

EAST^{ASIA}LUENCE

The rise of Asia's
soft power

backslash



Why Asia, Why Now

For nearly a century, America set the cultural tempo for the rest of the world. From Hollywood films and hip-hop to blue jeans, Silicon Valley, and Coca-Cola, the U.S. exported not just products, but instructions on how to live and what to aspire to. Concepts like freedom, self-expression, and individualism became the cultural operating system for entire generations. Even brand behaviors followed suit. Take L'Oréal's now iconic slogan, "Because I'm Worth It." Created in Manhattan during the women's liberation era in the 70s, it reframed makeup as a celebration of self-worth rather than something for the male gaze. The line was eventually translated into over 40 languages, becoming a global shorthand for American feminist ideals. And then there's Apple — not just a tech brand, but a symbol of creative freedom and personal agency for consumers everywhere. Its sleek, minimal designs were coupled with messaging that encouraged users to "Think Different," positioning individualism as both aesthetic and moral choice.

Today, that kind of U.S. dominance no longer feels guaranteed. Polarization, cultural fatigue, and a creeping disbelief in its own narratives have cracked the foundation. A record-low 58% of U.S. adults now say they feel "extremely" or "very" proud to be American, and nearly 70% believe the American dream no longer holds true, or perhaps never did. The story America once sold to the world is faltering, and new voices are filling the silence.

This isn't about America's decline so much as it is about what global culture is craving next. And Asia is already stepping up and stepping into the void. Of course, Asia's influence is not new, but its global receptivity is accelerating. Tangible exports like K-pop, matcha, anime, and Labubus are certainly part of this growth, but they don't tell the whole story. That's why this report goes deeper, unpacking four underlying values the world is craving most right now, and how Asia is uniquely primed to deliver on them.

These values begin to answer some of the biggest questions culture is wrestling with today:

- 1. Deep Mastery:** What will be considered high-value skills as innovation accelerates?
- 2. Unapologetic Emotion:** How do we make authenticity mean something again?
- 3. Thoughtful Friction:** What kind of limits lead to a better quality of life?
- 4. Social Etiquette:** How do we begin to restore mutual respect?

In a world that feels overstimulated, polarized, and morally adrift, Asia offers a compelling cultural counterweight: one that prioritizes meaning over immediacy, depth over speed, and collective well-being over self-interests. These are values that companies from any region or industry would be wise to lean into. Asia may be the master of these values, but it certainly doesn't have to be the sole exporter of them.

As we look East for answers, it's also important to acknowledge that Asia is not a monolith, and an Eastern-centric culture is not a utopia. Asia is a region shaped by contradictions: reverence for the past, but a desire to be on the cutting edge of what's next; emotional sincerity coupled with rigorous structures; community-minded design systems that can also carry the weight of social pressure and state control. Brands looking to learn from Asia's wins must also recognize its weaknesses. Admiration should not blur into idealization.

Still, there's a great deal for brands to take from this wave of Eastfluence. The goal isn't to directly copy and paste Asia's cultural exports, but to thoughtfully renegotiate them in a way that works for your brand and your market. If done well, a richer, more connected global culture will result.

Eastfluence by the numbers

By 2040...

42%

Asia could contribute **42%** of global GDP, be home to 60% of the Fortune Global 500 companies, and have 55% of the world's total workforce.

53%

Asia will be home to approximately **53%** of the global youth between the ages of 18 and 24.

Music

No. 1

BTS is still the world's most popular K-pop act several years into their reign. The group is arguably the number one driver of the so-called "Korean Wave," or "hallyu," which has helped make Korean fashion, food, and entertainment aspirational worldwide.

15B

Global K-pop powerhouse **BLACKPINK** holds records for the most subscribers for a band on YouTube (98.9M subscribers) and most-streamed female group on Spotify (over 15 billion streams).

Tourism Boom

13%

Asia-Pacific welcomed **13%** more international travelers in early 2025 compared to the same period in 2024, the strongest the region has been since borders reopened post-COVID.

Tourists may have arrived for the favorable exchange rate, but they left as unofficial ambassadors — bringing content, products, inspiration, and recommendations back home with them.

Entertainment

300M

In August, **KPop Demon Hunters** became the most-watched film in Netflix history with over 300 million views — marking a new viewership record for an animated movie.

8%

On Netflix, **South Korean shows and movies** now account for a steady 8–9% of global viewing hours, second only to U.S. content.

17M

Anime-focused **Crunchyroll** is the world's fastest-growing streaming service. Its subscribers have tripled from 5 million in August 2021 to over 17 million by May 2025.

1.9B

Garena Free Fire (made in Singapore) was the #1 most-downloaded mobile game worldwide in January 2025 with about 37.1 million installs (lifetime ~1.86 billion).

No. 1

Now in its third and final season, **Squid Game** remains Netflix's most-watched non-English show of all time. Season three recently became the first show to ever rank as the No. 1 most-watched show across all Netflix-served countries in its first week.

\$37B

International revenues now represent more than half of the estimated \$37 billion **Japanese anime industry**, and North America is the largest market outside Asia. A recent survey of over 4,000 American adults showed that 42% of all Gen Z respondents watched anime every week, far higher than the 25% of Gen Z respondents who followed the NFL.

155M

South Korean digital comic platform **WEBTOON** reaches roughly 155 million monthly active users across 150+ countries.

Asian brands excelling globally:

China

POP MART

The so-ugly-its-cute Labubu doll has become a global sensation, driving a 204% jump in revenue for Chinese parent company **Pop Mart** in the first half of 2025.

BYD

BYD surpassed Tesla to become the world's top seller of electric vehicles in 2024, with plans to double overseas sales to 800,000 this year.

MINISO

Budget lifestyle retailer **MINISO's** North America revenue surpassed the combined total from all its other Asian overseas markets in early 2025. Next up: launching its own pop-star dolls to compete with Labubu.



The Chinese bubble tea and ice cream shop **Mixue** officially dethroned McDonald's as the world's largest fast-food chain earlier this year and is now set to open its first U.S. store in NYC.

