NEETs, “Freeters” & Social Loafers: Impressions of Japan’s Perceived Undesirables

Damon E. Chapman & Daniel Cochece Davis

Note: Dr. Davis is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Marist College, Poughkeepsie, New York, U.S.A.

Abstract

In recent years, the NEET and “freeter” phenomena have become highly recognized in Japanese society. Research on these areas is relatively widespread in Japan, but analyzing how acceptable such terms are in the minds of young people is lacking. Whereas most NEETs and freeters are considered to be young (usually from 16-25), most of the people who deem the phenomena undesirable are parents, educators, employers as well as the government. Recent statistics show that the number of NEETs and freeters is steadily increasing (Honda, 2005; Kosugi, 2003). While reasons ranging from changing demographics to changing attitudes of Japanese youth have been blamed for the problem, and virtually all sides see these phenomena as detrimental to society, little research has studied how acceptable such a lifestyle is to today’s youth. This paper sought to remedy that. Does being a “freeter” or NEET have any merit to young people? To do this, this paper first defined the terms and discussed their prevalence and causes within society. Then, the period of “transition to working professional,” demographics, the labor market, changing attitudes of youth and an overview of the impact the NEET and freeter phenomena have on society is given. Previous work by the authors in both U.S. and Asian populations on other phenomena, “free-riders” and social loafers, were added to this work. When seen as specific examples of the general phenomenon of social loafing, NEETs and freeters “loaf” (or get a “free ride”) off of social support systems in the form of parents, schools and society. Recognized many years earlier in Western research, loafers and free-riders are also looked down on in most (if not all) educational and work-related situations across cultures, and, thus, have a perception that is similarly negative. To gauge the acceptability of these three phenomena, Japanese university students were asked how aware they are of and how acceptable such a lifestyle is. They were then asked who they believe has responsibility for both the cause of and solution to these situations, and what types of people they believe tend to be NEETs, freeters and free-riders (i.e. gender, character traits, ages, etc.). Results showed that the concepts of NEETs and freeters are well-known and are seen as somewhat increasing, but were not viewed as “common” as the researchers expected. Subjects indicated that NEETs and freeters are only seen as “somewhat negative,” though much more negative as the age of the NEET/freeter increases. Most of the blame for causing such phenomena lies with the individual, while the government was seen as least helpful in solving the problem. Lastly, a review of proposed countermeasures is given.
Introduction

The question "what do you plan to do after you graduate?" may easily be the most asked inquiry to a university or high school senior. Are you going on to higher education? Have you already confirmed a full-time job, or are you currently in the process of job-recruitment? Besides the actually process of getting through their senior year, with all its pressures, tests and (for university students) a graduation thesis, the task of securing one's future employment is another responsibility. As recently as 3 weeks before this paper's first draft was submitted, the first author asked one of his Japanese students in a basic English conversation class "What do you plan to do after graduation?" The straightforward reply, with no hesitation and no hint that he was second-guessing his answer, was "I plan to be a NEET." Simply stated, a NEET means someone who is not in education, employment or training (thus the acronym: NEET). To hear a university student actually plan to be such a person was surprising, and possibly indicative of how prevalent and accepted the status of basically "doing nothing" (Oshita, 2005) has become in recent years.

For many westerners, it is not unusual to hear students say they want to "take a year off" and travel after university work. Furthermore, unlike the job-recruitment system so prevalent in Japan's education system (also known as the "transition process" from education to work), most westerners do not rely on their educational institution for job-hunting assistance. Being "in the lurch" or taking some "time off" after university is widely accepted and much less criticized. Not so in Japan. The terms NEET, and its cousin "freeter," (loosely defined as a young person who "hops" through various part-time jobs, also labeled "atypical workers," see Honda, 2005), have garnered wide publicity in government and academic circles as well as the mass media in recent years (see "90% Fear Effect," 2005; Aoyama & Nakajima, 2005; "Erosion of Middle Class," 2005; Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005; Genda & Okata, 2004; Kosugi, 2003 & "NEET Woman Lacks Self-Esteem," 2005). The topic reached pop "cult" status when a song by a famous male pop group was criticized by Japan's Junior Chamber of Commerce as indirectly promoting the NEET concept. Through its lyrics, the song suggested to young people they "don't have to be number one . . . you're always special and the only one . . ." The Junior Chamber of Commerce suggested that "such a special one doesn't exist. Education should aim to teach students how to prepare to fit in with life in the competitive world" and that an educational approach in Japan that "blindly" respects individuality will be counterproductive ("Erosion of Middle-Class," 2005, p. 5).

In virtually all Japanese perspectives it is argued that the NEET and freeter phenomena are damaging to society. Recent results of survey by the nation's largest newspaper (the Yomiuri Shimbun) showed a high level of worry for the problem with 90% of respondents saying they were "concerned" about the problem of NEETs (see "90% Fear Effect," 2005). While such a negative image of the problem may not be in dispute from educators and policy makers, this paper takes a different approach toward studying the situation. It asks if such a post-university status is so commonplace that it has become an acceptable plan for some young people? Is it so widespread that young people view it as a lifestyle choice for their post-high school or post-university life? Do all young people find it a bad path upon which to embark, especially if they are unmarried and still "looking for their way" in life, or do they wish to follow the well-established "transition period" from education to employment that previous generations followed, and seek stable employment as quickly as possible? After all, it has
been acknowledged that in Japan "the transitional path from childhood to adulthood in the industrial age has been transformed since the 1980s from the straightforward transitional path whereby people moved step-by-step [usually via seniority], to a more complicated zigzag one" (Miyamoto, 2005, p. 74).

Is this "zig zag" approach one that accepts people becoming a NEET and/or freeter (even temporarily)? Have the demographic trends in the country lead to such dramatic changes in attitudes of the young generation that these lifestyle choices, like the one made by the previously mentioned student, have become a conscious plan after graduation? What other factors are at work?

To study how the current young generation perceives the status of NEETs and freeters, this paper will first define the terms, including a discussion of their prevalence and causes in society. Because the NEET and freeter situations are widely viewed as taking place in the years between education and full-time work, the period of "transition to working professional," a discussion of this transition is given, including how it has changed in recent years due to changing demographics and the labor market, as well as changing attitudes on the part of Japanese youth. After that, this paper moves into an overview of the impact (social and economic) that the NEET and freeter phenomena have on society, and the nation. This research project will also include a discussion on a related term, "social loafer/free-rider" that is commonly used in Western research, but not yet widely recognized in Japan. "Social loafing" is the phenomenon of individuals in group situations doing less work, participating to a lesser degree, putting less energy or effort into the group project than they would if they did the work alone (Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979) and it deals with the reduction or increase of the energy level, or effort, put into the group project by each individual in the group. Related to social loafing is the concept of "free riding" (Marwell & Ames, 1979, 1980), a specific area of research within the category of social loafing literature which addresses the problem of individual group members trying to gain the benefits of group work (cf. Davis & Chapman, 2003; Chapman & Davis, 2002). It must be noted that the main goal of adding the "social loafing/free-rider" questions was to gauge Japanese awareness of the terms, and if they are aware if it, compare their perceived social acceptability to that of NEETs and freeters. Then a measure is given of current university students' awareness and acceptance of these phenomena, including a look at the types of people they perceive fall into such lifestyles, and who they believe is responsible for both causing and helping the problems. Lastly, it will offer a review of some solutions that have been proposed to deal with the situations as well as some thoughts on future research.

**NEETs: The Concept Defined**

According to a Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare survey, there were about 820,000 NEETs in 2003, including people who stayed at home and helped with housework (Hiragana Times, 2004). This is a figure which represented 2.5% of the population aged 15-34, and included those suffering from "social withdrawal." The same government source (the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare) said the term NEET refers to people in the 15-34 age group among the nonworking population who, after graduating from school, do not go on to further education and do not get married (cited in Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005). According to the 2004 edition of the White Paper on the Labor Economy (cited in the same source), released by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, the number of young people known as NEETs are becoming a major social issue because they are neither working nor studying.
The national government then made a change to the definition of NEETs in 2005, which from that time on include people registered in school but not attending, and also including married people, resulting in the revised definition as “nonworking population aged between 15 and 34, who are not doing housework.” After this change in the definition, the Cabinet Office announced that the number of NEETs reached around 850,000 (see “Young People,” 2005), which is different from the statistics provided by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare that does not count those helping around the house as NEETs, resulting in a 27% increase from ten years ago; this includes about 430,000 future job seekers and about 420,000 non-job seekers. This means that one person in 40 in the 15-34 age bracket is a NEET.

Interestingly, the Health Ministry admits the entire concept is difficult to define precisely because it is a relatively new concept (“Defining NEETs,” 2005; “640,000 NEETs”, 2005), but regardless of how it is defined, NEETs, which means people who are not in employment, education, or training, are a growing social problem, and have became a topic of major discussions in the government, academic circles as well as in the popular press precisely because they are neither working nor studying. Regarding age, it must be noted that not all people who fall into the status of NEETs find themselves in the same age bracket. A labor report by the government in fiscal 2005 put the number of NEETs in the older bracket, starting from 25 up to 34, at around 320,000 (Kan, 2005b). As to differences between genders, it is suggested that if women who dedicate themselves to household chores (but are not full-time housewives) are included as NEETs — there is a minimal gender gap in NEETs (ESRI, 2005).

Freeters: The Concept Defined

Originally a Japanese coinage from the English word “free” and the German word “arbeiter,” meaning worker, freeters are basically job-hopping part-time workers (Kitazume, 2005). This phenomena has also been described as “people who take a succession of casual jobs in preference to steady full-time employment” as well as a “new lifestyle option” that resulted from Japan’s golden age of economic strength (Hiragana Times, 2004). It is important to note the words “preference” and “option” as indicative of a willing choice on the part of the young person. The government acknowledges the term is vague (Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006) and offered a simpler explanation, saying it is commonly understood as “young people working in temporary jobs or part-time jobs.” In a more specific definition, one government source said freeters are

- between the ages of 15-34 who are not students, and for women, are unmarried 1) who are referred to as “arbeiter worker or part-timer” at their places of employment; are 2) unemployed persons who desire to work as “arbeit worker or part-timers,” and are not helping household chores or are attending school” (cited in Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006, p. 7).

Yet another government research paper (the “White Paper on National Life”) defined a freeter as “a young person between the ages of 15 to 34 (excluding students and housewives), who work part-time or arbeit (including dispatched works) and unemployed persons who wish to work” (also cited in Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006, p. 7). The difference in these two definitions is that the latter (from the “White Paper on National Life”) includes “dispatched” (those not actively searching for work at all) and temporary workers as well as jobless people who seek full-time work.

According to statistics given in the White Paper on the Labor Economy, 2003 (cited in Labor
Situation in Japan, 2005/2006), the number of freeters is 2.09 million and this has doubled within the past 10 years (also see Hiragana Times, 2004). Another source put the number of freeters averaging 2.17 million in 2003, an increase of 80,000 persons over the previous year (Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005). Discussing young people who are not labeled freeters (who at least do some type of part-time work), excluding students and those involved in "household affairs," the number of people who "do nothing" exceeds 640,000. These numbers, taken together with the number of jobless youth (the completely unemployed, aged 15-34) and detached workers, the total number of unemployed young people topped 4.2 million (Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006, p. 2). Honda (2005) says that statistics show that freeters represent 1 out of every 9 people aged between 15 and 34 (compared with the previously mentioned ratio of 1 out of every 40 people aged 15-34 who are NEETs), so call them what you will, young people who are not moving into full-time jobs are increasing. The problem of growing unemployment, and the acceptance of such a social status on the part of young people, is universally seen as problematic.

