

The
Onion

양파

We all have a problem. Or that's what we'd been told millions, billions, gajillions of times. From every possible news media outlet, to isolated university academics, to data analysts who had been pumping their projections and their statistics machines nonstop—they all said basically we were screwed.

As a country. As a future. No more babies. Or the lack of babies. No children. No kids. This no more kids thing was serious we had been told. It was the beginning of the end. The end of us. While the rest of the world was fearing ozone depletion and a warmer earth, we were grappling with the onset of a future of very old people. Very old people. We were all scrambling to figure out a crisis we knew not how to solve.

Marriages had been on the steady decline for years. And now, with less marriages and a millennial generation that actually, actualized the expression, “giving a shit” or more so, “not giving a shit”, there just were no more kids. No more babies. No more youth to continue the struggle. But what could this all mean for our future? Nobody knew. Nobody knew anything. Nobody knew nothing. Nothing.

For the most part, historically, the Korean government its national policies had been so far pretty smart. Quite informed. Quite intelligent. The Korean government, with all its layers of bureaucracy and infinitely complex politics, had made some clever, perhaps ingenious moves. Such maneuvers were not directly responsible for, but could definitely claim some influence to good things like high speed connectivity, stem cell advancement, urban mobility systems, social welfare. Even abstract concepts like the Korean wave, the global phenomenon of Korean pop culture or the Koreanness of everything in the mid 2020s had a helping hand from the Korean government. But this time, the Korean government had not come up with any significant contributions to this no baby thing. Now, in a not too distant future, we had kind of run out of answers. Or not so much

running out of answers, we were actually just answerless. The country had gotten old. Just old. And there was not much anybody could do about this. The government policies to counter this in the 2020s were limited and for the most part mostly unsuccessful. Most of them were aimed at easing the financial burdens of raising a baby. Family support policies, infrastructure for childcare, housing support—these were the typical assumptions and solutions of the government at this time. It was logical to think that people could not afford babies. And therefore, it just made sense to make efforts to ease the financial burden of raising kids. But these tactics sadly had their limits. Limited in scope and limited in reach. For a country that had been pioneering concepts such as “smart” cities, LTE networks or even radical concepts like digital healthcare, this was the best they could come up with? Hardly inspiring. And sadly, ultimately, extremely futile. None of these policies were working. Nothing was working. Still no kids. The overall population continued to decline year by year. And in what was commonly seen as a last minute move of desperation, the Korean government set up a task force to investigate baby making processes in full detail. Was there anything, anything not yet thought of that the Korean government could implement? Anything that could help bring back the babies? This task force was assembled to think outside of the box. Outside the box. Thinking outside a box with perhaps not much left inside. Outside. The box.

This was the 2020s. This was the real birth of the ADHD¹ generation. Like the zombie apocalypse before this, a whole generation of smartphone addicts who consumed now, short form, social media content consisting of succinct, several second film clips for sometimes 5 to 7 hours a day, had become the majority. Everybody would not admit they were addicted but deep down inside, they knew they were addicted. Absolutely. It was a

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Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is marked by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development.

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd>

both invisible and visible sickness. Invisible because nobody knew what anybody was looking at on these phones. But visible because everybody was obviously looking at these phones. Couples eating dinner while no longer looking at each other. Couples who would only look at their phones and stop conversing at all for that matter. It was far more interesting to look at the phone. Far easier. Far more engaging. This was a generation of people who felt their hands subconsciously and sadly, consciously, reaching for their pockets every few minutes for that quick dopamine burst. An irresistible urge to check their phones. Even just for things like email. A small hit of email. A small hit of email? New mail? Was there a new message? It was sad. Quite sad. But this was life. Thank you Steve Jobs. Your vision for the world had become the world. Congratulations.

This ADHD generation could no longer read books. It was impossible now. It was completely impossible to read more than a few pages before getting that itch for another dopamine hit. Just a few pages and then boredom. Just a few pages and the hand starts inching towards that phone again.

And sadly, this ADHD generation, had much of the same response to even meeting real people. Even at live, public events. Real, physical appointments. Or even while dating.

This generation would find themselves unable to engage with the actual situation at hand. Instead, their hands, their minds would have this itch. This itch that could only be cured by their phones. Real things stood no chance of competing with these phones. Even real conversations, real interactions, real people. Even the super interesting, the super engaging humans in the flesh could no longer maintain the same attention that these phones could. Sad. Quite sad. But this was the new normal. And this particular government task force, different from ones before it, had a particular interest in this new normal. This task force had numerous suspicions

about this ADHD phenomenon. While other task forces were again, focused on the economic maneuvers that could perhaps ignite a baby producing generation, this particular force was curious about an increasingly despondent society. A society with an inching to zero attention span. A society that could not sit still. Or sadly enough, a society that no longer read.