Taiwan



24 years after first arriving in the U.S., **Din Tai Fung** generated the highest revenue per restaurant in the country last year, reaching \$27.4 million per location.

Japan

UNIQLO

Fast Retailing—the holding company that controls **Uniqlo**—had its best year ever last year, generating close to \$20 billion dollars in revenue. Its ultimate goal is to “become the best-loved, No. 1 brand among customers worldwide.”



The Japanese parent company of **7-Eleven** is betting billions of dollars that it can expand its business in the U.S. by making its convenience stores more like the food meccas they are in Japan (milk bread egg sandwiches included).

The Philippines



Popular Filipino fast-food chain **Jollibee** is continuing to open new stores in North America, EMEA and APAC after a record 2024, with plans to open between 700 and 800 new stores globally in 2025. It launched its first U.S. franchise program in March.

South Korea

COSRX

COSRX has rapidly transformed from a cult Korean “derm fave” into a global skincare powerhouse, with over 90% of its sales now coming from overseas markets.



Samyang Foods was recognized as the #1 brand among Gen Alpha in the U.S. for 2024, primarily driven by the overwhelming popularity of its Buldak Spicy Ramen noodles.

Beyond tangible exports, Asia is emerging as a model
of the cultural values the world craves most right now:

01

Deep Mastery

02

Unapologetic
Emotion

03

Thoughtful
Friction

04

Social
Etiquette



WHAT CULTURE
IS CRAVING:

STABILITY
PURSUIT

ROOTS
REVIVAL

Deep Mastery

We're living in a world with more design generalists and social media strategists than blacksmiths, ceramicists, or carpenters. In a culture optimized for quick wins, Asia's long-held reverence for mastery offers something more rewarding.

For the past two decades, hustle culture ruled the world. We lionized the startup founder and the multi-hyphenate creator. Culture told us to move fast, monetize everything, and keep chasing the next best thing, whether that meant dipping our toes in crypto trading or starting a Substack because everyone else was. Virality became value.

But the shine is wearing off. The reality is that hustle culture hasn't delivered on its promise of purpose or satisfaction. Many of us have become jacks of all trades but masters of none — and all the while, the actual masters are quickly disappearing. In the U.S., skilled trades like woodworking, tailoring, and even baking are seeing steep labor shortages. We're living in a world with more design generalists and social media strategists than blacksmiths, ceramicists, or carpenters.

This reckoning hits even harder in the age of AI, where anyone and everyone can churn out pieces of digital art, lines of code, or architecture blueprints in seconds — no real expertise required. This focus on execution over education has made us faster, yes, but also flatter.

There are signs that the cultural pendulum is starting to swing back. We've sped up to the point of exhaustion, and now, going deep feels radical. We're seeing it everywhere from the rise of craft hobbies among young people, to the viral appeal of #slowmade fashion on TikTok. Even the idea of staying at one company long enough to grow roots is becoming more appealing, with Gen Z workers in the U.K. the most likely age group to want an 'employer for life.' In a culture optimized for quick wins, Asia's long-held reverence for mastery offers a more rewarding model. One rooted in the payoff of becoming great over several decades.

A quiet cultural turn is taking place — one that values skill-based learning, time-honored craft, and deep mastery.

SIGNS THAT THE WORLD IS CRAVING DEEP MASTERY



In the U.S., enrollment at **trade-focused institutions** has increased 19% since 2020. Meanwhile, **art schools** across the country are seeing record-high application numbers as Gen Z seeks purpose in hands-on creativity.



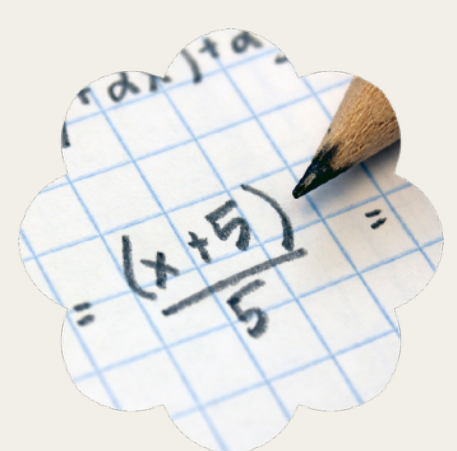
Craft has become luxury's most valuable currency as brands like Bottega Veneta and Loewe shift from celebrity-focused marketing to stories that highlight the **process, materials, and human labor** behind their products.



Advocates of the growing **Slow Science** movement are calling for a return to rigorous, methodical processes. It argues that the “publish or perish” mindset is leading to low-quality studies.



A movement known as **Architectural Uprising** is pushing back against modern design trends in Nordic cities and calling for a return to classically informed buildings.

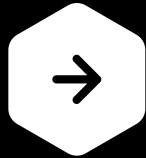


The **Singapore Math** method, which emphasizes mastery over rote memorization, has gained popularity in U.S. schools for its rigor and long-term comprehension benefits.



The global **handicraft market** was valued at \$740 billion in 2024, and is projected to reach \$983 billion by 2030, growing at a rate well above general retail growth. The Asia Pacific handicrafts market dominated the global industry with a revenue share of 34.81% in 2024.

Mastery has long been a core part of Asia’s cultural DNA, rooted in tradition but always evolving.



CHINA 🌸🌸🌸

MASTER-APPRENTICE LINEAGES

The 师徒 (shītu) tradition — where a student studies under a master — exists across Chinese arts, from Peking Opera to calligraphy. To keep the tradition alive, young apprentices are now documenting their training on Douyin and Little Red Book, making slow mastery aspirational for a new audience.



INDIA 🌟🌟🌟

CRAFT TRADITIONS

Indian artisans are renowned keepers of slow, intergenerational mastery. One fashion designer brilliantly blending heritage with modernity is [Anita Dongre](#), who reinterprets Indian crafts into contemporary silhouettes made by Indian artisans.