According to some researchers, not all freeters are young. A well-known Tokyo-based think tank, the UFJ Institute, released a report on the possible effects of the increasing number of job-hopping part-timers who are "middle-aged." According to the report, the number of "middle-aged freeters" 35 or older was 460,000 in 2001, but it will increase to 1.32 million by 2011, and could top 2 million in 2021 (Kan, 2005a). When comparing jobless youth labeled NEETs versus those labeled freeters, it has been noted that one clear distinction between NEETs and freeters in Japan is that so-called freeters hop from one part-time job to the next, while NEETs have no work at all ("Young People," 2005). Other researchers add that there is a high possibility that most NEETs don't even seek job assistance (Genda & Okada, 2004), and, as a result of this less-than-energetic effort, it has even been expressed that NEETs represent a bigger problem than freeters, since NEETs do not have a strong intention to work (Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005).

Characteristics of NEETs

Research by Hori (2004) classifies young people unable to find their "place" in the employment arena, that is people who struggle in the transition stage from education to being "working professionals" (Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006). Hori states that such people may fall into one (or more) of five patterns: a) those who seek momentary pleasure; b) those who see themselves as having lost contact with society; c) those who, due to personal difficulties, do nothing; d) those who have lost confidence; and, lastly, e) those who find themselves waiting for a better opportunity (Hori, 2004) and by definition, then, this may include both NEETs and freeters.

Given the potential impacts on the nation of this increasingly large group of young people (detailed later), the question of what type of person tends to choose a NEET lifestyle must be addressed. NEETs are made up of people from all types of backgrounds, yet there is a big difference between those who either dropped out of or graduated high school, and those who dropped out of or graduated higher education. For those with any type of higher education, the problem is considered one of "self-search", while those at high school level are in a situation where they are not pushed into work (ESRI, 2005). They are further seen as being more introverted and lacking in their ability to build relationships. Researcher Reiko Kosugi (of the Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training) has classified the NEETs into four types: the antisocial and hedonistic type; the withdrawn type, which is
incapable of building relations with society and shuts itself up; the paralyzed type, which thinks too much before looking for a job and ends up in an impasse; and the disenchanted type, which has worked but soon quit the job and then lost confidence (Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005).

Some researchers view NEETs as having problems with social networks: "I think that NEETs of age 25 and older are almost always socially withdrawn" states Dr. Tamaki Saito, a psychiatrist. More often seen in men due to the pressure society puts on them to work, he adds NEETs usually have poor communication skills (ESRI, 2005). Do such communication skills and the resulting weak social networks come only to older NEETs? That is doubtful, as seen when looking at the effects social networks have on influencing young people and their choices when trying to "find their way." Horie (2004) notes that one of the outstanding features of NEETs is "their isolation from other people, that is, their poor social networks" (p. 27). She adds emphasis on this isolation, arguing that young people are becoming NEETs because they lack confidence when it comes to having good relationships with other people.

Characteristics of Freeters

If the idea that people who take a succession of casual jobs in preference to steady full-time employment, or doing so as a "new lifestyle option" is becoming acceptable to young people, what happened to the traditional "lifetime employment" path of being the salaried worker? If the icon of the 1980's was the salaryman who sacrificed his private life for his company, today's icon could be the freeter — the young Japanese who take odd jobs to make just enough money to enjoy their personal interests or choose their way of life. When looking at the freeter phenomena, a westerner may comment that such a "job hopping" lifestyle is normal from the ages of about 18-24, the period of time when one is finishing either high school or university, and during that period, pays his/her own way via part-time jobs. In the meantime, the person is picking up work experience of whatever kind, or at the least, keeping her/himself financially above water. In other words, westerners may simply ask "Isn't this expected?" Japanese would offer a different perspective. "While some in the freeter ranks choose the lifestyle with a clear objective of supporting themselves with those jobs until they can realize their dreams in the future, many others are believed to do so merely to take refuge from reality or because they can remain dependent on their parents," noted Kahoru Iwamatsu, manager of the education policy group of the Labor Policy Bureau of the Japan Business Federation, (cited in Kitazume, 2005).

So are all jobless youth freeters? That notion is incorrect. Freeters are believed to be jobless people who work in temporary and/or part-time jobs and often switch jobs for various reasons, having little if any desire to achieve full-time work. Jobless youth, on the other hand, may be actively looking but are unable to find a full-time position. However, sociologists say many freeters could drop off the bottom of the employment scale and turn into NEETs, if they remain jobless long enough to lose the motivation or self-confidence to work (Kan, 2005a). In some ways, these type of people are good for business, in that they reduce labor costs for the company hiring part-time "freeters" because such positions do not require increased expenses in the form of benefits such as pensions, paid holidays, or payments into the nationalized health care system, unlike full-time employees. By far, however, regardless of what some may say are "merits" to having a sizable population of such people, there is vast public opinion that leading the life of a freeter is not ideal.

According to a survey by the Japan Institute of Labor, freeters fall into three basic categories: (1) the
“on hold” group, consisting of people who have not yet found what they want to do for a living, (2) the “no choice” group, consisting of those who are settling for temporary jobs while searching for permanent employment, and (3) the “dream-pursuing” group, comprising young people trying to work their way toward professional careers. Mentioned above, a Westerner may not automatically assign a negative connotation to young “dream-pursuers,” since it is precisely during one’s youth that people are expected to find their way, via education as well as different types of work experience (A New Class of Drifters, 2000). Like much of society, however, one well-known researcher criticizes such “dreamers.” Yamada Masahiro of Tokyo Gakugei University, widely known in Japan for his research on “parasite singles” (detailed below), has one simple idea for the cause of the freeter phenomenon: the lack of good [full-time] job opportunities. He argues that all freeters can be characterized as “dreamers who provide a source of cheap, disposable labor.” Furthermore, he says that all three types of freeter are pursuing unrealistic but expedient dreams (Yamada, 1999). Again, a westerner may ask is it unrealistic for a young person to use a part-time job as a source of income while simultaneously searching, preparing for and/or receiving training for a future full-time job that has yet to be attained?

The Japanese Institute for Education Policy Research identifies offers another categorization for freeters: a) those who desire freedom and ease: the “tarrying” type; b) those who attach importance to doing what they want to do: the “dream-chasing” type; and c) those who cannot find their desired regular employment: the “no-choice” type. Then there are the “mugyousha”, the estimated 280,000 graduates not involved in work or further study, some of whom leave regular employment for insecure destinations within two or three years of graduating (see Kingston, 2004). Japan certainly seems to be unique is its ability to label certain strata of society!

One note worth making regarding “types” of freeters is that in Japan’s changing society there is the tendency to classify people as winners or losers. In terms of employment status, those lucky enough to get jobs as regular employees at reputable companies are the kachigumi (winners), while those classified as “freeters,” are the makegumi (losers) (Japan’s New Misfits, 2005). Does this label mean that young people will always perceive freeters to be negative, or is this a notion imposed on the youth of today by the government, academia and mass media? If it is always negative, what impact does government, academia and mass media see these phenomena as having on Japan? To understand the national impact from an economic perspective requires a review of Japan’s demographic trends.

Demographic Trends

In 1995, the population of Japan was 125 million, and this is expected to peak in 2006, but then decline throughout most of the 21st century. The reasons for this population change are many, but it mainly results from a decrease in the birth rate (which peaked in both the 1940s and the 1970s), as well as marrying later and having children later. Furthermore, while the number of young people (those under 18) peaked in 1990 at 2.0 million, it is foreseen to decline significantly to 1.2 million by 2010. Specifically, the 5-14 age group declined by 18 percent from 1990-1996, and is forecast to decline another 8 percent by 2006 (Aoyama & Nakajima, 2005; OECD, March, 2000). With a decline in the number of young people, that generation will produce a shortfall of national income with which to support social systems when they reach working age. These demographic shifts "pose a threat to the nation’s economic potential at a time then the country faces a shrinking labor force brought about by
shifting demographics” (Kitazume, 2005). Such massive upheaval could also lead to the negative effects of recession and other national restructuring of the economic system.

The severity of this problem becomes clear when seeing that the number of people over aged 60 will have risen substantially as the post-war baby boomer generation retires, and the vast majority of those will require the social services they earned over their working life. In short, there will be a “greater financial burden on the [future] working population” and the decline in their numbers will have “far-reaching consequences for systems of career-development and for the lifetime employment system itself” (OECD, March, 2000, p. 13). Clearly, all levels of government, as well as the business community as a whole, have an interest in knowing why the future working population is increasing their numbers of NEETs and freeeters. With these demographics clarified, we now turn to the impacts an increase in this lifestyle will have on the country.

The Impact of Japan's NEETs and Freeeters on Society

Numerous sources from the government to social scientists to the mass media have voiced their concerns over the possible negative impacts young people living a NEET or freeter lifestyle will have on the country in the future. The White Paper on the Labor Economy (cited in Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005) warns that, together with the fact that the unemployment rate among young people is staying at a high level, the problem of NEETs "is cause for concern, because it will not only exert an impact on corporate activity and the economy but also affect the maintenance and development of society.” Adds a researcher at the UFJ Institute, a Tokyo-based think tank, “In many ways, the existence of aged freeeters will become a big problem for society, . . . to avoid that prospect, we have to take measures soon to help [current] freeeters out of their unstable status at as early a stage as possible” (cited in Kan, 2005a).

To understand any future impact by freeeters, we must look at the shifts in ages of such people. In the 1990s, the core generation of freeeters were those in their early 20s. But these days, it has shifted to those in their late 20s to early 30s. By around 2016, the number of “aged” freeeters in their 50s will surge, and from around 2020, some of them will reach retirement age (Kan, 2005a). This implies that some of those people currently in their 20s and 30s are destined to remain freeeters and this will lead to direct financial consequences. Dai-ichi Life Research notes that limited shopping or other spending activity on the part of NEETs was said to have reduced the gross domestic product by 0.15% in 2003 (see “Young People,” 2005). Furthermore, the NEET population “will swell to 984,000, [and] nearly one million, in 2010” according to the institute’s chief economist, Takashi Kadokura. He adds “Urgent countermeasures are necessary, because it is feared that the increase will bring down potential growth rates by holding back consumption and reducing the working population” (Asahi Shimbun, October 22, 2004, cited in Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005).

Similarly, Chief Researcher Hisashi Yamada of the Japan Research Institute remarked “Since the labor force . . . is being reduced, it [the increase in the number of NEETs] will be a factor in lowering the economic growth. There is also concern that the fiscal situation will deteriorate, because young people who really should be paying social insurance contributions conversely could be placed in a position of receiving livelihood protection. Another problem is the strong possibility that such young people will become involved in social problems, such as drugs and crime” (Yomiuri [Newspaper], October 5, 2004, cited in Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005). One study gives substance to growing
social concern about freeters squandering their earning power, saying the potential income loss of middle-aged and older freeters will be 7.3 trillion yen in 2021, compared to the expected earnings of full-time workers the same age (Kan, 2005a). Thought about on an individual level, it is said that the direct financial effects show a “staggering impact difference of about 300 million yen over a lifetime, including pension benefits” (Kawano, 2005). It is estimated that freeters in their 40s and 50s will have only 1.5 million yen in disposable income per year. Freeters of all ages may give up on marrying or be unwilling to start families, pushing down the already declining number of annual births by 1 percent to 2.1 percent (Kan, 2005a). This paper believes that a precursor to taking such steps as remedying this “unstable status” of NEETs and freeters in the transition period is to ask if that status is even acceptable to young people! That is, there must be an understanding of what the perceptions of being a NEET and/or freeter are in the minds of young people. Prior to that, we review how society views these seemingly undesirable phenomena.

