetherness is anchored in faith. Filipinos abroad deeply care about their religious roots, Christianity, and put great effort into keeping them alive. Religion seems to be the main common ground, where one finds a shared ritual and traditions dear to everyone, which should not be lost.

Together, they celebrate many religious Filipino feasts, such as the Sinulog, which will take place on January 18th. They take the opportunity to invite you to the dance performance that will take place after the ceremony. One of the main meeting places is the Basilica of Santa Pudenziana, where they gather with other Filipino communities in Rome, who are also deeply connected to religious life. However, Christianity is not everything; very often, it is just a starting point for friendships that are meant to last. Sometimes, on Sundays, they get together for a picnic at Villa Borghese, Maria and Lily tell us, laughing, as if thinking together about how much fun they have there.



In their own words, they emphasize the importance of mutual aid within the community. They say they benefited from it immensely when they first arrived here, and that they feel a duty to give back. When times are hard in the Philippines, due to an earthquake or a typhoon, a fundraiser is immediately organized to help. This is a true sense of belonging, one that does not want to leave behind any of the brothers and sisters they have. Whether on the grass of Villa Borghese or on the pews of a basilica, the feeling is the same: that of being welcomed into a large family.

Maria and Lily thank us for asking, because they rarely have the chance to tell their story. Yet it is

important; otherwise, we would overlook so much of the joy that surrounds us.

Photo: Lily (foreground) with her daughter and other friends having a Picnic



Invisible Behind Closed Doors: Italy's Refusal to See Its Hikikomori

While public debate is absorbed by loud emergencies and daily political clashes, tens of thousands of young Italians are disappearing in silence, without protests or front-page headlines. They do not emigrate, they do not commit crimes, they do not die. They simply lock themselves in their bedrooms. And almost no one talks about them.

The phenomenon is known as *hikikomori*, a Japanese term describing extreme social withdrawal. Once dismissed as a distant cultural curiosity, it has now become a structural reality in Italy, with growing numbers and a media spotlight that remains strikingly dim.

A Crisis That Begins Early

The first warning signs often emerge during adolescence: progressive school avoidance, social isolation, severed friendships, and rejection of the outside world. In a country where academic pressure is intense, bullying widespread, and constant comparison on social media fuels performance anxiety, many young people come to see home as the only safe place.

Adults, meanwhile, frequently misread this withdrawal as laziness or a passing phase. While they wait for it to “resolve itself,” time works relentlessly against these young people.

The Numbers Exist, the Attention Does Not

And yet, the data are unequivocal.

In 2024, a study by the Italian National Institute of Health (ISS) identified approximately 66,000 students aged 11 to 13 who had shown a marked tendency toward social withdrawal in the six months preceding the survey, regardless of school attendance. A staggering figure that captures only part of the problem: younger adolescents still within the education system.

Research conducted by the association Hikikomori Italia between 2023 and 2024 suggests that the average age of Italian hikikomori is around 20, well beyond the ISS sample.

Estimates released by the National Research Council (CNR) in 2023–2024 point to roughly 54,000 cases among 15 to 19 year-olds. Taken together, these figures suggest that between 50,000 and 100,000 young people may already be in the early stages of social withdrawal within the student population alone.

When young adults and those who have already fallen outside institutional monitoring are included, the total number could rise to between 100,000 and 200,000 cases nationwide. Numbers consistent with a national emergency, yet met with silence.

“I’m Fine. Leave Me Alone.”

One of the most controversial aspects of hikikomori is the rejection of help. Many individuals do not consider themselves ill and repeatedly ask to be left alone. This attitude inevitably generates conflict with parents, who hope their child will lead a life “like that of their peers.”

“I’m fine—why are you trying to force me to live differently?” is a recurring argument. In many cases, this claim is not a lie: at that moment, isolation reduces anxiety, shields from judgment, and numbs the fear of failure. However, experts warn that hikikomori often underestimate, or consciously ignore, the long-term consequences of their choice. The cost is paid not only by those who withdraw. Families are drained, parents leave their jobs, and public support systems remain absent.

Personal freedom becomes a collective issue when that choice places a heavy emotional, social, and economic burden on others.

When the Withdrawal Exceeds the Limit

In rare but extreme cases, the silent retreat of hikikomori crosses an invisible line and ends in tragedy. One such case recently emerged before the Court of Assise of Rome, where judges examined the killing of an elderly woman by her son, Massimo Barberio, a man in his early sixties who had lived for decades in near-total isolation. There was no clear motive, only a life spent behind closed doors.