INDONESIA 🌟🌟🌟

INDONESIAN ARCHITECTURE

Indonesia’s vernacular architecture, like Minangkabau roofs or Balinese compounds, is built with mastery of local ecology, wind patterns, and spiritual cosmology. Builders often work without blueprints, relying on inherited spatial knowledge.



JAPAN 🌸🌸🌸

J-BEAUTY

J-beauty is a model of ritualized science that emphasizes layered skincare routines, minimal yet potent ingredients, and techniques passed down through generations of estheticians and formulators. From camellia oil cleansing to ultrathin rice paper blotting, each step is designed with deep intentionality.



SOUTH KOREA 🌟🌟🌟

K-POP IDOLS

K-pop idols are the result of a grueling, long-form system of mastery. Trainees often spend 5 to 10 years in intensive programs perfecting vocals, choreography, endurance, media handling, and etiquette before ever performing on stage.



SINGAPORE 🌟🌟🌟

HAWKER CUISINE

Singapore’s hawker culture, now protected by UNESCO, is a living system of culinary mastery through repetition. Some hawkers have spent 30+ years perfecting a single dish, with one restaurant, Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle, even holding a Michelin star since 2016.



THE PHILIPPINES 🌟🌟🌟

PHILIPPINE BALLET TELESERYE

The Philippine Ballet Theatre (PBT) is bringing traditional Filipino folklore to life through ballet told in a teleserye style — dramatic, soap-opera-like storytelling popular on Filipino TV — to attract younger audiences.

What's Next



Looking ahead, this desire for discipline and expertise will only deepen. In an increasingly automated world that feels like it's losing its footing, mastery offers something more stable: personal fulfillment, cultural rootedness, and a sense of direction.

But mastery is not without its shadows. When pushed too far, it can become a pressure cooker — turning discipline into burnout, and devotion into self-erasure. The opportunity now is to reclaim mastery as a deeper, more human kind of excellence that nourishes rather than depletes.

BRAND IMPLICATIONS



LONGEVITY > TRENDS

We can expect, and are already experiencing, a pivot toward brands that emphasize longevity over trend cycles. Emerging luxury brands like Tokyo-based [Amaud](#) and Beijing-based [Laopu Gold](#) offer inspiration, emphasizing a “slow growth” approach that prioritizes ethical craftsmanship over rapid expansion.

MASTERY-BASED REWARD PROGRAMS

What if brands tied consumer rewards to mastery instead of money spent? Think public leaderboards, profiles that track your time invested and skills gained, and apprenticeships for top performers — tying identity to discipline rather than consumption.

SKILL-FLUENCERS

As influencer fatigue grows, people who demonstrate deep mastery (musicians, artisans, chefs, craftspeople) will eclipse hype-based creators. Followers will place higher value on creators who can teach them something, rather than just sell them something.

DISCIPLINE AS A LIFESTYLE

Looking forward, the brands that offer the structures and tools to live a disciplined life will become indispensable. Think learning hubs, craft centers, and trainee systems modeled after proven programs in Asia. We might also see brand narratives shift accordingly. In beauty, for example, this could mean rewriting the script on ritual-based skincare regimes as a form of self-discipline and self-love, not vanity.

DEPTH > DIVERSIFICATION

The “diversify or die” mantra will be replaced by a focus on doing one thing exceptionally well. Brands like [Toku Saké](#), which focuses solely on slow-brewed, small-batch saké; and Paris-based [Ormaie](#), which only releases a handful of sustainable perfumes, show that specialization, not expansion, may be the new growth strategy.



WHAT CULTURE
IS CRAVING:

UNGLOSSED

CONNECTION
QUEST

Unapologetic Emotion

Culture has mastered the art of clever detachment. But as the performance wears thin, honest emotional expression is starting to feel like the ultimate form of freedom.

Irony and emotional detachment have served as the native cultural language of the last few years, where anything earnest was written off as “cringe” and being in on the joke was the only way to prove that you weren’t naive.

This outright cynicism served as a kind of defense mechanism against systems that felt rigged against you. If you can’t win — against your boss, the financial system, the never-ending to-do list — you might as well spare yourself the disappointment by not even trying. In turn, culture leaned heavily into absurdity. Eating Tide Pods became a viral form of meta-humor, STONKS became a financial ideology, and the Bored Ape Yacht Club turned NFTs into one big joke. Brands got in on it as well. Products like Balenciaga’s \$2,000 IKEA bag and MSCHF’s Big Red Boots gave a knowing wink at the consumer. And every company adopted a snarky social media voice in an attempt to win over the cool kids (otherwise known as Gen Z). Wendy’s started it with merciless Twitter roasts, and everyone from Slim Jim to Duolingo followed.

But now, an overload of sarcasm and satire has left audiences craving something real. People are growing bored of performative nihilism and are finding freedom in honest emotional expression. Showing that you care is no longer social suicide; it’s self-preservation. This vibe shift was evident in Timothée Chalamet’s recent SAG acceptance speech, where he proudly proclaimed that “the truth is, I’m really in pursuit of greatness... I want to be one of the greats.” His speech made trying hard feel aspirational, and people applauded him for it.

The bottom line is that being genuinely happy is becoming more important than being in on the joke — even if it does come off as a little cringe. It’s why Taylor Swift fans are louder and prouder than ever (she doesn’t try to be cool, and they love her for it), and why #hopecore has over 2M posts on TikTok.

In this new landscape, earnestness is the first step toward something bigger: a cultural appetite for the kind of unapologetic emotional expression that’s already deeply embedded in many parts of Asia. This may run counter to the common Western perception that Asian cultures are emotionally reserved. In reality, Asia has long created space for amplified emotion, just channeled differently. South Korea’s K-pop culture — where fans write multipage letters, fund charitable campaigns in their idol’s name, and cry openly at concerts — is a prime example.

Where the West is just now relearning how to care out loud, Asia never stopped. It offers a model of emotional sincerity without embarrassment, reminding people that to live fully is to feel deeply.

The era of performative snark has run its course. Now, wearing your heart on your sleeve is more impressive than playing it cool.