The Perceived Undesirables: Social Perspectives of the NEET and Freeter Phenomena

Given that there has been so much publicity regarding the NEET and freeter phenomena, and the previously described warnings of negative social and economic consequences on the country, it is not surprising that opinion surveys show a public wary of the problem, and its future on society. Results of a survey by the nation’s largest newspaper (the Yomiuri Shimbun) showed a high level of concern for the problem (90% were “concerned” about the problem). Asked why people thought the NEET problem was increasing, 54.5% said it was due to parents spoiling their children, while 50.4% said it stems from young people not having a sense of duty or responsibility and 49.8% blaming those who cannot establish “appropriate relationships with others.” As to the long term effects of the NEET phenomenon, 58% said that a sense of diligence, widely seen as part of the uniqueness of the Japanese character, could be lost if nothing is done to stem the problem (see “90% Fear Effect,” 2005). Such diligence, others have suggested, will only be regained if society rewards people who work hard (“Imagining,” 2005), as opposed to traditionally rewarding people based on seniority.

Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Nariaki Nakayama recently referred to NEETs (in March, 2005) saying they seem to be formed by the current approach taken in education, and the problem of not stressing competition enough: “We used to teach that competition is no good, but the fact is that once we start to work in society we are thrown into a fierce competition, and children get focused on the difference. Isn’t today’s education helping to produce a reserve army of NEETs and freeters in a body?” (Sankei Shimbun, March 13, 2005, cited in Foreign Press Center, 2005). An opinion column in another one of Japan’s leading newspapers, the Asahi Shimbun, suggested the problem of the “drifting youth” could lead to them to being caught up in a cult. It compared the youth with cult followers, saying they “were basically no different from any ordinary young people today who have no imminent worries to speak of and cannot find a purpose in life. Compared to 10 years ago, these purposeless young people have definitely increased in number. They are the ones trying to find direction ... or flitting from one temporary job to another, or just resigned to their NEET status” (Egawa, 2005, p. 7).

Other leading opinion makers suggested the phenomena are a type of social rebellion. Professor Emeritus Akira Takanashi of Shinsui University, a former chairman of the government’s Employment Council, commented “The NEET phenomenon is a quiet rebellion of young people against
society. If the campus struggles of the 1960s and 1970s represented a conscious form of protest, the characteristic of the NEET phenomenon is its unconscious quality." He went on, saying "Society, including industrial circles and education, bears a responsibility for the outbreak of the NEET phenomenon." While acknowledging changing employment practices on the part of companies by reducing their demand for regular employees, and instead are hiring part-time and contract workers, he said such work "does not give young people much hope for the future. It's no good just telling these NEETs not to play the baby," he added. "The most important thing is for society to change and get closer to these young people" (Asahi [Newspaper], October 8, 2004, cited in Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005).

As all of these varying perspectives show, few (if any) opinions see the NEET and freeter phenomena in a positive light. Their character and motivation is questioned, their work ethic and their desire to be a normal part of society analyzed. Grouped in with these seemingly unwelcome places in society is one more English term that has been "Japanized," that of "parasite single." Detailed later in the methodology, when asked what they perceived the NEET and freeter phenomena to be, several subjects cited "parasite" in their answers, so this well-known problem deserves a cursory review.

Parasite Singles

The concept of "parasite singles" was first heard in the United Kingdom, but became a popular expression in Japan when a book written by Yamada Masahiro (professor at Tokyo Gakugei University) titled Parasaito Shinguru no Jidai (The Age of Parasite Singles) was published in 1999. According to him, parasite singles are young people who continue living with their parents (though not necessarily playing the role of care giver), depending on them for food, clothing, and shelter while enjoying a "carefree and well-to-do lifestyle" (Yamada, 1999). This group is sometimes described by the harsh term "parasite freeter" (Kingston, 2004). Tolbert (2000) adds a unique aspect to this phenomenon, specifying that they are "happily unmarried." The parasite single phenomenon, was the "most striking feature" of the young generation, and, Yamada explained, estimated that as many as 80% of single women and 60% of single men between 20 and 34 lived with their parents (Yamada, 1999). He goes on to say that since there is an increase in the age in which people choose to get married, the percentage of "parasite singles" in Japan is only slated to go up.

Like the NEET and freeter phenomena, blaming "parasite singles" for the social and economic problems of the nation became quite popular from the early 1990s, and hasn't subsided yet. As Yamada sums up very succinctly, one connection between parasite singles and how NEETs and freeters see their lives, is that they "feel that whatever they do is not going to make any difference... so they might as well relax and enjoy themselves" (cited in Tolbert, 2000, p. A5).

Depending on whom you ask, they are good for the economy because they spend their salaries on clothes, cars and dining out, or they are destroying society by refusing to get married and have children. They are young women with no responsibilities, or they are trailblazers, trying to find a path different from their mothers. As to their possible detrimental effects on society as a whole, they will have "a major impact on Japanese society and the economy and also cast a shadow on the health of society in the future" (Yamada, 1999, p. 4). As an example of this impact, he suggests that such a lifestyle choice (and the resulting lack of offspring from remaining single) is one of the biggest reasons for Japan's declining birthrate. Negating their expected role of marriage in the traditional
Japanese sense, Tolbert (2000) says that the female parasite singles are the first significant group of women in Japan to stay single beyond their early twenties — the percentage of women in their late twenties who have not married has risen from 30 to about 50 in the last 15 years — and their opinions and lifestyle define a kind of...yuppie devoted to leisure and luxury (Tolbert, 2000, p. A1).

Yet not all scholars agree that parasite singles are a negative phenomenon, and they oppose the reasons Yamada offers for the increase in parasite singles. Yuji Genda, a social scientist at Tokyo University and noted scholar on the NEET and freeter phenomena, says such a lifestyle choice is not because of a lack of will or independence, but simply because there are fewer preferred jobs available, as well as the result of a social and economic structure geared to maintaining the jobs and wages of older workers (see "A New Class of Drifters," 2000; "Parasite Singles," 2000). Others have suggested a simpler, romantic-based reason for the increase in such people: the desire to seek their own "love marriage" instead of an omiai, or "arranged marriage" (Ito, 2003).

One well-known writer on social topics gives a woman’s point of view: "In the United States and Europe, it’s possible to pursue a career even after marriage, even after having a baby," said Tamako Sarada, but in Japan, "if after marrying, a woman then realizes there is something she wants to do, she has almost no chance to come back to it." Sarada takes issue with the label "parasite single" and its negative connotation. She thinks mothers want to let their daughters do what they themselves were unable to do. "Deep in their hearts, single women think there is something they can do and want to do," she said (Tolbert, 2000, p. A5). Is there a direct connection between parasite singles and an increase in the numbers of NEETs or freeters? Mr. Genda notes that parasite singles are not a cause of NEETs, but are the result of that phenomenon ("The Problem," 2004).

**Views from the Western World**

Of course the problems of jobless youth, and which direction they turn to cope with such a status is not unique to Japan, even if such terms as NEET and freeter are. Actually, the term NEET has been used outside of Japan and it has been pointed out in the UK that approximately 9 percent of upper teens are NEETs (Genda & Okada, 2004). In many Western countries, debt as a result of paying one’s own way through school often requires graduates to work (full- or part-time). In this regard, student debt exercises a positive force, but that is not usually the case in Japan (Kingston, 2004). But how such phenomena are viewed by different cultures deserves discussion here. Is it always a negative situation to be in?

Amy Camardese, assistant professor in education at Westminster College in Pennsylvania, noted that young workers in the United States do not share the work ethics of the baby boomers (who will soon reach retirement age). Citing a study by a Massachusetts Institute of Technology researcher, Camardese said that in the U.S. young workers’ values about work commitment differ from their parents’ — particularly over what they will put up with in their organizations and businesses, and with their superiors. "So we have a very similar problem with Japan," though she says she does not think that the changing behaviors of the younger generation must be seen in a negative light. It is possible to put the changes in the right direction, "but we have to figure out what that right direction might be," she added (cited in Kitazume, 2005).

Another western researcher said he has two nephews who might be defined as freeters if they were
living in Japan because they belong to an age bracket where people could expect them to be already established in their careers. "The older one has had a few quite significant part-time jobs — he has worked for a management consultant company in New York, worked for the Red Cross in Africa, and has perhaps come to Japan in some sort of a special program, and has gone to universities in eastern Canada, in Paris and more recently just outside of New York . . . At age 30, he is a freeter, perhaps. But he is a very well-educated young man now hoping to find a job in government in Ottawa," he added (cited in Kitazume, 2005).

As seen from a Western perspective, such phenomena are not always bad. There has long been debate over the approaches Japanese take to a "work ethic" and whether or not the personal choices that much more often drive a Westerners' choice in employment would work in Japan. Westerners are widely seen as more independent, that is driven less by "what's best for the group" than Asian cultures. While Japanese have traditionally adhered to the "transition process from education to employment," is the upward trend in young people who want a job that reflects their personal interests so bad? Due to this trend, will young Japanese find it more acceptable to be a NEET or freeter? As the above examples show, Japanese educators differ from other countries on their views of the acceptability of the phenomena. While the trends of NEETs and "freeters" are widely believed to exists in their countries, Westerners thoughts that the young generation of Japanese thinking is not totally negative may need to be heeded, or at least more understood, in Japan.

**NEETs and Freeters: Causes of Undesirable Phenomena**

As was stated earlier, freeters are said to count for one out of every 9 people aged 15-34 (Honda, 2005). With the numbers so large, it is unfair to assume a simplistic reason for this, whether it is personal character, the job market, national demographics, or a combination of all of these. If a typical young person in the process of job hunting were to glance on the internet for ideas about what to do when falling into a NEET or freeter lifestyle, they would find a variety of reasons given by young Japanese for pursuing this course, among them a conscious decision not to enter what they see as the hidebound, old-fashioned Japanese corporate world. When looking at one trend that about 30% of recent university graduates in Japan willingly stop working at their first full-time job after a short period, Kahoru Iwamatsu of the Labor Policy Bureau of the Japan Business Federation explains that many young people are confronted with the large gap between their preconceived ideas about employment and the reality at their actual jobs. Once they quit, then, only a small portion of them go on to take up other "regular" jobs. Most choose the path of the "freeter" (Kitazume, 2005).

Then again, demographic changes will clearly have an impact on young people as well as changing work ethics (Kitazume, 2005). From an economic standpoint, the most direct cause in the increase of such young people are the changes in recruiting since the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s (Honda, 2005). But this is overly simplistic. There are numerous factors that have led to the changes in jobless youth during their transition to working professionals and they must be reviewed here. The adolescent transition period itself (from education to employment) is lengthening, and this trend is occurring in many post-industrial societies (Honda, 2005). What needs to be understood is how fast the transition period is evolving in Japan. To do this, we first review what the "transitional period" means in Japanese culture, followed by some systematic changes occurring from within.
The "Transitional Period:" From Youth to Adulthood

It has been shown that the greatest concern of having an increase in NEETs and freeters is its potential negative and wide reaching impact on future social support systems, as well as the national economy as a whole. It has also been shown that most research agrees that NEETs and freeters fall within the ages of 15-34, with the highest percentage being in the 18-24 age bracket. One well-known researcher of NEETs, Reiko Kosugi, argues that the highest are 19 or 23; the ages at which young people graduated either high school or university, and have been unable to find a job and have given up looking (Yomiuri Shimbun, October 5, 2004). It is within these years that most people find themselves in the "transition period" or process of moving from education to employment.