For all its advancements and technological prowess, Korea maintained a sometimes very classic or traditional approach towards dating. For the most part, the dating process evolved in extremely slow increments. Despite the emergence of dating apps based on big data and 200 question surveys, this millennial generation still found themselves sometimes resorting to timeless, classic dating concepts like the “sogae-ting²” or hoping perhaps to meet somebody at work or at school. And this newly formed task force was interested in how ADHD worked in tandem with these slowly evolving dating processes. They had quickly discovered that the reality was that this ADHD generation in particular was one that had continuously been fed unreasonable amounts of unrealistic content. Fake might be an appropriate word but perhaps life-like could be better. Or hyper real? This generation was constantly following influencers on social media who might take 100 pictures only to eventually show just one photo out of that 100. And this photo, that special, selected one out of that 100, just happened to be amazingly, stunningly, suspiciously, truly perfect. Showing an almost unreal situation and capturing a perfect moment out of many imperfect moments. On top of that, this photo also happened to be heavily edited digitally to show something even more closer to perfect than perfect could be? Super perfect. And to even take it to yet another level, some computer savvy influencers would create combinations of real people with

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A sogae-ting is a kind of arranged date. In the past it would be parents introducing their children in the hopes of creating a potential marriage. But it later evolved to even friends introducing friends for dating.

AI³ assisted image and video manipulation. Real meets hyper real meets unreal meets fantasy. The ultimate results of this? An unrealistic skewing of realistic expectations. And so this task force had discovered that the dopamine rush now required more. The dopamine rush required now an amazing amount of fantasy. The dopamine would not rush like it used to without such fantasy. Everything had to be super. Hyper. Real people were now second tier. Real people were just not as interesting. Real people that looked like real people were far below that dopamine kick. Far below that threshold. The spectacle, the fantasy of the hyper beautiful, the sensational. These became the standard. This was the new normal.

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AI. Artificial intelligence. The use or study of computer systems or machines that have some of the qualities that the human brain has, such as the ability to interpret and produce language in a way that seems human, recognize or create images, solve problems, and learn from data supplied to them.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/artificial-intelligence>

This task force had conclusively determined, that this, the attention deprived, dopamine addicted environment that we were all living in was, perhaps just as much as any other possible reason, affecting the absence of babies. People were still dating. But the joy of a real date could not compare to hyper reality. And even on a somewhat successful date, the participants were not stimulated enough to continue forward with the dating process. It was cumbersome. Slow. Too involved. Too complicated. It was far easier to scroll through images and videos with the thumb and find equal if not more satisfaction with the unreal.

Ladies and gentlemen, please allow yourselves to give a warm, heartfelt welcome to the “Yoo Dong Jin Act.” Sometimes certain Korean government initiatives took on human names for both symbolic or identification reasons. The Kim Young-ran Act⁴ was an initiative in 2016 that was created to abolish corrupt practices of bribery behind closed doors. And although extremely difficult to enforce by law,

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The Kim Young-ran act. Otherwise known as the Improper Solicitation and Graft Act, proposed in 2012 by Kim Young-ran, the then head of the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission. A law set up to curb the heavy bribing and corruption of people who were in positions of power and certain gifts they could receive from regular people.

the law was followed by what had always been, a very good samaritan citizen base in Korea. You could not gift certain food items above 30,000 KRW or give gifts of more than 50,000KRW. Or something like that. The Yoo Dong Jin Act act was a product of years of research conducted by this task force. It was essentially a dating policy. It was a kind of crazy law that simply stated when dating, a minimum of seven dates must be undertaken before exiting the relationship. Seven dates? What? What kind of craziness is this and how could the government be involved in personal dating or relationships? Crazy. Just crazy. Yes. Initiated by the government. Yes. Extremely likely to fail. Yes. For sure.

The Yoo Dong Jin Act from the onset seemed to be forever on the brink of failure. The act took quite some time to take hold. There was great disbelief upon its announcement. It was shocking. Just madness. The government was demanding what now? Absurd. What kind of crazy people were running this country? Or so everyone thought. But like any and all Korean laws, a law was a law. And in this generally compliant, kind, obedient society of just nice folks, people actually were polite and followed all laws. And as crazy as this law was, people somehow started to adapt and adjust to the Yoo Dong Jin Act Act like any other act before it. Casual dating or the concept of fling-like, casual dating was the first to change. Or rather, not exactly change, but more or less disappear all together. People began to be quite serious when engaging in what was perceived as a date. For they knew, there was an unwritten but binding agreement for six more successive dates afterwards. And so there was confusion and apprehension even in what previously were considered casual dating encounters. But as with all things, nature makes ⁷adjustments. People make adjustments. After a while, these seven dates, well, this was standard. This became the way things were and seven dates were just

now a part of the process. This crazy law somehow became normal. The new normal.