SIGNS THAT THE WORLD IS CRAVING UNAPOLOGETIC EMOTION



The “**I am cringe but I am free**” meme has become a viral sign of the times as more people decide to give up the act and give in to joy. Meanwhile, creators on TikTok are warning that ironic detachment “kills your ability to enjoy life.”



James Gunn’s 2025 reboot of **Superman** has been praised as a heartfelt, delightfully cheesy take on the Man of Steel that the world didn’t know it needed — a stark contrast from the past antihero hits like Deadpool and Suicide Squad.



New anti-algorithm platforms like PI.FYI are encouraging users to **earnestly share what they’re into**, marking a refreshing departure from the showy cynicism that currently rules the web.



Pop stars like **Addison Rae** and **Benson Boone** are turning cringe into cultural currency. Addison said she pitched her album to Columbia Records using words like “intentional,” “intense,” “loud,” “dance,” and “glitter,” while Boone is topping charts with emotional heart-on-sleeve ballads.

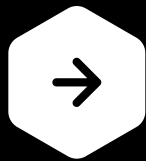


At Paris Fashion Week 2025, labels like **Miu Miu**, **Rabanne**, and **Courrèges** consciously moved away from spectacle and satire toward “new sincerity.” Their collections combined nostalgic elegance, emotional vulnerability, and deep storytelling.



Nike’s recent campaign “**Why Do It**” takes direct aim at cringe culture, telling Gen Z athletes that being a “try-hard” is actually the coolest thing you can do.

Where the West practiced cleverness as armor, Asia offers devotion and feeling as an invitation to connect.



INDIA 🌟🌟🌟

BOLLYWOOD & TOLLYWOOD MELODRAMAS

Whether it's tearful reunions, over-the-top declarations of love, or slow-motion family breakdowns, India's Bollywood and Tollywood films embrace emotional intensity as both art and catharsis.



CHINA 🌟🌟🌟

XIANXIA

In Chinese entertainment—especially xianxia and historical dramas—love, honor, and destiny are treated with unapologetic grandeur. Shows like *The Untamed* and *Eternal Love* showcase big emotions and poetic dialogue.



JAPAN 🌟🌟🌟

KAWAII CULTURE

Japan's kawaii culture, often dismissed in the West as mere cuteness, is actually a deep form of open emotional expression. From Hello Kitty merch to handwritten notes adorned with colorful stickers, kawaii aesthetics invite people to lead with warmth rather than coolness. It gives adults permission to embrace childlike joy without irony.



THE PHILIPPINES 🌟🌟🌟

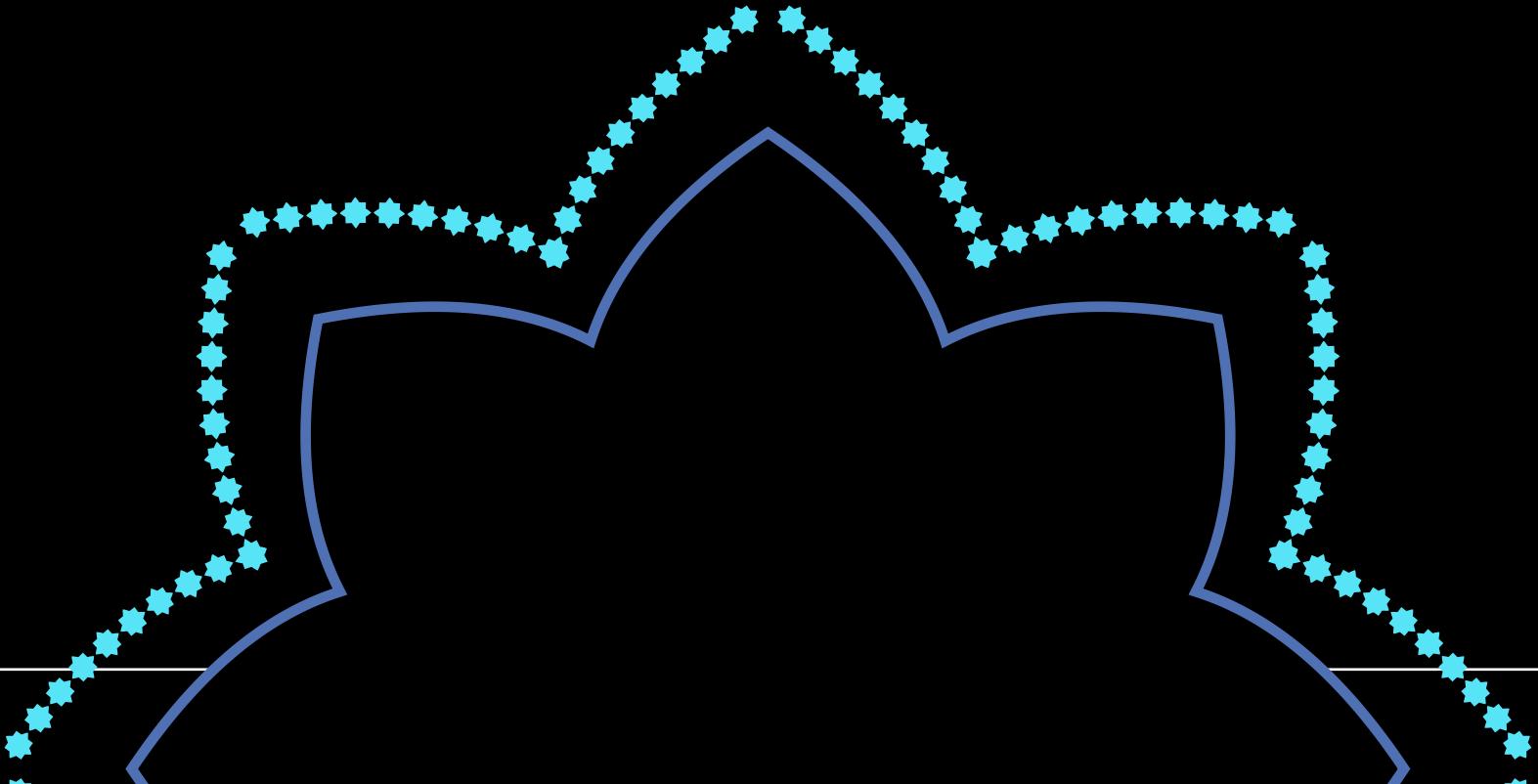
AUTHENTIC INFLUENCERS

Filipino creators are gaining traction on TikTok for heartfelt vlogs and spiritual musings. OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker) farewell videos, tearful homecomings, and prayer-filled birthday celebrations routinely go viral for showcasing vulnerable emotions, and 41% of Filipino influencers cite narrative sincerity as the core of their creator identity.