Such a period in life-cycle theory is when people pass from adolescence to mature life (or adulthood). This transition, in all cultures, is regulated by the social system, the socio-economic structure in place in the country, as well as by culture and socially accepted practices. In the context of this transition period, Honda says that freeters “can be understood as a variant of this prolonged and disordered adolescence” (2005, p. 22). It is also believed, adds Michiko Miyamoto, a professor of family sociology, that this "transition period" is getting longer and a new stage has entered the course of young Japanese lives: “the post-adolescent” period (Miyamoto, 2005). In the context of moving from youth to adulthood, and needing employment in a culture that is committed to social welfare like Japan is, shifts in this stage of a young person’s life may help us understand the increased emergence of NEETs and freeters. Noting that such shifts were observed in developed countries from as far back as the 1980s, Miyamoto (2005) offers six aspects from which to view these changes:

a. As the number of students entering higher education increases, the perceived imbalance between cost and effects of the education increases, making it increasingly difficult to reach social consensus about scholarship.

b. The severe employment situation increases unemployment as well as forces people to remain unemployed and look for other work for longer periods of time (a trend seen much more recently in Japan than other developed countries).

c. An increase in young people who bypass the option of seeking employment while in education, or remain without work after graduation "until the right opportunity" comes along.

d. A trend in young people not beginning to focus on some specific vocational career from an early age.

e. A shift in marriage demographics: delaying marriage by remaining single longer, living with an unmarried partner, divorcing quicker, etc. (This author would add an increase in the number of "parasite singles," unmarried people who continue to live with their parents, usually within the 20-34 age group).

f. A change in attitudes towards their career. Some young people delay work in order to travel. Others will only take jobs that satisfy their personal desires.

These six items will need big changes if they are to help achieve the above-mentioned tasks of the transition period, as Miyamoto points out:

The transitional path from childhood to adulthood in the industrial age has been transformed since the 1980s from the straightforward transitional path whereby people moved step-by-step, to a more complicated zigzag one. The transitional patterns began to be personalized and diversified with greater fluidity (2005, p. 74).
With the increase in people becoming NEETs and freeters, the transformation is clearly continuing. Put even more succinctly from a Western perspective, living the status of a freeter may simply be one step in the “zig zag” approach to growing up: “They may still be looking to make best use of their graduate skills in professional jobs that are more demanding... They may just take two or three hops to find their niche” (Kingston, 2004). To sum up the importance of understanding this period, one must ask what should people achieve during this “transitional period?” Miyamoto (2005) adds there are basic expectations Japanese have regarding what they are expected to do during this “transitional period, including a) building a “foundation for a stable working life;” b) enabling themselves to be independent of their parents while creating a basis for a future independent life; c) finding acceptance within the status quo as a “wholly committed member of society and being able to fulfill the obligations” it requires; and d) finding a specific role for one’s participation is society.

Looking at these tasks, it is easy to find contradictions. If a young person willingly chooses to keep only part-time work, while living outside the parents home (and, simultaneously, not accepting any financial assistance from them), could s/he not be “independent?” Could not that “role” for participation be “self-fulfillment” via a pursuit of personal interests, hobbies or a vocation that may result in a “career” in the future? (e.g. How does one become an artist, musician or pro-sports player without endless hours of unpaid skills training and practice?). Could the shifting “post-adolescent” period help us understand why growing numbers of people find themselves labeled NEETs or freeters? What leads people to “be seemingly content with doing nothing?” (Oshima, 2005, p. 2). With this discussion of the entrenched transition period given, this paper now turns to systematic changes taking place within the transition.

The Transition to Working Professionals: Systematic Changes

This section will review three main factors that have affected the transition process of moving from education to working professional: changes in demands from the labor force; supply side problems of the labor force, and changing attitudes of young people.

Changes in Labor Force Demands

Changes in the demands on the part of the labor force includes changes in employment practices which have resulted in rising numbers of young unemployed people, decreasing numbers of full-time employees and an increase in the number of non-full time workers. The “lifetime employment” system of finding a job after high school or university graduation and keeping that same job, slowly moving up the “corporate ladder” through seniority (as opposed to merit) has been changing in recent years. Since the collapse of the bubble economy in the late 1980s, Japan’s employment situation has worsened, the unemployed hit a record high in 2004 while the increase in part-time workers has increased substantially. Looking at job offers, the number of openings offered to high school students had fallen to one-eighth from 1992 (with 1.67 jobs available) to 2003 (with only 220,000 jobs on offer). The situation wasn’t as bad for university graduates, with a decrease to only two-thirds of the highest year (Recruit Works Institute, 2002, cited in Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006). A common trend, not surprisingly, is that the lower the age and/or the academic background, the higher the percentage of completely unemployed young people. Like other industrialized countries, such a shift toward a more educated labor base has been the result of a globally expanding economic outreach, resulting in
downsizing while retaining and/or hiring new workers who are considered qualified as a result of their formal education.

The system for raising young people to become part of the “full-time employee” status quo (via in-house training) has become “unstable” (Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006). While previous generations have grown up under such a system (promotion usually based on seniority), the younger generation prefers to move up the corporate ladder based on merit. A Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper survey found that 64.2% agreed with “performance-based systems” of promotion, and this approval improved to more than 70% for people in their 20s and 30s (“90% Fear Effect,” 2005). This “new” perspective on the part of young people in the labor force prefaces other issues affecting the transition from education to adulthood: supply side problems of the labor force, and changing youth attitudes.

**Supply Side Problems of the Labor Force**

The origin of these problems comes from changes in recruitment programs on school campuses (how educational institutions support their students throughout the multi-year job hunting process). Similarly, the overall school-company method of cooperation, which has been described not just as “the creation of professional skills or encouraging motivation for employment, but the determination of the student and giving the opportunity to become ... a working professional” (Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006, p. 6) has changed. Noted above, a lower level of formal education results to limited employment chances. In past decades, Japan was often praised for its system of recruitment and employment of new graduates which kept unemployment rates of young people lower than most other industrialized countries (OECD, 2000). Traditionally the hiring companies would offer in-depth occupational skill development with the assumption that people would be employed long-term. A major benefit, besides the job itself, was that such training gave young people motivation to become part of the professional workforce. These days, however, the number of people who drop out of such a recruitment system is on the rise.

On the movement of young people to do what they want, the Japanese governments’ Department of Education summed it up clearly when they stated that young people, from the 1990s onward, were demanding more choices within the transition process from education to employment. They want options that are “more genuine” and which respect their preferences instead of being led to job offers that stem from their school record and/or employment test results. The Education Department adds that it is not only young people who have a general feeling that the education system needs to give students more opportunities to choose their own way, as well as more channels in which to develop their own individuality (cited in OECD, March, 2000, p. 16). The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) noted back in the late 1990s an increase in students at Japanese high schools who do not participate in the formal, “institutionalized” job recruitment process. Rather, they prefer to willingly accept temporary or part-time jobs (i.e. being freeters). These same young people also said it was acceptable to not work at all if they are unable to find their first choice of job (OECD, March, 2000).

A survey of high school students conducted in Tokyo a few years back (cited in Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006, p. 5) studied the process of high school students going through the job recruiting process during their senior year in school, and the resulting freeters who did not find work they desired. Of these subjects, almost half who became self-described freeters had ambitions for full-time
work but quit searching during some stage in their job-hunting. When asked why they choose this path, popular answers included "I don’t know what work would be suitable for me" (38.3%) and "I want to do other things," (33.8%) both responses indicative of the persons self-fulfillment at work. A multiple-answer format showed different trends. Subjects replied that being a freeter was good because it gave them "more free time" than for full-time employees (42.8%) and they "want income now" (43.1%). The same subjects who gave these two answers also tended to reply (based on factor analysis) that they could experience "more comfortable human relationships than for full-time employees" and they believed they could "change jobs more easily than full-time employees."

In all fairness, the fewer job opportunities offered to senior-high school students (as opposed to college graduates) is a significant factor in the increase of freeters as is the employment placement system each high school utilizes. But the aim of this paper is not to learn how to increase job opportunities for young people, but rather why the options of becoming self-described freeters is widely accepted. As the authors of the high school survey sum up, one way to see the freeter "mentality" from such results is that young people want an easy income while experiencing as much personal freedom and comfort as they can. Critiquing such goals on the part of the subjects, the paper concludes that such "freedom and comfort is an orientation for avoiding roles and responsibilities as constituent members of society. Not being able to raise the sense of belonging to society is a significant problem for our society" (Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006, p. 5). Having looked at both the changes in labor force demands as well as supply side problems on the part of labor, let’s turn inward. Just as the nature of work and employment practices in Japan has changed, the nature of young people has changed. Understanding this changing nature of today’s youth is the next topic of this paper.

**Changing Attitudes and Work Ethics of Young People**

Given these evolving employment practices, the continuing faltering economy and job market, one could wonder what would keep young people from taking advantage of the opportunities available in the form of recruitment systems offered at their educational institutions as much as before? Is not any help better than no help? What in the current generation has led youth to believe that being a NEET and/or freeter is an acceptable option after graduation? It is doubtful that economists, sociologists let alone educators and job recruiters would find the merits of full-time employment less than the demerits of not working full-time. If one works only part-time, economic self-reliance is limited by a smaller income, vocational skills are not developed (part-timers usually end up performing menial, repetitive and temporary tasks); future career prospects are vastly reduced, with the possible exception of, after many years, moving into a low-level management position. Also, how would one establish his/her position in society? Psychological problems may stem from the lack of security at an age where society demands that people know their “place” in society. But young people, it could be argued, accept these facets of being freeters. They find a certain amount of freedom, possibly rebellious, in the idea of not getting “stuck” in a job that they may have to keep for the next 20 or more years. Can such demerits of not working full-time be resolved by being a freeter? The government argues the clear answer is no. But there has been an increase in people who intend to realize or try personal “things I want to do” (Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006, p. 7).

An increasing number of young people are also less motivated and actually have negative attitudes
NEETs, "Freeters" & Social Loafers: Impressions of Japan’s Perceived Undesirables

It is generally believed that young Japanese still value the role of employees as a social duty and familial responsibility. From the early to mid-1990s, however, they have begun questioning the aspects of employment attributed to their parents generation: the “workaholic” values, and the “lifetime employment” system that generally requires strict loyalty to one’s employer, and upward mobility in the organization through seniority rather than merit (like Western organizations). Noted earlier, students at Japanese high schools are using recruitment services less. Such a drive to be more individual, relying less on the traditional “school — job recruitment — immediate employment after graduation” cycle is increasing as young people desire more “non-regular” work or self-employment (OECD, March, 2000).

This is a view that young people are leaning on a more individualistic lifestyle than their parents. In a forum on the subject of freeters in different countries, Henry Lewis, an education administrator from Canada, notes that “we have to admit that we have created an economy and a society which gives people and consumers many choices, and if our young people wish to make the most use of the choices, maybe that’s something that we cannot easily criticize them for . . . So I think what we are looking at now is a younger generation who are allowing themselves a wider choice of lifestyles. And perhaps they are looking at the fact there is more to life than a working career. Many might be looking at the sort of life that their parents lived and thinking, ‘well, that worked well for Mom and Dad, but perhaps that’s not exactly the path that I need to follow’” (Kitazume, 2005). Are the new attitudes of Japanese youth following the same trend? A look at their work ethics will conclude this discussion of changing youth.

Once seen virtually the world over as the epitome of a high work ethic, some researchers say even this feature of the Japanese psyche is changing. Kahoru Iwamatsu of the Labor Policy Bureau of the Japan Business Federation cited what she described as the weakening work ethics of young people, which she attributed to insufficient career education, the declining function of communities as educators, and overprotection and excessive meddling by parents in their children’s lives. It is widely known that education in Japan has long focused on preparing students to enter prestigious universities that automatically promised good jobs, but, she argues, not much effort has been made to foster young people’s views about work, what jobs they should aspire to in the future or what kind of life they want to lead, as opposed to what parents or educators tell them (cited in Kitazume, 2005).

