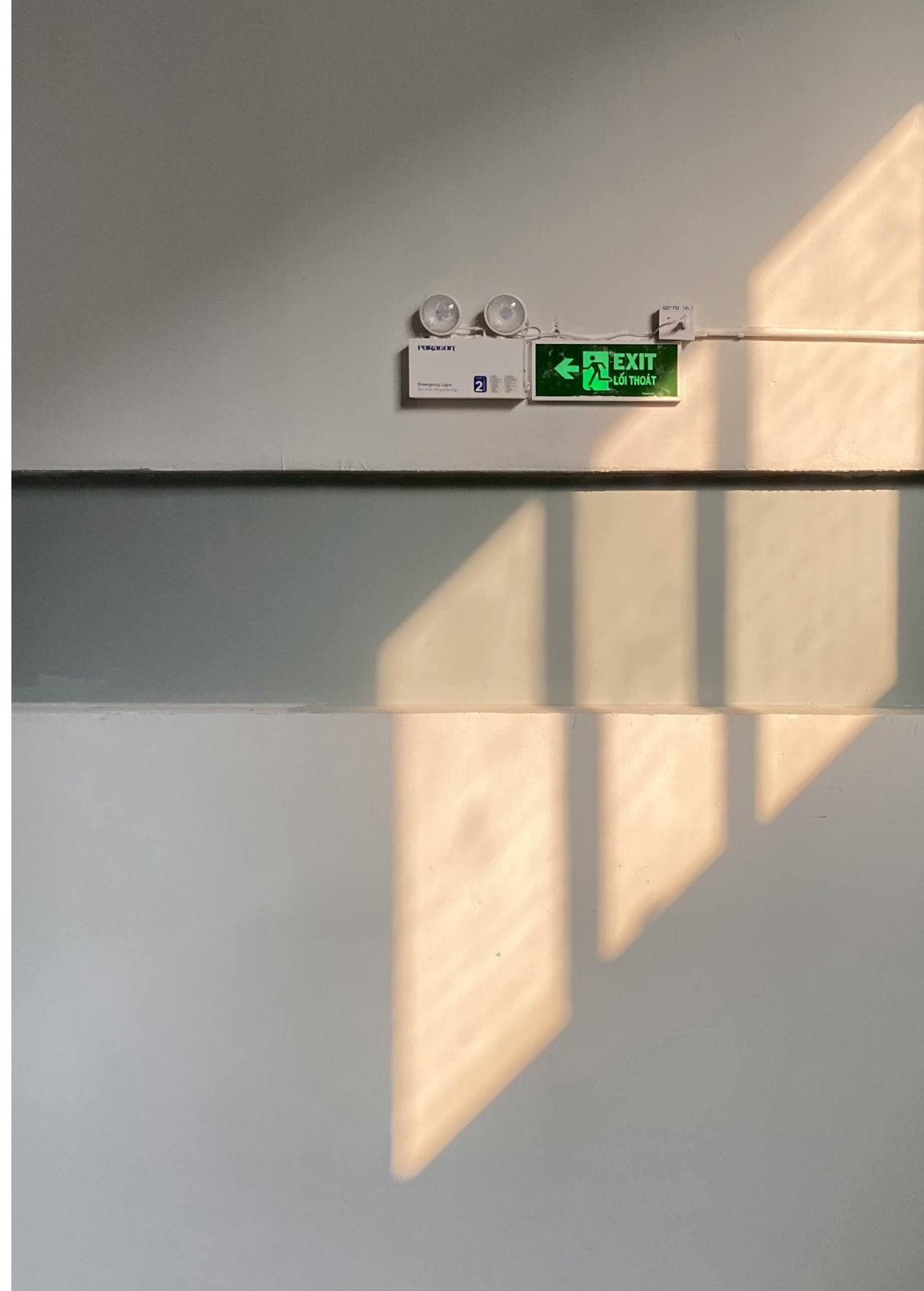


The Year of Checking Out

The COVID19 pandemic that shifted society and culture feels like ages ago, and life has returned to normalcy but not to what it was before. Life is back to business as usual but with shifted values, needs and new questions.

While 2024 was a continuation of a variety of sociocultural trends, we identified patterns that imply consciously opting out. Particularly younger generations seek respite from the relentless pursuit of external validation and embrace a more self-centred, introspective way of being. Salt consulting looks back to highlight how this manifested in Japan and South Korea.



Fan Culture Crisis



From *oshi*-centered life to self-centered

Oshikatsu (Japan) and *dukjil* (South Korea) both refer to the fan culture that has been normalized and expanded beyond the connotations with the obsessive and socially awkward *otaku* type. Engaging in fandom is now considered a fun fact about someone or a topic that can build a bonds between people. It provides emotional fulfilment and achievement that seeking romantic relationships and pragmatic self-development fail to offer.

2024 marks the first signs of *oshikatsu* culture fizzling out. While this expression of fan culture is inclusive and expressive, the normalization of having someone or something to support is leading to “*oshikatsu* burnout”. In both societies, the societal pressure to conform is expanding to private life and hobbies. In Japan, this trend is called the “black routine culture”. In Korea, people opt to “dopamine detoxes” to take a mindful break from being glued to fan content and the emotional rollercoaster that comes with *dukjil*.

Tired of playing by someone else’s rules, the Japanese and Koreans are checking out of fan culture to reconnect with themselves. Looking inward and shifting focus to “stanning themselves” is helping them realign before they return to the world.