So what was the logic behind this law? This task force had determined that in fact most people were quite compatible. At the very core, very compatible. And that love could form even from the most unlikely of human combinations. But to discover such love in contemporary relationships was, in its current material form, impossible. Why was it impossible? Well, as far back as anybody could remember, a heavy focus on external appearance was a very Korean thing. A very standard Korean thing. Something that had been around for generations upon generations. Korea had for the longest time an unusual array of hyper beauty standards that were so high, so hyper, they had already given rise to an epic era of intense plastic surgery. Such standards had created a large population of people who were not satisfied with their appearances and unfortunately, for the most part, not satisfied with the appearances of others as well. So, not only was ADHD part of the equation. But this in tandem with these hyper beauty standards here made it impossible for “normal” or “sub normal” people to succeed in relationships. And by normal, we mean normal in appearance. Unrealistic beauty standards paired with again, unrealistic expectations ultimately equaled disappointment with everything that was real.

This task force had also ultimately discovered that the failure rate of “sogaeting” was astronomical. Nobody had done such in-depth research on this “sogaeting” phenomenon before, but the results were astounding. Well, perhaps more so astounding with a dash of pathetic. The data showed that this kind of dating almost never worked. And for a huge majority the reasons for failure were simply the aforementioned beauty standards in combination with these

shortened attention spans. This rendered almost everybody unattractive. Whether they were attractive or not, nobody could compete with the unreal. When meeting somebody for the first time, sadly, neither corresponding participant could match any of these now sky high expectations. Even for women, who, historically were more “forgiving” in terms of looks. Women, who proudly proclaimed that looks did not matter to them entirely, well this task force had ultimately determined that this was far from the truth. Looks did indeed matter. Looks mattered for everyone in this time.

Height, or lack of height, skin complexion, teeth, eyes, nose, obesity, hair loss or unnecessary hair growth. All of these things ultimately did matter. This, in combination with the accelerated rate of visual assessment through smart phone applications where swipe gestures completed a date rejection in less than a micro second. This was sadness. A generation with no hope. A generation that was screwed.

But how could such a crazy law work? How could such a law be enforced? There were supposed fines for not adhering to this new law. As with previous national policies, the if, when and how of these fines being implemented was abstract. The power of this law was perhaps more in rumors and hearsay.

There were rumors that so and so got fined. Or that there was a certain penalty in this situation. This was enough for the people to believe.

Society had adjusted. Society had evolved. People could change. This new law eventually took on a kind of cute, homemade nickname later. Some people started calling it the “onion law.” For any couple that went on this succession of seven dates, people started to begin to symbolize this drawn out process to the peeling of the layers of an onion. With every successive layer, more complexity, more vibrancy, something more potent and sometimes, more tears. This

term onion, strangely began to take on a somewhat positive connotation. Cute. Curious. Alive. Potent. People began to acknowledge the conceptual component of peeling human layers. There was a certain rawness at the core of humans that had long gone unnoticed, untouched. A potent, powerful entity that for thousands of years had been hidden to eyes unable to see through escalated human vanity and decreasing attention spans. The onion metaphor was strangely apropos. For like an onion, the dating process or even human relations were not necessarily something pleasant. These interactions were not something beautiful or more so, instantly beautiful. There were emotions. There were tears. Obviously. Most of these date pairings, all had some form of conflict. As it was a succession of dates and not just one date, some kind of conflict was actually unavoidable. Often times, by the third or fourth date, there was something obviously undesirable that came to light. Something that in any normal circumstances or in the past would equal an exit to the relationship. But this law somehow made and demanded for more dates. And in many cases, that one more date could do things. One more date. That one more date was strangely often enough to patch things up. To overcome said conflict. It was one more date than had happened in classic, traditional dating processes. And it was that important. One more date to fix things.

These seven dates typically went through a cycle or certain cycles. Most of the time, there was actually not much attraction at first between the dating parties. At the first passing of this law, it was a rather huge issue because people were so apprehensive to go on dates due to the seven day commitment. And so if there was no attraction at all, there were at first, no dates to be initiated. But people had to adjust. People had to evolve. People had to date. And people did start to date. And perhaps more importantly, people started to complete the seven date requirement. And this was how things started to change.

People could notice something happening. Something was indeed happening. Everywhere. Societal data began to gather. Societal big data. Rumors. Rumors that were later found to be truth. Rumors soon spread, as they do, of the onion. This curious onion. This onion. This was a thing now. The onion. And one had to experience it. Or so we heard.