Noted previously, Japanese companies generally manage their personnel according to the year in which employees were hired. Under this seniority system, younger employees can find it difficult to implement their new ideas or approaches. An employee may have to wait 10 to 20 years to reach a position of authority, regardless of ability. However, notes Kosugi (2003 & 2004) freeters lie outside this corporate society, and can gain a variety of experiences. Some freeters start their own businesses, and others have put their talent to work in manga comics and games — choices they made themselves. But examples like these are still in the minority. Most freeters are conscious of the fact that being a freeter pays less, and that one can only be a freeter for so many years. The majority of people working as freeters would actually prefer to become regular, full-time employees. So do they see it as an acceptable lifestyle only during the transition years? A westerner may add another more independent-based reason for choosing a freeter lifestyle. It could be that younger workers want more immediate recognition and rewards than their predecessors. In a discussion forum on the NEET and freeter problem across cultures, one American professor of education said “They want more autonomy
when it comes to job choices, they want fewer rules that stifle their individuality of expression.” Such young people are also “concerned about lifestyle issues . . . [and] are not inclined to accept authority, [they] often question why they are being asked to do what they are asked to do” (Kitazume 2005).

As much of the previous analysis has shown such phenomena have been perceived in a highly negative way. Similarly there is another type of problem that is seen as problematic in Western societies: social loafing (or free riding). A group-level phenomenon of individuals in group situations putting less energy or effort into a group than they normally would, this was added to this survey in order to find out what extent the problem is known in Japan. Successful Asian countries must wage war against the “loafing culture,” states Akihiko Tanaka, Associate Professor of International Politics at the Institute of Oriental Culture at Tokyo University (Kathirasen 1993). He adds that encouraging young Asians to work hard (both in and out of academia) in the new, economically successful Asian countries is far from easy. “There is no incentive to compel the young to strive hard,” he adds (Kathirasen, 1993). Also, such a problem, with the rise of NEETs and freeters as part of the social dialogue, has not decreased. The next part of this paper briefly summarizes the social loafing and free riding phenomena (for a more extensive and detailed analyses of loafing in both Japan and Malaysia, see Chapman & Davis, 1999, and Davis, Chapman, & Jaffar, 2000).

Social Loafers & Free-Riders: The Concepts

“Social loafing” is the phenomenon of individuals in group situations doing less work, participating to a lesser degree, putting less energy or effort into the group project than they would if they did the work alone (Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979). Social loafing is a common occurrence in many different situations from tasks requiring cognitive effort (e.g. brainstorming), to work involving physical effort or labor (e.g. see Latané & Darley, 1966, for a study on why people who witness an emergency fail to help others in distress). The term “social loafing” is relatively new, evolving as recently as 1979 (see Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979), but research in this area goes back nearly 100 years. Social loafing is a group-level phenomenon, it cannot occur at the individual level (at the individual level, it is known as “procrastination,” “laziness,” or a similar term). It deals with the reduction or increase of the energy level, or effort, put into the group project by each individual in the group.

Related to social loafing is the concept of “free riding” (Marwell & Ames, 1979, 1980), a specific area of research within the category of social loafing literature which addresses the problem of individual group members trying to gain the benefits of group work. Specifically, free riding describes an individual, usually one who has less investment in the outcome of the group task, who abstains from using much energy on the group task, thereby getting a “free ride” off the energy of fellow group members. A related phenomenon is the “sucker effect”, where one person in the group does the majority of the work rather than receiving the low group evaluation. Because it deals with reductions or increases in individual energy expenditure within group tasks, social loafing, the group level phenomenon closely tied to motivation levels of group members toward accomplishing the task, subsumes both the “free rider” and the “sucker effect.” (cf. Davis & Chapman, 2003; Chapman & Davis, 2002; Chapman & Davis, 1999; Davis, Chapman, & Jaffar, 2000).

In Japanese society, social loafing is known, effectively, by three terms. One is “putaro,” (プータロー) or a person who is considered lazy; one who wastes time; one who “hangs around” doing nothing in
particular; one who expels minimal energy in a given situation; and often refers to an unemployed person. Similarly, "putaro suru" (プタローをする) is the verb form, meaning being lazy, loafing, or generally doing little in the given situation ("suru" is a verb similar to "do" in English and applies to numerous actions). Another term that displays "loafing" from the Japanese perspective is "fura fura suru" (フラフラする). "Fura fura" translates as "doing something with no purpose." When describing a person, the term "fura fura shiteiru hito" (フラフラしている人) is used ("hito" means person in Japanese) to describe someone who tries to do nothing, or as little as possible in any given situation. That person tends to "goof off" in order to avoid having any personal responsibility on a given task. (Students who this researcher discussed the concept with commonly noted that they use it to refer to another student who comes to school out of necessity, but actually puts out zero energy. The student simply shows up in class, says nothing, and he/she may be assigned to a group project but offers no active participation). In short, this type of person will not participate in a task, but simultaneously does not expect any sort of reward from the task either. That type of person would be labeled by another term widely recognized in Japan: "binjo suru hito."

"Binjo suru hito" (便乗する人) is roughly translated as "free rider" and the English expression itself is sometimes used by Japanese speakers (thus its inclusion in this present study). This is a person who gets a "free ride" from others; one who uses other people and their ideas so he/she doesn't require any active thought or participation of his/her own. Important to this definition, however, is the fact that the person attempts to get credit for others work or ideas. The verb form of this term is "binjo suru" meaning to use others, get a free ride, etc. The term applies in situations requiring cognitive effort (e.g. group projects, business projects with co-workers, brainstorming ideas, etc.), as well as situations requiring physical effort (e.g. going from place A to place B at another's physical or financial expense) (Davis & Chapman, 2003; Chapman & Davis, 2002; Chapman & Davis, 1999; Davis, Chapman, & Jaffar, 2000).

Social Loafing: Prevalence & Causes

As stated above, the definition of social loafing indicates it is a group-level phenomenon which deals with the reduction or increase of the energy level, or effort, put into the group project by each of the group's individuals. Social loafing subsumes both the "free rider" (and "sucker effects") because it deals with reductions or increases in individual energy expenditure within group tasks, and it is common across many different types of tasks. Previous studies in this area have been done on groups doing a physical task (Ingham, Levinger, Graves, & Peckham, 1974), shouting (Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979), and pumping air (Kerr & Bruun, 1981). In these studies, participants were usually tested individually, then grouped together with other participants in the experiment, and tested again, collectively, as a group. Group dynamics, theoretically, suggests that any group effort should be close to the sum of all the individual efforts combined. Known as "synergy," this idea that the result of the group work would be greater than the sum of all the individual efforts has long been a central characteristic in group theory research. In reality, however, social loafing is a much more common experience for groups, and is more commonly reported as symptomatic of group work. In short, social loafing research empirically establishes that when the individual efforts of all group members are combined, it is greater than the sum of the collective group effort, which is opposite the notion of "synergy" so prevalent across group research (as detailed in Davis & Chapman, 2003; Chapman &
While loafing may be more easily recognized within groups involving physical activity, studies also show the size of the group may affect participation. People may be less likely to help others when alone than when in a group. Latané & Darley (1966) found that people are less likely to help people in emergencies when they are alone than when they are in a group. Wicker (1969) found that members in a religious group are likely to participate less when the size of the religious group increases. Social loafing, however, is also prevalent in tasks requiring cognitive effort (e.g. brainstorming; see George, 1992; Harkins & Petty, 1982). Efforts to discover the cause of loafing goes back as far as the late nineteenth century (Triplett, 1898) and the better known study by Ringlemann (1913). This has included work in church groups (noted above, Wicker, 1969) and a study on shouting (Williams, Harkins, & Latané, 1981) which found that, in short, people loafed because they could not be discovered in the pooled efforts of the group. The effects of such individual efforts were furthered when it was found that when participants' individual efforts were identifiable, they generated more uses than when their efforts were pooled (see Harkins & Jackson, 1985). This occurred, however, only when the participants believed their work would be compared to others (i.e. co-workers) so that some sort of "check" was necessary to measure the output of each individual (Harkins & Szymanski, 1988; Szymanski & Harkins, 1987).

While the previously mentioned study by Williams, et al (1981) concluded that identifiability of an individual's output is an important factor in preventing social loafing, Brickner, Harkins, and Ostrom (1986) found that participants did not loaf whether the group's output was pooled or not, but when they believed they would be personally affected by the group's outcome. Consistent with previous research, however, was the finding that when personal involvement was not a factor, participants did loaf unless they were identifiable. Another approach to the causes of social loafing came from Steiner (1966), who identified two possible causes of the group effect of social loafing (negative "non-summativity"): coordination loss and motivation loss. Motivation loss is more closely tied to, if not actually another name for, social loafing. Beyond this, other factors facilitating motivation loss include: a) lack of investment in task outcome, b) lack of interest in task, c) non-identifiability of individual output (i.e., all rewards for accomplishment given out at group-level only), d) lack of exertion comparability with other group members (i.e., non-competitive or comparative situation), and e) dispensability of effort (i.e., not necessary for group achievement). Kerr (1983) provides a succinct psychological definition: "an inverse relationship between group size and member motivation" (p. 819).

In an academic context, social loafing is commonly observed in situations with group rewards and lack of individual accountability (Comer, 1995), and the presence of social loafers, or free-riders, is often a source of conflict in student groups (Strong & Anderson, 1990; Bacon, Stewart, & Silver, 1999). North, Linley and Hargreaves (2000) studied loafing in a co-operative classroom task and found that social loafing existed in a collaborative educational task and that students working in smaller groups were more productive than those in larger groups (something which was found in previous literature in a business context). Previous work by the authors on social loafing and free-riding also focused on academia and found that loafing in college groups is a well-known and common phenomenon that crosses national boundaries (surveys were done in the Japan, the U.S. and Malaysia). Within academic groups, most people did little to compensate for the loafing problem in their group, and the majority of students believed their instructors did little, if any thing, to stop it (Chapman & Davis, 1999; Davis,
Chapman, & Jaffar, 2000). Other work focusing on the instructor’s perspective showed that the vast majority of instructors (in both Japan and the U.S.) are aware of the concepts of social loafing and free-riding, yet they should be more aware of techniques to curb loafing. Across cultures, the same work found that Japanese instructors tend to take a less active role in curbing loafing than do American instructors in the classroom (Chapman & Davis, 2002; Davis & Chapman, 2003). In short, social loafing phenomena exist across several situations and types of groups (business, academic, social, etc.) and can be considered pervasive phenomena. Social loafing phenomena appear to be facilitated by situations where individual contributions are not identifiable nor indispensable, where no meter or standard exists for evaluating an individual’s contribution, and where the overall group goal has little or no intrinsic value to the individual member.

