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Work, merit and recognition: identity construction in two capitalisms

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Research Article

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Abstract

This article explores how young people in Italy and Japan experience work as a source of identity, recognition, and psychological pressure. Drawing on a comparative qualitative methodology and grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Axel Honneth, Michael Sandel, Takehiko Kariya, and the critique of the performance society (Marcuse, Han, Chicchi & Simone), the study analyzes 24 in-depth interviews (17 Italian, 7 Japanese) supported by broader survey data. In Italy, the findings reveal a widespread sense of frustration and disillusionment, rooted in the misalignment between education and employment, the erosion of expectations, and the denial of recognition. In Japan, the research highlights a strong identification with the company, accompanied by performance anxiety, fear of failure, and the internalization of meritocratic pressure. Extreme responses such as hikikomori and karoshi are interpreted as structurally coherent reactions to a system that equates value with conformity and endurance. The discussion frames work as a mirror of the self: when recognition is absent, identity fractures. The article concludes by reflecting on the psychological cost of invisibility and the urgent need for new narratives of value beyond performance, with implications for mental health and youth policy.

1. Introduction

In late modern societies, work has ceased to be merely a means of subsistence. It has become, instead, a central axis around which identity, recognition, and social legitimacy are constructed. The individual is no longer defined solely by personal relationships or civic belonging, but increasingly by their capacity to perform, to produce, and to be seen as “useful” within the economic order. This transformation is not neutral: it reflects a profound shift in the moral grammar of our time, where the value of a person is often measured by their productivity, adaptability, and success.

The centrality of work in shaping identity is not a new phenomenon, but its current configuration is unprecedented. In the past, identity was often inherited—rooted in family, tradition, or religion. Today, it is increasingly earned, negotiated, and performed. The subject is called upon to “become themselves” through work, to express their uniqueness while conforming to the demands of flexibility, efficiency, and competitiveness. This paradox—between authenticity and adaptation—generates tensions that are particularly acute among younger generations, who are entering a labour market marked by precarity, overqualification, and the erosion of traditional guarantees.

In this context, the concept of recognition becomes crucial. As Axel Honneth (1992) has argued, identity is not a solitary construction, but a relational process that depends on being seen, valued, and affirmed by others. Work, in this sense, is not only a source of income, but a stage on which the individual seeks esteem, dignity, and social visibility. When this recognition is denied—through unemployment, underemployment, or the mismatch between aspirations and reality—the consequences are not merely economic, but existential. The subject experiences a fracture between who they are and who they are allowed to be.

This article explores these dynamics through a comparative lens, focusing on the experiences of young people in Italy and Japan—two countries that, despite their cultural differences, are both deeply marked by the logic of performance and the ideology of merit. Drawing on qualitative data and thematic coding, the analysis investigates how work functions as a mirror of the self, how failure becomes a crisis of identity, and how recognition—or its absence—shapes the trajectories of young lives.

The centrality of work in shaping identity cannot be understood without considering the concept of recognition. As Axel Honneth has argued, recognition is not a luxury of social life—it is its very condition. The subject becomes such only insofar as they are recognized in their dignity, their rights, and their contribution. In this framework, work is not merely a technical activity, but a symbolic one: it is the space where the individual seeks social esteem, where they hope to be seen as valuable, competent, and worthy. When this recognition is denied, the subject does not simply lose income—they lose a part of themselves.

In the meritocratic logic, this recognition is no longer unconditional. It is earned, negotiated, and often withheld. Michael Sandel, in his critique of meritocracy, speaks of a “tyranny of merit” in which success is interpreted as moral desert, and failure as personal fault. The subject internalizes this logic, and begins to see their own suffering not as the result of structural injustice, but as the consequence of not having “done enough.” In this way, meritocracy becomes a moral regime, one that punishes silently and rewards selectively. The subject is no longer simply evaluated—they are judged.

This dynamic is particularly acute in the Japanese context, where meritocracy has taken on hyper-formalized and institutionalized forms. As Kariya has shown, the Japanese educational and corporate systems are structured around a rigid logic of performance, in which the individual is expected to conform, excel, and never falter. The company becomes not only a workplace, but a moral community, a surrogate family, and a mirror of the self. The failure to enter or remain within this system is not simply a career setback—it is an existential rupture.

The performance society, as described by thinkers such as Marcuse, Han, and Chicchi & Simone, does not merely ask the subject to work—it asks them to become their work. The principle of performance becomes totalizing: it colonizes time, emotion, desire, and even leisure. The subject is no longer allowed to rest unless they have earned it. The logic is circular: one works to deserve rest, and rests only to work better. As Marcuse wrote, “the repression is not only economic—it is libidinal.” The subject sacrifices pleasure, spontaneity, and even identity in the name of productivity.

In this system, failure is not tolerated. It is pathologized, silenced, or punished. The subject who does not perform is not simply inefficient—they are invisible. And invisibility, in a society that equates visibility with value, is a form of death. The subject disappears from the symbolic order, and with them, their right to be recognized.

This article seeks to explore how these dynamics manifest in the lived experiences of young people in Italy and Japan. Through a comparative lens, it examines how recognition, meritocracy, and the

performance society shape identity, generate suffering, and produce forms of resistance—silent or explicit, individual or collective.

In light of these theoretical premises, this article poses a central question:
How do young people in Italy and Japan experience work as a source of identity, recognition, and pressure?

This question is not merely descriptive—it is diagnostic. It seeks to uncover how the subject, immersed in a society that demands performance and promises recognition only to the deserving, constructs their sense of self through work. It interrogates the emotional, symbolic, and relational dimensions of labour, and how these are shaped by cultural, institutional, and economic contexts.