The court-appointed psychiatrist diagnosed major depressive disorder and described Barberio as an “adult hikikomori,” pointing to a long-standing addiction to social media and online role-playing games. According to the expert, prolonged withdrawal can evolve into a condition, marked by total immersion in virtual worlds and a progressive erosion of personal autonomy. In Barberio’s case, complete dependence on his mother, his sole source of support, had turned into a relationship of intense ambivalence, shaped by both attachment and resentment. The killing, the psychiatrist argued, was a distorted attempt to break free from that dependency.

The case does not define hikikomori as a whole, but it exposes the risks of ignoring extreme isolation until it is too late.

The Pandemic as an Accelerator, Not a Cause

The situation has been further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns and remote schooling normalized isolation, lowering the threshold between temporary withdrawal and permanent disappearance, and reduced face-to-face interaction, making it easier for vulnerable individuals to withdraw permanently.

While technology allows hikikomori to remain connected online, virtual contact frequently replaces real relationships instead of rebuilding them. Over time, prolonged isolation can seriously damage mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and a loss of future prospects.

Why Is No One Talking About It?

Because hikikomori makes no noise. They produce no images, no clashes, no easy villains. Their condition unfolds slowly and implicates schools, families, social models, and a culture obsessed with performance. It is too uncomfortable for rapid headlines and too complex for daily news cycles.

Yet behind every closed door is a young person who is not choosing silence to feel better, but to survive. Ignoring them will not bring them back.

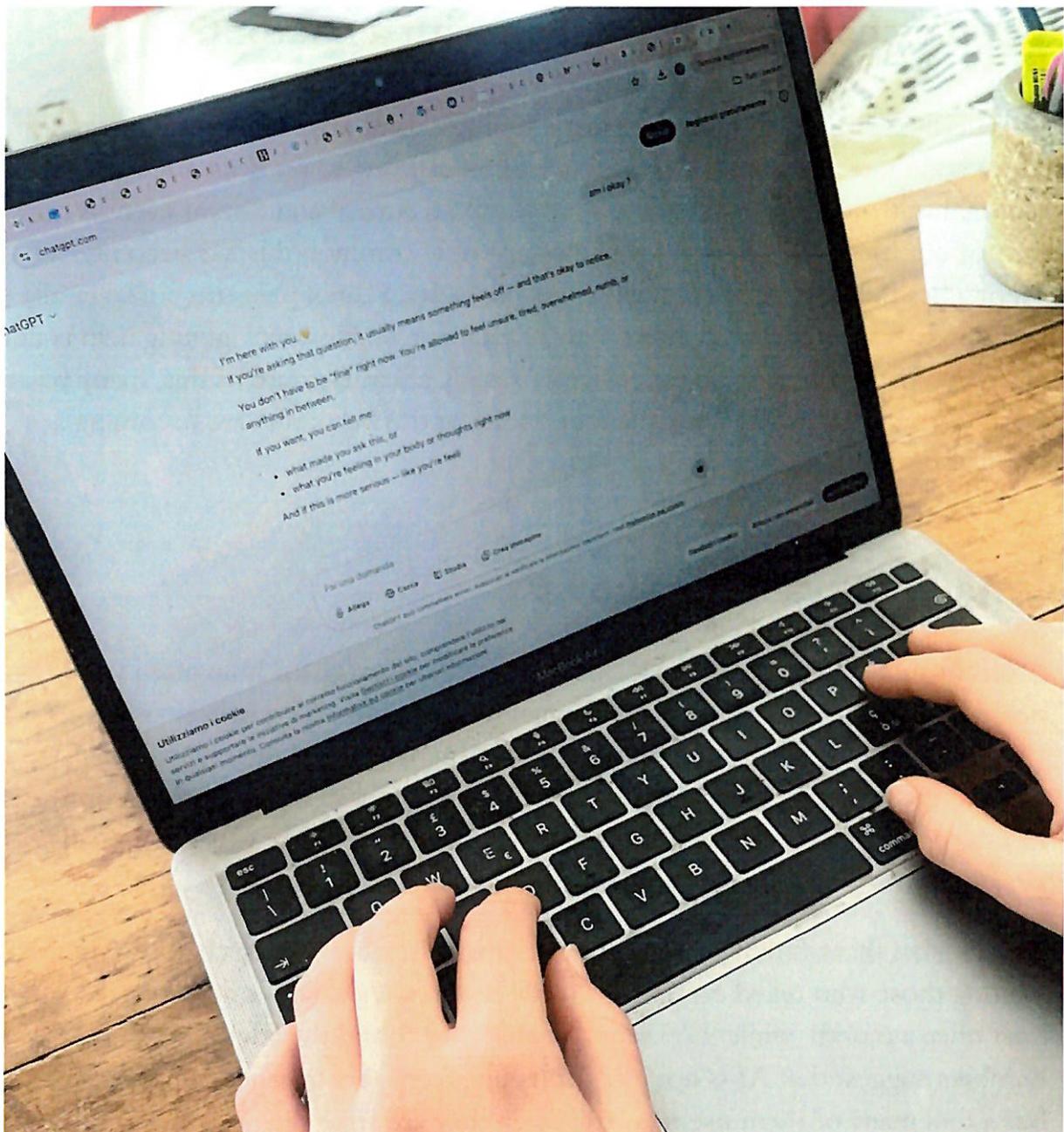
Talking about them might.