Up to now, this paper has reviewed the NEET and freeter concepts, the characteristics that make up people who fall into those lifestyles, what trends may have a hand in causing the increase in these situations, and the impact they (may) have on society. It then detailed the system under which most youth make the “transition to working professionals” including both systemic changes and changes from within. It also reviewed a similarly negative phenomena known as social loafing, research which includes the “free-rider” concept. Noted earlier, adding the social loafing/free-rider phenomena to this survey was driven by a desire to further check Japanese awareness of the problem (cf. Chapman & Davis, 1999). The main focus is on NEETs and freeters, but it could be said that in all of these concepts, one theme is underlying: motivation. NEETs are seen in many negative ways, such as young people who struggle in the transition period to work, who may not have enough desire to work, are lacking in social networks, may be “disenfranchised,” those who may have lost touch with society or suffer from social withdrawal. Freeters are seen as “job hoppers” for a variety of reasons, some based on motivation (they are “dream-pursuers”) while others have no choice but to work part-time until they find full-time employment. They have been accused of “tarrying” due to their desire for “freedom and ease” (see Kingston, 2004). Is a lack of motivation keeping them from getting a full-time job, or are they content with their part-time status? Freeters have also been called “atypical” workers because of their seemingly lack of commitment (again, a question of motivation?) to a full-time job. In all of these “situations” or character traits, a higher level of motivation may stem the problem. The authors make no direct claim, but only note that an increase in personal motivation may help a student “find his/her way” in society. After all, it was noted that freeters, in their push to not be the stereotypical “salaryman” of Japan could be seen by some as “the pioneers of future society” (Honda, 2005), so in that case a motivation to not follow the status quo would justify motivation for different reasons. Like NEETs and freeters, motivation is a factor in social loafing as well. In fact, it is closely tied to motivation levels of group members toward accomplishment of a group task (cf. Steiner, 1966). In virtually any social circumstance, doesn’t the higher motivation one has to accomplish a goal lead to a greater chance of accomplishment? Couldn’t the same be said of NEETs and freeters? If they were motivated enough, they could pull themselves out of those lifestyles if they wanted to. But to be that simplistic is to assume that they in fact don’t want to lead a NEET or freeter lifestyle. That is a big if, and it is central to this paper’s focus: how do young people see the NEET and freeter phenomena?
Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to learn how acceptable university students in Japan believe the NEET, freeter and social loafing/free-rider phenomena to be, including what types of people lead those lives, as well as what they see as causes of and solutions to the phenomena. Since this “life style” predominantly occurs in youth, this research focused on the impressions of university students, the future of the country. We first gauge awareness of the problem, by asking:

RQ 1: How aware are Japanese students of the NEET, freeter and social loafing/free-rider phenomena and how widespread do they believe it is?

As the future of the country, if the youth show high levels of acceptability for such phenomena, the future of the country as a whole would seem bleak. Although slowly changing, the patriarchal view that men in Japan should be the breadwinners, supporting his family, or, if unmarried, at least support himself without (too much) parental assistance is expected from the early 20s. Are men who do not fulfill those responsibilities more likely to be viewed as NEETs or freeters? Are they more likely to be accepted in such a role? Also, it was noted that the current generation of freeters have been seen as rebellious and setting a trend for the future as they search for jobs of their choosing. Similarly, if there are positive acceptance levels, what does that say of the personal drive, enthusiasm and work ethic of the current generation of students? In search of answers to these type of questions, we ask:

RQ 2: How acceptable do Japanese students believe these phenomena to be in society?

Next, it is widely believed that most people who are labeled a NEET or freeter are young, single and may or may not have completed formal education. But what traits do they show? Are more men falling into this situation than women? When discussing the characteristics of NEETs, it was said that a lack of confidence in developing good relationships with other people was a factor in a person becoming a NEET. This may be one of many characteristics that define what type of person falls into a NEET lifestyle: introverted, lacking in communication skills and being part of a limited or isolated social network. Are these traits how society views NEETs? Freeters were seen as “dream pursuers” and lacking commitment. Similarly, what traits are thought to represent NEETs? Laziness? A lack of motivation? To learn about the “type” of person who falls prey to a NEET or freeter lifestyle, we ask:

RQ 3: What type of person do Japanese students perceive to be a NEET, freeter and social loafer/free-rider (e.g. character traits, age, etc.)?

Lastly, numerous sources from the government to social scientists to the mass media have voiced their concerns over the possible negative impacts young people living a NEET or freeter lifestyle will have on the country in the future. This includes changing demographics and employment practices in Japan, an evolving transition process from education to employment, including how graduates are recruited, and changing attitudes of young people toward work. An equally large number of sources have suggested remedies for the phenomena (see below). To learn what is in the minds of youth, we asked:

RQ 4: Who do Japanese students believe to be responsible both for causing as well as curbing the NEET, freeter and social loafing/free-rider phenomena?
Methodology

Data from Japanese subjects was collected from 184 undergraduates at one small, private university and one mid-sized public university in Western Japan. The survey, written in Japanese, had been translated, and cross-translated from the English version by three native Japanese speakers, all fluent in the English language. The survey consisted of a series of 46 questions about NEETs, freeters and social loafers/free-riders. The surveys were distributed in the student's classroom, and the data was collected in July and August, 2005. All student responses were anonymous. The mean age of the participants was 19.28 years old, with a range from 18 to 64. 97.8% of all participants were 21 years old or younger. As to the gender of participants, there were 57 males (31.5% of those who indicated gender) versus 124 females (or 68.5%; 3 subjects declined to indicate gender).

Results

Research question one asked how aware subjects are of and how widespread they believe the NEET, freeter and free-rider/loafer phenomena to be. Results showed that 74.5% (or 137 subjects) said they had heard the term NEET, 98.4% (181 subjects) said they had heard the term “freeter,” but only 4.3% (8 subjects) had heard the term “free-rider/social loafer.” It is not surprising that such a low percentage has heard of free-riders/social loafers, given that the English terms were used in this research. Those who said “yes” in all three phenomena were then asked to write-in what they thought each term means (though it should be noted that not all of those who said “yes” gave write-in explanations.) Describing NEETs, the single largest explanation given was people who are “not in education, training and have no job” (the most widely understood and almost literal definition of NEETs). This description was followed by the slightly different idea that NEETs are “young people who don’t work, can work but don’t want to and “kill time” at home;” they “have no enthusiasm for education, no goals, and (currently) no work;” and they are “parasites.” When describing freeters, the top descriptions subjects wrote are that they “are young with no full-time job, only part-time work; have no “one” job, no full-time work, they “job hop;” and they only “survive” day by day with part-time work.” Essentially, subjects had a fairly clear understanding of what being a freeter means in Japanese society. (For a full list of all write-in responses, see the Appendix).

When asked how common each of the phenomena are seen, (where 5 = Very Uncommon / 1 = Very Common), NEETs were seen only as slightly leaning toward “somewhat” uncommon (mean = 3.50), while freeters are “somewhat” common (mean = 2.35) and the seemingly unknown free-riders are neither (mean = 3.05). Given that this survey asked university students for their opinion, it would seem that students can’t be NEETs (by definition) since they are in school, and the more common status of freeters stems from the fact that many (if not most) students have a part-time job during their university life, and changing that part-time job frequently may be viewed as relatively normal. It was surprising to the authors, however, that both well-known phenomena were not viewed as much more common. Asked if they thought these phenomena are either decreasing or increasing (where 5 = Rapidly Increasing; 1 = Rapidly Decreasing), NEETs and freeters were both seen as “somewhat” increasing (NEET mean = 4.27; freeter mean = 4.04), while free-riders/loafers were only leaning toward “somewhat” increasing (mean = 3.76). Given that few people know about the phenomena of
free-riders (4.3%), it is difficult to gauge which way an “unknown” phenomena may be headed (a thought repeated in discussions below).

Described earlier, the current generation of freeters have been seen as rebellious and setting a trend for the future as they search for jobs of their choosing. If there are high acceptance levels for freeters (or NEETs), what does that say of the personal drive, enthusiasm and work ethic of the current generation of students? Research question two asked how acceptable Japanese believe these phenomena to be in society. Subjects’ answers, although in the direction most social opinions would predict, were not nearly as strong as the authors (and some academics) thought. NEETs were seen as the worst of the three at “somewhat negative” (mean = 3.98; on a scale where 5 = Very negative and 1 = Very positive) while freeters were seen as almost neutral (or barely “somewhat” negative with a mean of 3.19); and free-riders were only slightly more negative than freeters (“somewhat” negative; mean = 3.39). Whereas the status of a NEET is doing literally nothing in education or work-related tasks, its higher negative perception is not surprising. But more importantly, do these relatively low “negative” numbers indicate that NEETs are somewhat acceptable? Does a neutral acceptance level mean freeters can be seen as both acceptable or unacceptable based on one’s circumstances (such as age)?

The next results help answer that question.

As a further measure of “acceptability,” subjects were asked how acceptable it was to be labeled a NEET, freeter or social loafer/free-rider at various ages in life. Results show a strong age trend among subjects’ replies. There is a heightened sensitivity to the labels for younger and older people, but much less sensitivity in middle-age ranges. That is, it seems more acceptable to be a NEET or freeter (or free-loader) from 17-25 (and for freeters, up to 30) than later in life (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>NEET (mean)</th>
<th>Freeter (mean)</th>
<th>Free-rider/Loafer (mean)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 16 years old</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-19 years old</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-22 years old</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-25 years old</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>2.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30 years old</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35 years old</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40 years old</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 40 years old</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>4.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 = Totally Unacceptable
1 = Totally Acceptable

To learn about the “type” of person who falls prey to a NEET or freeter lifestyle, we asked research question three: what type of person do Japanese students perceive to be a NEET, freeter and social loafing/free-rider (e.g. character traits, age, etc.)? Subjects gave answers similar to widely accepted descriptions of NEETs and freeters, saying that the 17-25 year-old range accounted for 86.2% of all perceived NEETs, while freeters had a slightly wider age range: the 17-30 year old range accounted for 98.9% of all perceived freeters. We then asked what character traits the three phenomena were thought to have. To do this, we offered a brief list of character traits that are widely viewed as either “positive” or “negative” by mainstream society (e.g. motivated vs. unmotivated). When asked what
traits NEETs, freeters and free-riders/loafers exert, NEETs clearly have a reputation worse than that of either freeters or free-riders. They were much more "lazy, unmotivated and reliant on others" than were other phenomena. Not one single character trait most people would view as "positive" was registered for any of the three phenomena (see Table 2). (As with previous data regarding the free-rider/social loafer phenomena, the fact that only 4.3% of subjects know the term suggest they are unable to judge the character of that type of person, thus the "neutral" answers for that phenomena).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>——</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>△ = Free-Riders/Loafers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In my opinion, (NEETs; Freeters; Free-riders/Loafers) are:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hard-working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>motivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-reliant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open-minded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reliable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unreliable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unmotivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disorganized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reliant on others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dogmatic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the last research question, we asked a two-part question. The first part asked participants who they believe to be responsible for causing the NEET, freeter and social loafing/free-rider phenomena. By far, subjects stated that the individual was most to blame for causing the phenomena (where 1 = very responsible and 5 = not at all responsible, the NEET mean = 1.51; the freeter mean = 1.65), though less so for social loafers/free-riders, (mean = 2.18). While all factors took some blame for the phenomena, (as seen by means which were all below 3.0 = neither), except for schools/universities in the case of social loafers/free-riders (mean = 3.07), none were particularly strong. The only factors that could be seen as having slightly more responsibility for causing NEETs were families (mean = 2.19) and for freeters, employers/companies (mean = 2.06). The individual was clearly held most responsible, though less so for social loafers/free-riders (see Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who has the most responsibility for causing the NEET, freeter and free-rider/loafer situation? (1 = Very responsible, 5 = Not at all responsible)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEETs (mean)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Local / City Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers / Companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools &amp; Universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The media (through publicizing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The individual person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The second part of research question four asked participants who they believe is responsible for curbing the NEET, freeter and social loafing/free-rider phenomena. This could further be split into two sub-questions, the first of which is addressed here: who should help? Similar to the previous results for who is causing the problems, the individual person was clearly thought to be in the best position to help (whereas 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree, for NEETs, the mean = 1.56; for freeters, the mean = 1.67.) with the next most common reply being no one [should help]. It's a personal situation. But it should be noted that subjects agreed that all other factors were seen as being somewhat responsible for helping NEETs, as seen by means which were all below 3.0 (no answers indicated subjects disagreement with who should help) (see Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who do you think should help NEETs, freeters and free-riders/loafers? (1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The National Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Local / City Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers / Companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools &amp; Universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The individual person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one. It's a personal situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The last part of research question four asked who is currently doing enough to help NEETs, freeters and social loafers/free-riders. Subjects suggested it was up to the government to do more, that both the national and local governments were not doing enough to help (where 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree; National / Local Government means for NEETs = 3.76 / 3.74 and National / Local government means for freeters = 3.52 / 3.47). The numbers were not significant in any of the answers, but the next factor seen as not helping were employers and companies (NEET mean = 3.66; freeter mean = 3.32). Similar to previous results, all factors were seen as somehow not doing enough to help NEETs and freeters (all means were above 3.0, except for families in the case of freeters). In short, it seems that subjects would like to see all resources used a bit more in overcoming the NEET, freeter and social loafing/free-rider phenomena. See Table 5.
TABLE 5