HACHIKŌ

The story of Hachikō, the loyal Akita dog who waited at Tokyo's Shibuya Station every day for nearly 10 years after his owner passed away, is one of Japan's most enduring symbols of sincerity. His unwavering devotion resonates deeply with Japanese values around loyalty and heartfelt commitment, even earning him a bronze statue at Shibuya Station.



What's Next

As the cultural pendulum swings, vulnerability, emotional depth, and earnest effort will become the new markers of modern influence. This means brands that once thrived on irreverence will need to look inward and figure out who they really are once the “too cool to care” armor comes off. This isn’t necessarily the easier path. Anyone can fire off a sarcastic social post, but being sincere takes real conviction. It requires brands to know what they stand for beyond the brief.

Not all forms of emotional expression are created equal, either. As sincerity comes back in fashion, there’s a risk of it being commodified and reduced to branded content and campaigns that try too hard to appear genuine.

This kind of performative vulnerability will only put people off. In fact, it’s exactly what led to our current era of clever cynicism in the first place. People sniffed out fake “authenticity” to the point where any display of effort or emotion started to feel like a marketing ploy.

Looking ahead, the thing that will differentiate the truly sincere brands from the pretenders is action. In other words, not just talking about your values via feel-good messaging, but actually proving it through initiatives that reward vulnerability, foster connection, and create space for emotional expression IRL.

BRAND IMPLICATIONS



DON'T BE SNARKY BY DEFAULT

Brands that adopted a snarky tone by default should reevaluate whether it’s actually serving them. Rather than using sarcasm to fit in, find a distinct personality and sense of humor that helps you authentically stand out.

EMOTIONS > AESTHETICS

Instead of chasing of-the-moment aesthetics, brands will be judged on how deeply they make you feel. This could spur a shift away from short-form everything toward longer-form storytelling on platforms like Substack and YouTube.

FUEL ALL-OUT FANDOM

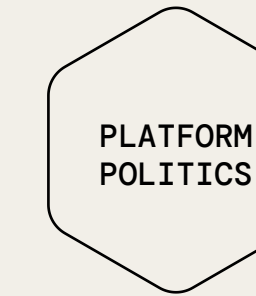
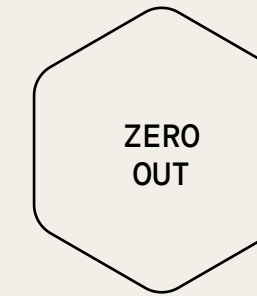
Cultural capital now lies in visible devotion. Expect to see a rise in groups and platforms that give people license to nerd out over their passions—from the world’s biggest fandoms to ultra-niche subcultures. [Lore](#), a new search engine for the internet’s most obsessive fans, offers a glimpse of what’s to come.

DESIGN FOR CONNECTION

Flashy pop-ups built for content creation will feel increasingly empty. Instead, brands should put their energy into IRL experiences that allow for natural connection. Inspiration can be found at IKEA’s [Billyothèque](#), a pop-up outdoor library that turned the Seine riverbank into a space for slow, serendipitous encounters.



WHAT CULTURE
IS CRAVING:



Thoughtful Friction

We're witnessing a values reset where friction is no longer a flaw to be eliminated, but a feature to be designed in.

Modern culture taught us to celebrate limitless access and instant gratification as the markers of freedom. Faster, easier, and more seamless became synonymous with advancement, and anything that got in the way of that was deemed the enemy.

But more and more, we're realizing that this once-sexy promise of "effortless everything" is leaving a mess in its wake. Never-ending newsfeeds and unlimited mobile data are eroding our health, free next-day deliveries are burying our planet in waste, and most recently, unfettered access to AI chatbots is draining both our energy supply and our motivation. After years of flattening friction out of every experience, we're now seeing a shift where intentional obstacles are being reframed as tools for conscious living. People are starting to accept that they do need to be told "no" once in a while, after all.

This growing appetite for friction is evident across categories. In tech, tools like One Sec and ScreenZen are deliberately inserting micro-pauses before users can open addictive apps. In travel, visitor caps, rules, and fees are marking the end of limitless tourism. And in retail, some of the fastest-growing segments — made-to-order brands, refill stores, slow drops — are the least convenient. These aren't signs of a regression, but rather the start of a more thoughtful way forward.

In many ways, Asia already offers a blueprint for this mindset. From spiritual practices that reinforce restraint to how slowness is built into daily systems, things that might feel restrictive in the West are widely accepted as paths to better balance. As the rest of the world comes to the same understanding, we'll see a richer definition of freedom emerge. One defined not by the total absence of rules or limitations, but rather by the freedom to slow down, opt out, and get back to what really matters.

There's a growing cultural appetite for systems that slow us down just enough to help us choose better, consume less, and experience more.

SIGNS THAT THE WORLD IS CRAVING
THOUGHTFUL FRICTION



Social media giants are adding friction to protect their youngest users. TikTok's new nightly in-app guided meditation exercise is turned on by default for users under 18, and Pinterest is testing a new prompt encouraging minors in the U.S. and Canada to close the app and turn off notifications during school hours.