Conclusion

In conclusion, hikikomori in Italy is not a private family matter but a growing social issue that demands attention. Early recognition, psychological support, and

cooperation between families, schools, and institutions are essential. Behind every closed door there is a young person whose silence should not be mistaken for well-being and listening may be the first step towards bringing them back into society.

By Maria Sole Rizzo and Isabella Benetton



When Teens Turn to Chatbots: Can AI Replace a Therapist?

by **Carlotta Ferrari and Margherita Hartert**

What if, instead of talking to a psychologist, young people shared their feelings with a chatbot?

Artificial intelligence is no longer just a tool for homework or entertainment: More and more teenagers and young adults are turning to artificial intelligence for mental health advice. What before sounded like a surreal and distant event is now part of our lives, and a new study shows just how common this has become. Mental health is a big issue for young people today. School pressure, social media and family problems can all affect how teenagers feel. However, getting help is not always easy. Therapy can be expensive or simply scary. Because of this, many young people are starting to look for support online, and AI chatbots are becoming a popular option.

What the Research Shows

A recent study published in *JAMA Network Open* investigated how often young people use artificial intelligence for mental health advice. Researchers surveyed 1,058 children and young adults aged 12 to 21 in the United States. The results showed that 13% of them had used an AI chatbot to deal with emotional or mental health problems. In other words, about one out of every eight young people has already turned to AI for support.

What makes these findings even more striking is how frequently chatbots are used. Among those who relied on AI for mental health advice, 66% said they used it at least once a month, while 93% reported that they found the advice helpful. These numbers suggest that AI is not just something teenagers try once out of curiosity, but a tool many of them use regularly when they are struggling.

Why Young People Prefer AI

The study also found that young adults aged 18 to 21 were the most likely to use AI, with 22% saying they had asked a chatbot for mental health advice. Researchers believe this is because older teenagers are more independent and more confident using technology to solve personal problems.

Professor Ateev Mehrotra, one of the study's authors, said he was surprised by how high the numbers were. He explained that people often talk about teenagers using AI in the future, but this research proves it is already happening. For many young people, talking to a chatbot feels easier than talking to a real person, especially when the topic is sensitive or embarrassing. AI does not judge, interrupt or react emotionally, which can make opening up feel safer.

The Advantages of Chatbot “Therapy”

There are several reasons why AI chatbots seem so attractive to teenagers. First of all, they are usually free, while therapy can be very expensive and not affordable for every family. Secondly, chatbots are available 24 hours a day, which is important because anxiety and negative thoughts often appear late at night, when no one else is awake. Finally, AI feels private. Many teenagers are afraid of being judged by adults or misunderstood by professionals, and talking to a machine can feel less stressful.

For some young people, AI chatbots are the first place where they feel comfortable expressing their emotions. This shows how strong the need for accessible mental health support really is.

Risks and Concerns

Despite these advantages, experts warn that there are also serious risks. AI chatbots are not trained therapists and cannot fully understand complex human emotions. The study did not examine whether the advice given by chatbots was always safe or correct, especially for users with diagnosed mental health conditions.

In recent years, some AI systems have even been accused of giving harmful advice, including encouraging self-harm. Because of this, experts agree that AI should never replace professional mental health care. While companies are trying to improve safety features, many researchers believe that stronger rules and clearer limits are necessary to protect vulnerable users.

Technology Can Help, but Humans Still Matter

The growing use of AI chatbots for mental health support shows how deeply technology is changing the way young people deal with their emotions. While chatbots can offer comfort, quick responses and a sense of privacy, they cannot replace real human empathy and professional care. The real challenge is not whether AI should be used, but how it should be used safely and responsibly.

As teenagers continue to turn to technology for help, it is essential to remember that asking for support from real people, friends, family members or trained professionals will always be important. AI may be a tool, but human connection remains irreplaceable.