“You have to try the onion. It’s not as bad as you think. I truly had no idea what I was getting into. But you have to try it for yourself. Can’t explain what happens. It’s too complicated. Too hard to explain. But it is worth trying at least once.”

The rumors that were shared often concluded that it was best not to judge somebody on a shabby or unattractive exterior. Like an onion. For every suspect facade, the rumors had it that there was always something raw, real, fascinating and perhaps beautifully pungent sitting inside. It just took some time to figure that out. And after some time, people really did figure this out. Soon, the onion became a kind of game. People wanted to try the onion. And while experiencing the onion, people were looking for ways to figure out the mysterious core of the onion. The core that was not readily apparent at first glance or on the first date? How could one determine what was inside? It was almost near impossible at first. But people can figure things out. And people began to acknowledge the necessity of a seven date cycle in order to even get close to figuring such things out. What was inside the onion? It took seven days even to begin to get a glimpse of these things. Abstract things such as humor, warmth. Gentleness. Kindness. Concepts that typically would never manifest on a first date. These kind of things would never manifest themselves in a digital image. But these abstract concepts, these became small treasures. Treasures that people knew they might find when beginning the onion. And with every successive date, some of these treasures became unlocked. Unlocked like levels. Levels in a game. This became a thing. A thing of its own. Look for the

signs they said. Hard to see them but they are there if you look hard enough. Look for the small things. The subtle things. See if you can see the signs of something underneath. Something there. And when you see such signs, better yet, don't stop. Look further. Dig further. Go further. There might be something there. Perhaps something meaningful sits there. Perhaps something meaningful lives there, underneath. Something is there. Spirits? Perhaps? Perhaps? Maybe not quite a spirit. Perhaps a human. A real human being. Somebody. Sitting somewhere inside there, was somebody waiting for another somebody.

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Waiting.
There, but waiting.
Somebody.

Appendix 1: The Stomach

People started to add certain unwritten rules to the “onion law.” Things that kind of became unspoken etiquette and unspoken ceremonies that made this potent onion process all the more interesting. One of these was the simple act of cooking. It was an unwritten rule that during these seven days, each participant would have to cook one home made meal for each other. The reason this became part of the process was that people began to discover that such acts of service, the simple act of cooking, had some magical powers in and of itself. Even the most unattractive person, when whipping together a simple plate of basil pesto penne or Monterey Jack cheese topped shin ramen, inched that one step closer to being attractive. This was the magic of giving. The magic of sensorial giving. A delicious meal could heal the most destructive argument and also break, even the most callous human beings. It was magic. And it was an unofficial part of the seven date process. Some people used it as an intermediary to resolve arguments. Some people used this as a way to close out the seven dates, kind of the like the relief pitcher in baseball. A way to seal the deal. Either way, the hands that cook, also became a part of the dating process. The senses of touch, taste and smell. These two were part of this onion process. They say the belly feels things. That you have to go with your guts. This unwritten rule created a way for stomachs to talk to other stomachs. The stomach knew what the eyes did not. The stomach could be trusted while the eyes could not.

Appendix 2: The Worlds Wants The Onion

The onion, like Hallyu, BTS, Korean cinema, soon somehow became a global phenomenon. Somehow. Coincidentally. Amazingly. There was absolutely no way to predict how this random law, this law that was at first so intensely criticized, this law that was predicted to be an absolute failure, could have found such footing. This law that was thought to be an invasion of privacy. How a random law could have become a global phenomenon was unfathomable. But it did. People heard about the onion all over the world. And they wanted in. They wanted to experience such things. The same social media that had created a generation of limited attention was now being used to spread the quirks and perks of this thing called the onion. In a short amount of time, this onion became a bandaid for humanity. Healing wounds. Healing ancient sufferings. The sufferings of a world obsessed with vision. The sufferings of a history obsessed with physical appearance. And this strange law, this strange thing known as the onion, had changed that. From the Philippines to Canada, the onion became a thing. Somehow, another bizarre triumph or victory of the Korean government.

Appendix 3: Different, Not Necessarily Better

The onion, as global phenomenon, had changed things. But were things for the better? Not sure. Divorce and divorce rates stayed relatively the same. Despite an increase in relationships and long term couples, the conflicts that culminate in divorce were still unavoidable. Were there more babies? Yes. But not in the quantities that the task force had hoped for. Were people happier? Perhaps this could be a definitive yes. A large section of society who had, for quite some time, been excluded from dating activities were now involved. Part of something they had not been before. And this for sure spiked an uptick in overall societal happiness. But were things better? This was a question that this government task force could not answer in confidence. Things were different. But not necessarily better.