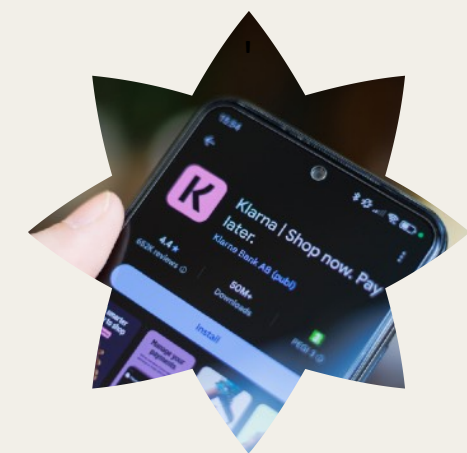
After reaching peak "smart," people are now craving a **return to tactile controls** that help them feel more connected to the physical world. Real estate agents say that more buyers are seeking low-tech and no-tech homes that require self-sufficiency, and both Volkswagen and Hyundai are swapping distracting touchscreens for physical knobs and buttons.



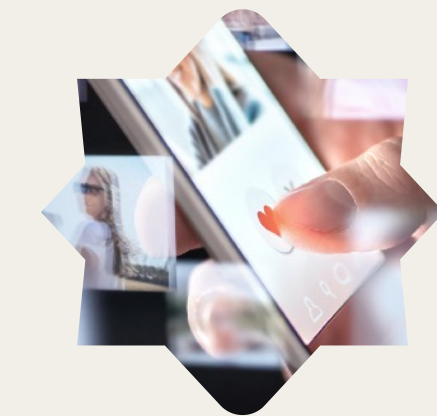
To **combat overtourism** (and the protests that come with it), popular destinations like Barcelona and Santorini are imposing tourist caps, entry fees, or total closures to preserve their cultural and natural environments.



France has passed legislation aimed at **regulating ultra-fast fashion** platforms like Shein and Temu. Key provisions include banning advertising of the cheapest clothes, imposing an environmental "eco-fee" per item, and forcing transparency around environmental impact.

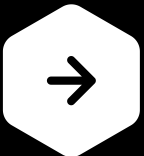


With seamless payment systems making it **way too easy to overspend**, the UK's Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) is introducing tighter regulations and mandatory affordability checks for 'Buy Now, Pay Later' services.



New **dating apps** are trading limitless choice for strict rules. For example, members-only app Cuffed limits users to just one match at a time, and European app Breeze doesn't allow people to text until the first date is booked.

Whether through tech limits or public waste systems, Asia shows us that friction can shape healthier habits at scale.



CHINA 🌟🌟🌟

STATE-LEVEL TECH LIMITS

Since 2021, minors in China are restricted to just 3 hours of video games per week, allowed only between 8–9 p.m. on weekends and holidays. Similarly, Douyin users under 14 are limited to just 40 minutes of daily screen time, with forced logouts and auto-sleep activation at 10 p.m. Content is educational and curated, with no infinite scroll.



SOUTH KOREA 🌟🌟🌟

SCHOOL SMARTPHONE BAN

Starting March 2026, mobile phones will be banned from elementary and middle schools nationwide in order to curb addiction.



JAPAN 🌟🌟🌟

WASTE MANAGEMENT

Public trash bins are rare in Japan, which forces people to carry their trash home — a daily friction that encourages waste consciousness. Trash sorting systems also require residents to meticulously wash, separate, and bag different types of waste for proper recycling.



ANTI-FOOD WASTE LAW

China's Anti-Food Waste Law, passed in 2021, aims to reduce food waste through various measures, including banning binge-eating videos, allowing restaurants to charge for excessive leftovers, and imposing fines on those who waste large quantities of food.



THAILAND 🌟🌟🌟

HIGH-VALUE, LOW-VOLUME TOURISM

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) is combatting overtourism with a new 2026 strategy titled "Value is the New Volume," which aims to trade large crowds for fewer, high-quality visitors. Meanwhile, a 300 baht (S\$11.80) tourist entry fee is expected to be introduced in Q2 or Q3 of 2026.



CASH > CARD

Japan is considered a predominantly cash-based country, with the third-highest cash usage rate (~80%) among developed nations. This slows down consumption by creating a barrier to instant spending.



INDIA 🌟🌟🌟

RESTRAIN AS A VIRTUE

Indian traditions across Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism uphold intentional limitations — fasting, silence, and stillness — as paths to clarity.

What's Next

In the face of climate collapse, digital addiction, and runaway consumption, friction is becoming an urgent form of social responsibility. But as with any cultural correction, there are risks of taking it too far — especially when limits come from the top down without transparency or trust. Friction done well creates space for reflection and intention. Friction done poorly can easily slide into surveillance, censorship, and the loss of autonomy.

That's why context matters. Friction doesn't exist in a vacuum, it functions differently in cultures with different relationships to power, freedom, and institutional trust. In places where civic trust is fragile, friction imposed from above can feel more like control than care.

The recent social media ban in Nepal is a case in point. Introduced under the banner of preserving social harmony, it was widely protested as an act of censorship by a government already facing criticism for political instability and economic hardship. In this context, friction is seen not as protection, but as repression.

This brings us to the West. Can friction thrive in a culture that prizes freedom and individual choice as a core aspect of national identity? We believe it can, but the narrative has to change. In the West, friction won't be embraced as state enforcement or top-down paternalism. It will need to emerge as opt-in structures, ethical designs, and premium restraints.

BRAND IMPLICATIONS



BUILT-IN RESTRICTIONS

In a world of overwhelming choice, people won't want to debate the ethics of every decision — they'll gravitate toward products and platforms that have thoughtful boundaries built in. Whether it's vetted B2B marketplaces that exclusively sell local goods, carbon-based consumption limits, or a waste fee that makes you think twice, the future will favor pre-engineered constraints that lighten the mental load.

FROM CAMPAIGN TO CAPABILITY

In this next era, marketing will take a back seat to infrastructures that shape healthier habits at scale. The most culturally relevant brands will be those that act like civic architects, influencing urban design, education models, and behavioral norms to support more intentional living.