In my opinion, I think the following groups are currently doing enough to help
NEETs, freeters and free-riders/loafers. (1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NEETs (mean)</th>
<th>Freeters (mean)</th>
<th>Free-Riders/Loafers (mean)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The National Government</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Local / City Government</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers / Companies</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools &amp; Universities</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The media</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The individual person</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The above results showed that while the vast majority of subjects know of the NEET and freeter phenomena, not all see them as entirely negative. In fact, in terms of how acceptable such a status is seen by university students in Japanese society today, freeters are basically "neutral." When broken down by age, NEETs and freeters were seen as being more unacceptable in both younger age groups (under 16) well as older age brackets (31-40+ years old) than they were in between. Yet freeters were both more acceptable in general, as well as much more acceptable within the ages 17-22 than were NEETs. Given that freeters by definition are "job hoppers," subjects seem to say that such a lifestyle was more preferable than someone doing nothing at all (NEET). It was even more acceptable to be a freeter (compared to a NEET) up to age 30!

When looking more closely at perceived character traits of NEETs, freeters and free-riders, none of the phenomena received any marks for traits viewed positively is most societies (i.e. motivated, self-reliant, etc.). In fact, at the risk of simplifying such characteristics, there was a larger trend for NEETs (and slightly so for freeters) to be dependent overall on other support systems (i.e. family or friends). When looking at the six character traits and how NEETs and freeters may or may not be seen as manifesting such traits, in all six NEETs were seen in a more negative light than were freeters. Why is this so? NEETs, by definition, are "doing nothing" but does that imply that their personalities are to blame? It was noted earlier that NEETs are generally seen as more introverted and having a lesser ability to build relationships. They had even been classified as one of four types: the antisocial and hedonistic type; the withdrawn type, the paralyzed type; and the disenchanted type (see Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005). Some researchers also viewed NEETs as having problems with social networks. NEETs of age 25 and older are more socially withdrawn and this is more often seen in men due to the pressure society puts on them to work, and NEETs usually have poor communication skills (ESRI, 2005). Horie (2004) adds that one outstanding feature of NEETs is "their isolation from other people, that is, their poor social networks" (p. 27). She adds emphasis on this isolation, arguing that young people are becoming NEETs because they lack confidence when it comes to having good
relationships with other people. Taking into consideration the effects of personalities and what type tends to fall into the NEET or freeter lifestyle also requires a look at the social networks within which these young people live. Such networks have a significant impact on the ability of young people to find employment.

Previous research had found that a large percentage of freeters who did succeed in finding jobs as regular (full-time) employees did so after relying on connections with their friends and relatives (Japan Institute of Labor, cited in Hori, 2004). This suggests that people's social networks play a big role in moving from education to work (or from part-time to full-time work). So does this mean that a more "introverted" character trait is indicative of people who become a NEET (or freeter)? Research suggests the types of "social networks" that tend to define NEETs: a) an "isolated social network" which was found in cases where those young people who have little contact with other people, yet have high educational backgrounds; b) a "limited social network", seen in cases where young people were "content" with their close ties in a local community; and c) an "expanding social network," which was observed among people who were active in their attempts to expand their relationships (Hori, 2004).

Among these three types of networks, the vast majority of NEETs fell into either a "limited social network" or an "isolated social network." It was further noted that the "limited social network," while giving people a greater sense of emotional support, also constrained their activity (Hori, 2004). People in a "limited" network were seen to "follow the crowd" when making decisions (checking whether "everyone else is doing it"), and relying on others' influence as opposed to making decisions alone. In short, it is suggested that a closer social network of people to help find one's place in the "job world" increases the chances of finding a suitable position. That is, the more extroverted, social and self-reliant person would have a better chance of employment s/he desires, thus not falling into a NEET lifestyle or, after having fallen into it, at least getting out of it quicker.

Related to the concept of social loafing and free-riding, the authors suggest a possible link to the personal history of someone who finds themselves in the "status" of a NEET or freeter. As noted, a stronger social network led people to have more success at making the transition to work. Those with a "limited social network" or an "isolated social network" had more problems. By definition, social loafers are people who "loaf" off of others when engaged in some type of group effort. One of the effects of being a loafer is that they are often seen as unwelcome within a group due to their minimal input and effort. They are getting a "free ride" off of the efforts of others, exerting minimal energy and thus, minimal reciprocity toward the other members of the group. The authors of this paper suggest that previous experiences as a member of social groups (whether it be in education, sports, a working group in a place of employment, or even the family unit) may have "turned off" other people to the person. That is, the person (now living the life of a NEET or freeter) may have had such negative experiences in previous social groups, and made such minimal efforts that loafing and free-riding somehow had an impact on his/her ability to form "successful" social networks. Other group members of the networks may have weakened their connections to these people as a result of these people not pulling their weight on tasks, not contributing much to projects or relationships, etc. An "isolated social network" is found in cases where young people have little contact with other people (Hori, 2004). Previous "rejection" from groups due to loafing or free-riding off the efforts of others could be an underlying cause of these isolated networks.

To offer a simple clarification, one should think about being in a social relationship with a "taker."
That is, someone who just takes and never seems to provide others in a relationship with things they need from the relationship? How about working with a co-worker who never seems to provide much value to group projects, never comes up with ideas, etc. If so, what would most people do over time, in terms of their social network and relationship with that person? They would likely invest less time and energy into maintaining that relationship. Networks are simply social relationship webs reinforced or weakened by the maintenance and development, or lack thereof, of interpersonal connections. When people have invested mutual energies to maintain a relationship, certain opportunities arise from and exist because of maintaining this relationship. For example, if two people can work together, provide not only support but opportunities for personal and professional growth and development, it is a successful "network." Subjects in this paper found most responsibility for the NEET and freeter problem lies with the individual. In short, they seemed to recognize the value of a "successful network" in the sense that they believed that individuals have a responsibility for their situations as becoming NEETs and freeters. As such, the energy social loafers "take" from others eventually "costs" them opportunities and the kinds of professional growth that makes them more productive members of society.

Although not statistically significant, freeters were seen as slightly more acceptable than were NEETs. We suggest this is simply because freeters are likely to be working part-time jobs, and changing such part-time work is increasingly common, if not respected. One popular characteristic of freeters is the desire to accept full-time work in one company only when they find what they want. That is, they find their individual choice of work more important than simply accepting a job based on what society (or their family and peers) demand of them. Freeters have also been described as "latent objectors to the mainstream structure of Japanese society..." with not a small number refusing the life of the "company-man" (Honda, 2005, p. 6). Such a conscientious choice has led them to become a negative symbol of mainstream Japanese society, yet at the same time as the pioneers of future society. Yet results here would suggest that being a freeter as old as 30 is relatively acceptable. Is the "negative symbol" of a freeter a label assigned to them by the very "recruitment system" in Japan that many have suggested is in need of overhauling? The authors believe so and have described some ideas and solutions to deal with helping young people find work suitable to them (see "countermeasures" below). Freeters, at least from a Western perspective, were also seen as young "dream-pursuers," since it is precisely during one's youth that people are expected to find their way, via education as well as different types of work experience (A New Class of Drifters, 2000).

With the results of this survey given, it seems that being a freeter (and NEET, though less so) is not the worst thing to be for young adults. As a society, however, this paper has shown that most academics, government officials and a not so small number of sources in mass media don't see the phenomena as something to be taken lightheartedly. They have ideas to counter the situation. Thus, this paper concludes with a review of some of the most popular countermeasures that have been proposed for dealing with and reducing the increasingly problematic phenomena of NEETs, freeters and, lastly, free-riders/social loafers.

Countermeasures & Solutions: Overcoming the NEET & Freeter Phenomena

There has been no shortage of ideas given to stop or at least reduce the increasing number of NEETs and freeters. These range from personal efforts (see "Helping Youth," 2005; and "Former
Teacher," 2005) to the opening of centers by local nonprofit organizations where the plan is to help NEETs and freeters readjust to “regular working hours, gain work experience and revive interest in work” (see “Experiences,” 2005). One vocational school produced a booklet hoping to dissuade students “make [the] increasingly popular lifestyle choices” of becoming a NEET or freeter (Kawano, 2005). There are also highly structured government programs comprised of training and counseling services to resolve similar problems (see Kan, 2005b), as well government moves to create “cram schools” (called “schools of independence for youngsters”) to handle the NEET issue (see “Erosion of Middle-Class,” 2005). Equally indispensable is setting up a mechanism that does not produce young people who will be socially excluded (Genda & Okada, 2004). Below is a review of some of the recurring ideas that have received attention in academic, governmental and mass media circles.

On the notion that the situation may appear to be insolvable, that NEETs are fundamentally preconceived to “loaf” around, getting a free ride off their family and/or society, one person adds that the problem may just be misperceived: “It’s a misconception that NEETs are incapable of working” explains Kei Kudo, operator of an NPO designed to give young people skills training (“Helping Youth,” 2005). What they need is the motivation and resources from which to find the appropriate work suitable to them. Acknowledging that the system of helping young people move from education to working members of society has changed, the government has suggested some steps to reconstruct the system “to nurture the next generation for overall society” (Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006, p. 8). These include (1) develop a more comprehensive framework for the development of professional skills; (2) increase motivation for young people to work through more counseling services, personal career plans and guidance that works concurrently with skill development; and (3) improve the system of assessment of professional skills.Limiting the evaluation of one’s worth to only full-time experience downplays any possible value of previous part-time and/or volunteer experience in professional settings (i.e. any “on-site” experience of both white-collar as well as industrial or “blue-collar” situations, internships, government-sponsored jobs, etc.) (see Labor Situation in Japan, 2005/2006).

Mentioned earlier, the role of social networks was a big factor in young peoples’ decision to be a NEET (Hori, 2004). As a result suggestions were given to expand the “isolated” and “limited” social networks of young people through assistance from school, public employment, public organizations (which can be effective in artificially creating social networks), and part-time employment through references. In short, Hori (2004) argues for multiple sources of support when assisting young people find their “place” in society apart from only paid employment. In terms of overcoming those who have no job at all (NEETs), the possibility of young people being recruited by companies will increase if they acquire the following skills: (1) communication skills, (2) basic academic skills, (3) qualifications, and (4) a sense of responsibility. In connection with this increase in the number of unemployed young persons (and freeters), the government white paper comments, “It is important to arouse the consciousness of all strata in society [not only industrial circles but also educationalists and others] and thereby foster and improve the will and capabilities of young people” (Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005). Put more succinctly, drifting youth need to “find meaning and self-fulfillment in life” (Egawa, 2005, p. 7).