Japan: “Low-effort” and “short-term” shifting perceptions of work

The phrase “ganbatte” (try hard, make an effort in Japanese) has been causing some discomfort in recent years. This year has witnessed even stronger allergic reactions especially among the younger generation of employees. “Ganbatte” represents a scam as they see the efforts of their peers not paying off.

In Japan, this is manifesting in mentally checking out. As employment laws make firing difficult, disengaged workers stay for the stable paycheck while contributing their bare minimum. Climbing to managerial positions is avoided like the plague.

At the same time, the labour shortage is diversifying the gig-work landscape with extremely short-term jobs, and finally legalizing ridesharing. While the lifestage and socio economic profile of



The Changing Meaning of Effort

mentally checked out workers and those who engage in short-term jobs are different, the emergence of low-effort labour as an option is likely to further drive questioning the role and value of full-time employment.

The aging demographic is driving careers that resemble relay races rather than marathons as a Japanese recruitment agency coins. This means that the hierarchy of employment types may start to blur and for more people work would increasingly be about the needs of the here and now.

South Korea: Fading confidence in linear careers



Work related mental resignation is noticeable among young Koreans as well. Culturally, landing a job at a reputable company and climbing the career ladder is still considered the dream. However, young workers are increasingly disengaged as they question if they are investing their time, loyalty and perseverance in the right place. The government's recent tone deaf policy proposal that allows even longer hours and the backdrop of news on death by overwork are further prompting them to pull away.

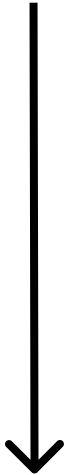
Hustle culture looks like way out. For young workers this appears as a promise of fulfilment, financial security and less stress. In the growing trend of multiple side jobs ("N-job-er"), creative directions are often chosen to develop marketable skills or passion projects that provide the emotional benefits that a corporate job may lack. Online courses and mentoring supporting these n-job-ers also thrive.

Young Koreans are stepping off one hamster wheel to hop on to another one. While side jobs seem to stand for a more liberated and stimulating work style, they also mean constant self-development, networking, and personal branding. As the first signs of fatigue from seeing "alternative career success stories" are already appearing, existential questions and a critical review of the growth mindset is likely to ensue.

Extreme simplification of overwhelming relationships

Navigating relationships online and offline requires care and attention. In collectivist societies like Japan and South Korea where confrontation is avoided, frustration with maintaining the harmony of the groups has reached its peak.

This strain has led to “Relationship Reset Syndrome” in Japan – a drastic tool where people delete profiles, contacts, or move cities – reflecting the desire for personal calm through complete avoidance. In Korea, “sonjeol (손절)” – cutting ties like discarding stocks – also captures the growing urge for efficient relationships.



Cutting Relationships Loose

Similarly, MBTI personality tests have also become popular as another tool to help people categorize and assess compatibility of relationships, as well as accepting personality differences. However, this oversimplification limits themselves from forming authentic and deep connections.

This cultural shift highlights the generation that lost its patience, choosing efficiency in relationships to protect their mental health over the strain of group harmony. The popularisation of such extreme measures has potential to trigger a shift towards exercising open communication.

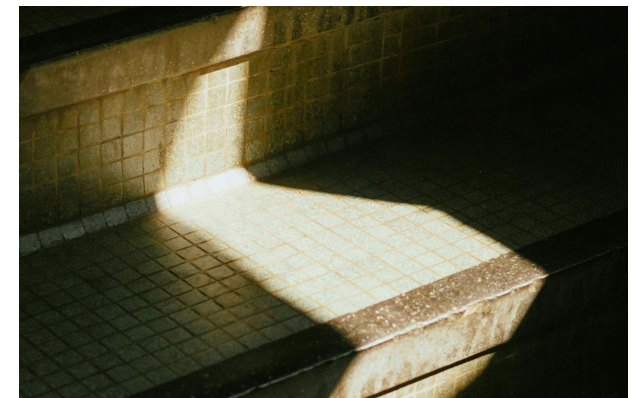


Outsourced affirmations

AI filling in the space of lacking mental health care

While mental health awareness has been growing in recent years with the help of online representations of depression, anxiety, or neurodiversity, the long-standing stigma creates a barrier for seeking help in Japan and South Korea. Everyone is busy and exhausted which causes one to question whether they are “allowed” to be depressed. The shortage of mental health professionals also contributes this vicious cycle of mismatched demand and offer.

Recently AI has started to fill the gap in mental health care. In addition to free ChatGPT prompts that console and affirm, there are paid Japanese apps emerging where AI stands in as a therapist to develop users’ self-esteem and confirm what they are feeling is normal. In Korea, an AI powered journaling app offers a safe space for venting. Unlike humans, these AI “therapists” are always available to proverbially hold the user’s hand. AI’s soft and empathetic tone is a threat to motivational speakers popular in both countries. Their content instructs followers on how to exercise pragmatic self-discipline to be the best version of themselves. Now, people are opting out of the result-driven approach, and stepping towards an affirming one that, at this stage, only AI can offer abundantly.



New Fundamentals

Mental resignation is ushering in a transitional phase. While questioning the external value system is nothing new, witnessing it affecting behaviour is significant in high-context cultures where true thoughts and feelings are usually hidden.

The “Year of Checking Out” signals a shift toward what might be called the “New Fundamental” – a return to the core stripped-down needs of human existence. With it, the search for optimal life design and relationship with others and self continues. As external values are under-delivering, this time around, we are turning inward for answers – a conscious effort to meet fundamental human needs rather than chasing external validation or societal approval. As individuals disengage from the external noise, they embrace the simplicity of being.

Salt continues to decode cultural undercurrents – get in touch to discuss how to navigate 2025.

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