DIGITAL FRICTION AS A PREMIUM

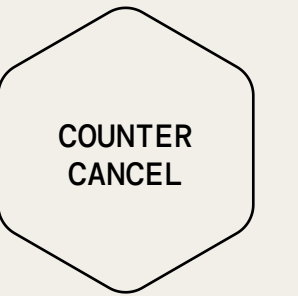
We're entering an era where tech's value may be determined by how well it protects you rather than how much freedom it gives you. The new Nxtpaper 5G Junior phone is a prime example. It can switch to a monochromatic display that reduces eye strain and discourages gaming by limiting bright visuals, and integrates parental controls and a Digital Detox mode to combat kids' phone addiction.

THE END OF FASTER = BETTER

Moments that slow people down — intentional delays, analog design, scarcity, staggered access — will become signs that your brand values mental health.



WHAT CULTURE
IS CRAVING:



Social Etiquette

Nearly half of U.S. adults say people have gotten ruder since the pandemic. After ditching formality in favor of unabashed individualism, the world is ready for a return to mutual respect.

“Speak your truth.” “Stand your ground.” “Embrace your main character energy.”

These have been the common cultural refrains of our time, creating a landscape of hyper-individualism where people were told to put themselves first. In turn, traditional social etiquette — once seen as the invisible glue of public life — was reframed as outdated, restrictive, even regressive. We ditched formal greetings, made the switch to casual dress codes, and encouraged people to “just do you” without thinking twice about how it affected those around them.

Today, the consequences of this lack of consideration are becoming more and more evident. It’s the viral videos of barefoot and belligerent airplane passengers, the widespread habit of scrolling TikTok during a meal with friends, and the fact that ghosting has become an epidemic. According to a recent [Pew Research Center survey](#), nearly half of U.S. adults (47%) say people behave more rudely in public now than they did before the pandemic. The main culprits? Smartphones, entitlement, and a general lack of boundaries. Worse yet, this lack of incivility is contagious.

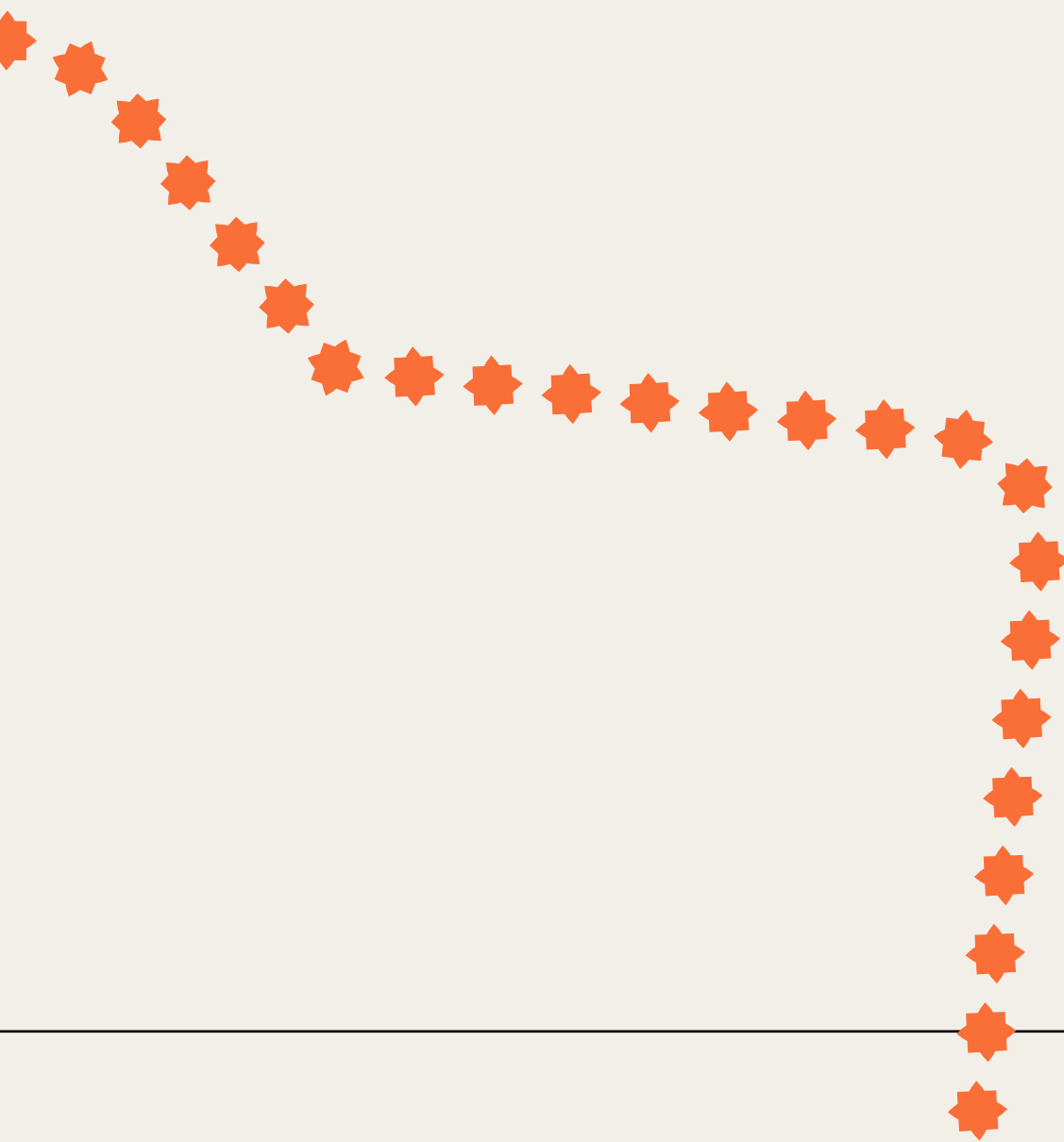
When someone disrespects you, whether in line at a coffee shop or in a comment section, you’re more likely to pass that rudeness along to someone else.

