

The Australian

Cult of the mask grips Japan

- **Richard Lloyd-Parry**
- From: The Times
- January 29, 2011 12:00AM

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RIKA and Kimiko are typical Japanese schoolgirls.

They have blue sailor-suit uniforms, spangly mobile phones and several designer shopping bags. But one thing stands out: the cotton medical masks that cover their mouths and noses every waking hour.

These teenagers don't have colds. Instead, they are members of a growing tribe of Japanese teenagers who wear masks to take refuge from the world at large.

Rika puts her mask on when she leaves home and takes it off only when she goes to bed. She removes it reluctantly to eat, drink and occasionally allow her boyfriend to kiss her. She feels "comfortable" and "at ease" when she wears it. Rika, and others like her, are the cause of growing disquiet.

Last week's Asahi newspaper ran a long piece on these date or show masks. The phenomenon is one more example of a troubled youth culture turning in on itself, echoing Japan's lack of economic and political self-confidence.

The eccentricities of Rika and Kimiko are not as extreme as those of the million hikikomori, socially withdrawn Japanese who live with their parents and rarely leave their bedrooms. They are less sensational than the "girly men", heterosexual boys who forgo high-status pursuits and girlfriends in favour of humble jobs and clothes shopping.

But, like them, they seem to speak of a culture in which economic stagnation and the loss of guaranteed lifetime employment have left many young people uncertain of their place in society.

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