Regarding the NEET problem and countermeasures, Assistant Professor Yuji Genda of the University of Tokyo commented, “In an opaque state of blockage, NEETs actually think too deeply about the meaning of work. The symbolic image of the NEET is the young person who gets tossed
NEETs, "Freeters" & Social Loafers: Impressions of Japan’s Perceived Undesirables

about in an age that emphasizes individuality and expertise, loses hope of working, and comes to a standstill. At the bottom of their hearts, almost all NEETs want to work. What these NEETs need most of all is not knowledge and information about work but actual experience of the joy and tension of mixing with others" (Asahi [Newspaper], October 8, 2004; cited in Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005). The SankeiShimbun (March 13) cited an opinion of the Nihon Shugaku Ryoko Kyokai, (the School Trip Association of Japan) that "at a time when young unemployed people are increasing, there is a noticeable move to include among school trip itineraries a program of hearing stories from job professionals to provide students with an opportunity to learn work values at the middle and high-school stage. Especially on high-school trips, there is a progressive polarization between the memory-making, sightseeing-type and the study-type that places importance on career guidance" (Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005).

In other efforts, some local government offices have gone so far as to set up projects to encourage children in primary and middle schools to think about what they want to do in the future (Kan, 2005b), as well as getting junior high school students thinking about their future. At a slightly higher age, Genda & Okada (2004) state that there is no clear prescription for junior high school students leaving school, (which continuously exceeds 100,000 students annually) and any approach to remedy the problem must be a systematic approach that corresponds fully as an employment measure on a nationwide scale.

Before such a sweeping proposal is made, however, using local communities as examples is a good start. Reiko Kosugi, assistant research director at the Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training, who specializes in NEET-related issues, said: "Local communities may also be able to help NEETs reintegrate into society by providing opportunities for them to work as volunteers, for example, so they may regain self-confidence or feel fulfillment by helping others. Anyway, if we want to decrease the number of NEETs, not only their parents and the central and local governments but more members of the public should see the issues more seriously" (Kan, 2005b). Ms. Kosugi notes that, the government put together a set of measures for dealing with the situation in 2003. Called the Independence and Challenge Plan for Young People, it begins by addressing the needs of those still in school. It promotes more active use of internships and other approaches to job-related education with direct ties to industry. Furthermore, a “dual system” that combines classroom learning with on-the-job training is being implemented at high schools, vocational schools and job training centers (Kosugi, 2004).

To try and improve the situation via a deeper understanding of the underlying causes, Oshima (2005) notes that the government will survey young people on their family environments, relationships with friends, whether their parents expect them to get jobs and how other people influence their job-hunting choices. To get direct feedback from young people on a personal level, we agree that is a good start. Taking this to an even more personal level, some Japanese researchers have considered ideas from outside Japan. In a meeting between U.K. and Japanese researchers, John Papworth explained to the Japanese how his employment support group (Connexions) helps young people who are feeling isolated or in need of guidance and support. "Rather than passing them round from pillar to post, [our organization] provides a dedicated personal adviser, or PA, with whom young people can build a relationship," he said. "It is a holistic service...we look at the whole situation" (Kingston, 2004). It was this all-round approach that interested the Japanese research team. Dr Michiko Miyamoto, a professor
of family sociology at a university near Tokyo, says: "There has never been a support service of this kind in Japan. The economic situation was so good that there was no real need for career advice or a training service" (Kingston, 2004). Clearly, those days have passed.

On a much more "pragmatic" level, one well-known researcher of freeter lifestyles notes that because company long-term goals are set differently, they rely on a flexible labor pool of contract workers, temporary employees, and part-timers (Kosugi, 2004). In order to make the most of this flexible market, Japan will need some sort of system for classifying job qualifications that will give a measure of the person's ability. "Many European countries rely on paper qualifications to show employability, and Americans use resumes to advertise their personal skills and qualifications. In Japan, employment was always assumed to be permanent and so there was no need to advertise one's skills to an external audience. Those days are over, however, and we urgently need a reliable framework of qualifications that allows job hunters to advertise their occupational skills, and potential employers to recognize them" (Kosugi, 2004). In short, Japanese freeters (and NEETs when they actively engage in job hunting) will need to develop their resume-building skills in order to market themselves to prospective employers.

As this previous discussion shows, there is no shortage of ideas for how to deal with NEETs and freeters, whether it be through personal efforts, non-profit organizations, local (as well as national) governmental efforts, distribution of information via books, pamphlets and job-related magazines. Or, on a more systematic level, to the restructuring of the recruitment process graduates go through as one step in the "transition period" to adulthood. This paper did not set out to define the best approach, it merely offers a review of the most popular measures currently being considered. To conclude this discussion on proposed countermeasures and solutions to the NEET and freeter phenomena, this paper must also acknowledge ideas made to overcome the last group of "undesirables:" free-riders and social loafers.

Although mostly unknown outside of Asia, this paper studied the phenomenon of social loafing, noting that NEETs and freeters can be seen as "loafers" or free-riders within the contexts of society (i.e. within their family, their class and their social networks, etc.). Their ability to build social networks in the form of a wide-ranging web of interpersonal relationships may be a factor in learning who slips into the life of a NEET or freeter, as well as how to prevent such an occurrence. People with a "successful network" may be seen as taking more responsibility for their situation. As such, the energy social loafers "take" from others eventually "costs" them opportunities and the kinds of professional growth that makes them more productive members of society. Due to this, a cursory review of how to overcome the loafing phenomena is given. It must be noted, however, that the focal point on such countermeasures in most of the following research has been on loafers (and free-riders) within small groups (for an extensive review on curbing social loafing and free-riding, see Chapman & Davis, 1999; Chapman & Davis, 2002; and Davis & Chapman, 2003)

**Countermeasures & Solutions: Curbing the Effects of Social Loafing**

Researchers (mostly Western) have focused their efforts on how to compensate social loafing. Past research has suggested that the compensation mechanisms for diminishing the presence and/or effects of social loafing include: a) providing incentives (e.g., less work for those meeting deadlines); b) making each member's contribution indispensable (i.e., the project cannot be completed unless
everyone completes her/his part); c) making the cost of actively participating in the group minimal (i.e., contributions do not necessitate further contributions, large amounts of time or physical effort, etc.); d) feedback that is given to both the individual and the group, and this feedback is learning-oriented rather than performance-oriented; e) having group goals that are intrinsically valuable and relevant to each individual member of the group; f) making all individual contributions identifiable; g) making all individual contributions measurable by some objective, stable, meter; h) having group members provide feedback and evaluation to all other members of the group; and i) having group members with high-efficacy expectations (e.g., people who think “I can do this!”). (See Bacon, Stewart & Silver, 1999; Caruso, 2002; Harkins & Jackson, 1985; Harkins & Petty, 1982; Jackson & Williams, 1985; Karau & Williams, 1993; Kerr & Brunn, 1983; Matsui, Kakuyama, & Onglatco, 1987; Sanna, 1992; Shepperd, 1993; Zaccaro, 1984). Loafing, Caruso (2002) adds, is less likely to occur when those working on the task are women rather than men; and when those working are from Eastern cultures rather than Western cultures. Finally, Jackson and Williams (1985) discovered that social loafing may not always be a bad thing, as it may underlie enhanced performances and possibly reduce stress when people work collectively on difficult tasks.

Conclusion

This paper sought out perspectives on the NEET, freeter and free-rider/social loafer phenomena. While students indicated that such positions as NEET and freeter are “undesireable” (as the title of this paper suggests), they don’t seem to be as strongly “unacceptable” as other segments of society make them out to be. Perhaps society simply needs to accept the fact that young people are changing and such individuality in youth lifestyles is on the increase, which will inevitably lead to a “freeter rebellion” of youth who don’t want to follow in the footsteps of their fathers and grandfathers. As Honda (2005) noted, the future of freeters will be the touchstone of the path for Japanese society hereafter” (p. 23). Perhaps it is up to the government and educators to teach today’s youth that the previously tread “path to adulthood” has new routes. In the end, such phenomena may come to be seen as one normal “stage” of a young person’s life, one more path, however diverted, on the “transition to adulthood.” In short, as these results show, being a freeter (and slightly less so for a NEET), may not always be the worst thing. The transition process from education to working life is evolving. Changes are happening, however slowly. The results of this paper suggest that not only are freeters not the “undesirables” so much of society sees them as, but mildly acceptable in the eyes of young people and, as Honda (2005) said, setting a path for future Japanese. The question is, what kind of path.

Note

The authors would like to extend gratitude to the following scholars whose laborious efforts to translate the English measures into Japanese made this study possible: Kota Tsuda, (Hiroshima University); Jun Sasaki (Assoc. Professor at Hijiyama University, Hiroshima); Yoshiyuki Notohara (Lecturer at Hijiyama University, Hiroshima) and Mayuka Seto (of the Language Laboratory at Hijiyama University, Hiroshima).
References

90% fear effect of NEETs on society. (2005, July 29). The Daily Yomiuri, p. 3.


Genda, Y. & Okada, D. (April, 2004). A Policy Instrument for Motivating Young People who are Not in
NEETs, "Freeters" & Social Loafer: Impressions of Japan's Perceived Undesirables

http://www.esri.go.jp/en/archive/e_dis/abstract/e_dis100-e.html


Imagining a brighter future. (2005, July 29). The Daily Yomiuri, p.4


http://education.guardian.co.uk/egweekly/story/0,5500,1340813,00.html

Kitazume, T. (July 26, 2005). Weak work ethic is holding back generation of ‘freeters’ and drifters. The Japan Times Online. Retrieved September 30, 2005:

http://www.jijigaho.or.jp/app/0410/eng/sp13.html


http://www.oecd.org/document/5/0,2340,en_2649_201185_2465989_1_1_1_1,00.html


Parasite single: What's the matter? Website. Retrieved October 10, 2005:
http://law.ris.ac.jp/ilc00/contents/981100174/


Key words: NEET, freeter, social loafer, free-rider

Damon E. Chapman(言語文化学科国際コミュニケーションコース)
Dr. Daniel Cochece Davis
(Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, Marist College, Poughkeepsie, New York, U.S.A.)

(2005.10.31 受理)
Appendix

Subjects’ Write-In Descriptions of NEETs, Freeters & Social Loafers/Free-Riders

When asked to write their descriptions for the term “NEET,” subjects wrote that NEETs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>No. of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>are not in education, training and no job*</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are young people who don’t work, can work but</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don’t want to and “kill time” at home</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have no enthusiasm for education, no goals, and (currently) no work</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are “parasites”</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don’t do anything, have no energy, are “lazy”</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can only find part-time work</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aren’t looking for work (of any kind)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are “loafers”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are the same as “freeters”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graduate university but then only “mess around”</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are loners</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are people between 16-35 who are not students</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are people who pursue their dreams</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are “bastards” or “stupid” and do nothing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The most widely used and almost literal definition of NEETs.*

When asked what they think the meaning of “freeter” is, subjects wrote that freeters:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>No. of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>are young with no full-time job, only part-time work</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have no “one” job, no full-time work, they “job hop”</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>only “survive” day by day with part-time work*</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are not students, they “mess around” while working part-time</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“dream” of success, but only work part-time</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have enthusiasm to work, but don’t or can’t</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do not want to work seriously</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are the same as NEETs</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graduate university, but, thereafter, work part-time only</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>help their parents (at home and/or financially)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*“survive” was the key word in these answers, which distinguishes the part-time job as the significant thing in their life (education is much less, if at all, relevant). As for the meaning of “free-rider / social loafer,” only two write-in answers were given: “workers” and “freestyle” people (that is, those who “make their own way through various jobs”). Clearly, this English term (of which the Japanese equivalents of “binjo suru hito” or “putarō” were purposefully not given) is virtually unheard of in Japanese.*