But the fact that people are calling out bad behavior can be taken as a positive sign that a course correction is coming. Vox is questioning [if we’re in a crisis of rudeness](#); the Financial Times is investigating [what happened to London Underground etiquette](#); and creators are racking up millions of views with videos outlining what constitutes proper gym etiquette, office etiquette, and texting etiquette. Even the spread of videos like “how to act like a gentleman” or “[tips for maintaining a ladylike presence](#)” show that formality is becoming aspirational again.

While the West scrambles to relearn these muscles, Asia never let them go. Across the region, manners, modesty, and shared behavioral norms are baked into formal laws as well as informal codes of conduct, showing how societies can function more gracefully when mutual respect is nonnegotiable. And in our increasingly fractured world, a little decorum is needed now more than ever.

Social codes once seen as old-fashioned are being reintroduced as helpful guides.

SIGNS THAT THE WORLD IS CRAVING SOCIAL ETIQUETTE



Modern etiquette figures like William Hanson are seeing surges in popularity, delivering bite-sized lessons on manners and interpersonal respect. His new etiquette guidebook, “Just Good Manners,” was an instant bestseller in the U.K., and he has nearly 7 million followers across Instagram and TikTok.



More parents are calling for the return of **communal kid discipline** and urging strangers to correct their kids’ behavior if they’re acting out in public.



About half of U.S. employers are now hiring etiquette coaches to train Gen Z employees in **basic workplace manners**. Examples include behavior around shared eating spaces, email and Slack etiquette, and professional presentation skills.



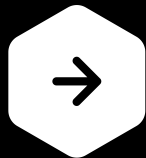
In recent years, Disney has added new language to its codes of conduct, **urging civility and warning of consequences**. At Disneyland and Walt Disney World, the company now explicitly states that guests may be removed for behavior that lacks “kindness and compassion.”



After years of dressing down, fashion and workplace culture are leaning back toward **more tailored, formal office wear**. Brands like Prada, Stella McCartney, and Uniqlo Europe are rolling out collections that reintroduce structured blazers, pencil skirts, and polished separates. “I feel like this is the fashion houses’ way of saying the power suit is back, dressing for work is back,” says image consultant Beckie Klein.



Across Asia, etiquette functions as soft infrastructure — a set of codes that preserve social harmony by showing consideration for others.



CHINA 🌟🌟🌟

ETIQUETTE CAMPAIGNS

Shanghai’s government has hosted several etiquette campaigns, such as a 2009 “Seven Nos” campaign targeting spitting, littering, vandalism, damaging greenery, jaywalking, smoking in public, and swearing. More recent examples include a 2016 campaign that addressed rowdy behavior at the Shanghai Disneyland, and efforts to improve dining etiquette during the COVID-19 pandemic.



JAPAN 🌟🌟🌟

SILENT COMMUTING

While not a formal law, Japan has strong social norms around silent commuting. Signs in train cars ask riders to turn phones to silent mode (manner mode) and avoid voice calls entirely, creating intentional social quiet zones.



INDIA 🌟🌟🌟

RESPECT FOR HIERARCHY

In India, respectful conduct is deeply embedded in everyday behavior, particularly toward elders, authority figures, and guests. Greeting elders by touching their feet (*pranam*), avoiding direct confrontation in public, and using honorifics like *ji* reflect the value placed on politeness and humility.



THAILAND 🌟🌟🌟

PUTTING OTHERS FIRST

In Thailand, etiquette is both a moral value and a cultural art form. The concept of “greng jai” (เกรงใจ) reflects a deep-rooted concern about not inconveniencing or imposing on others. This makes Thai people incredibly considerate in tone, timing, and gesture.



INDONESIA 🌟🌟🌟

BAD TOURIST CRACKDOWNS

Bali is cracking down on bad tourist behavior with new 2025 regulations. The updated laws forbid visitors from climbing sacred trees, taking inappropriate photographs at religious sites, littering, using single-use plastics, and disrespecting locals.



SINGAPORE 🌟🌟🌟

LIMITING PUBLIC CONSUMPTION

Eating and drinking on public transport has been outlawed in Singapore since 1987, and chewing gum has been banned from commercial sale since 1992. These rules create a clean, controlled public space — sacrificing convenience for collective comfort.

What's Next

In our increasingly fractured world, reintroducing basic manners may be one of the simplest ways to foster mutual respect. Even the smallest gestures, like holding the door for someone or getting dressed up for a play, create micro-moments of acknowledgement. Because if we can't manage these everyday acts of consideration, how can we possibly expect to navigate real ideological differences with any kind of grace?

Seen in this light, etiquette takes on a new kind of cultural weight. It becomes a way to signal care for the collective in a time when putting yourself first has become the default behavior both online and off.

Looking ahead, we're likely to see the rise of subtle behavioral codes across everyday contexts — new expectations for how to act in public, how to engage online, and how to show up in romantic, professional, and even civic relationships. Brands and platforms will begin to bake etiquette into their experiences, and social rewards will increasingly be tied to courtesy.

In a time when all rules and boundaries have been blurred, knowing how to behave can be a relief, not a burden.

BRAND IMPLICATIONS



RESPECT > RELEVANCE

In a culture that's facing the limits of a me-first mindset, brands can step in to foster mutual respect. We might see campaigns that invite people to rise to shared standards, or programs that help younger audiences develop the soft skills — like empathy, etiquette, and deference — that culture is beginning to value again.

REINTRODUCE BEHAVIORAL GUIDELINES

After years of casual everything, clear codes of conduct feel refreshingly helpful. Brands can eliminate confusion by setting strict community guidelines, creating onboarding journeys for new customers, and employing stewards that hold people accountable.

COMMUNAL BRANDS

For years, every brand positioned themselves as disruptors, rebels, or tools for personal empowerment. The next era will demand a shift toward community-mindedness and shared identity, where brands invite co-creation and reward acts of service.

Thank You!

Backslash is the cultural intelligence unit serving the agencies of Omnicom Advertising Group (OAG).

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