Italy and Japan offer two particularly significant case studies. In Italy, the mismatch between education and employment, the precariousness of contracts, and the erosion of future prospects generate a widespread sense of frustration and disillusionment. In Japan, by contrast, the company often becomes a surrogate identity, a space of belonging—but also of anxiety, overwork, and silent suffering. In both cases, work is not simply what one does—it is what one is allowed to be.

Through a comparative and qualitative approach, this study explores how recognition is granted or denied, how merit is constructed or deconstructed, and how the subject resists, adapts, or collapses under the weight of performance. The aim is not to generalize, but to listen—to the voices, the silences, and the fractures that emerge when identity is negotiated through labour.

To explore the research question in depth, this study adopts a comparative qualitative approach, grounded in thematic coding. The method is not neutral—it is situated, reflective, and attentive to the voices of those who speak, as well as to the silences of those who cannot. The comparative dimension is not used to generalize, but to illuminate: to understand how different cultural, institutional, and symbolic contexts shape the experience of work, recognition, and identity.

The analysis draws on a corpus of interviews conducted in Italy and Japan, selected through criteria of relevance and diversity, and interpreted through a coding process that privileges meaning over measurement. The thematic coding does not seek to quantify, but to reveal patterns, tensions, and contradictions. It is a method that listens, that traces the emergence of subjectivity in the folds of discourse, and that recognizes the complexity of lived experience.

The comparative lens allows us to observe not only differences, but also resonances: the Italian frustration and disillusionment, the Japanese anxiety and conformity, the shared desire to be seen, valued, and understood. It is in this space—between cultures, between expectations, between selves—that the analysis unfolds.

2. Theoretical Framework

Recognition and Identity: Honneth's Spheres of Recognition

The construction of identity is not a solitary act. It is a relational process, shaped by the gaze of the other, by the social fabric in which the subject is embedded, and by the forms of recognition that society makes available—or denies. In this sense, recognition is not a secondary need, but a primary condition for the development of the self. As Axel Honneth has argued, identity is formed through three fundamental spheres of recognition: love, rights, and esteem.

The first sphere, love, refers to the intimate relationships that provide the emotional security necessary for the emergence of a stable self. It is in the experience of being loved—by parents, partners, or close friends—that the subject learns to value themselves as a person. This recognition is not mediated by performance or merit; it is unconditional. Yet, in a society increasingly governed by the logic of productivity, even this sphere risks being contaminated by the imperative to "deserve" affection.

The second sphere, rights, concerns the recognition of the individual as a moral and legal subject, endowed with dignity and entitled to equal treatment. It is the foundation of citizenship and of the modern idea of justice. However, when access to work becomes a condition for full participation in society—as in the case of welfare conditionality or the stigmatization of the unemployed—this recognition becomes selective. Those who do not work, or who do not work "enough," risk being excluded from the symbolic community of the deserving.

The third sphere, social esteem, is perhaps the most fragile and contested. It refers to the recognition of the individual's contribution to the shared life of the community. In contemporary societies, this contribution is often measured through work. One is valued not for who they are, but for what they do—and how well they do it. This creates a hierarchy of worth, in which certain professions, roles, and performances are celebrated, while others are rendered invisible. The subject internalizes this logic, and begins to see their own value as conditional upon their productivity.

In this framework, work becomes not only a means of survival, but a mirror of the self. It is the space where the subject seeks recognition, constructs identity, and negotiates their place in the world. When this recognition is denied—through unemployment, precariousness, or the mismatch between aspirations and reality—the consequences are not merely economic. They are existential. The subject experiences a fracture between who they are and who they are allowed to be.

This theoretical lens will guide the analysis of the empirical material, allowing us to understand how young people in Italy and Japan experience work not only as a task, but as a terrain of recognition, a battlefield of identity, and a source of both dignity and suffering.

The promise of meritocracy is seductive: it tells us that success is earned, that effort is rewarded, and that the individual is the sole architect of their destiny. It is a narrative that flatters the winners and silences the losers. But as Michael Sandel has argued, this promise conceals a deeper violence. In a society governed by the "tyranny of merit," failure is no longer seen as the result of structural injustice or

unequal starting points—it is interpreted as a personal fault, a moral deficiency. The subject who does not succeed is not simply unlucky; they are undeserving.

This logic produces what Sandel calls a “rhetoric of desert,” in which the successful are encouraged to believe that they have earned everything, and the unsuccessful are left to internalize shame, guilt, and invisibility. The result is a society that divides, isolates, and humiliates. The meritocratic ideal, far from promoting justice, becomes a mechanism of exclusion. It rewards those who already possess the cultural, economic, and symbolic capital to succeed, while blaming those who do not.

In the Japanese context, this dynamic takes on even more rigid and institutionalized forms. As Kariya has shown, the Japanese system of education and employment is structured around a hyper-meritocratic logic, in which the individual is subjected to continuous evaluation, classification, and ranking. From the earliest stages of schooling, students are trained to compete, to conform, and to suppress any deviation from the norm. The university entrance exam becomes a rite of passage, a symbolic threshold that determines not only one’s academic future, but one’s social value.

This system does not merely select—it shapes. It produces a subject who is disciplined, silent, and anxious. The company becomes the new family, the workplace the new temple of recognition. But this recognition is conditional, fragile, and often cruel. Those who fail to enter the system, or who fall out of it, are not simply unemployed—they are erased. The phenomenon of hikikomori, the silent retreat of thousands of young people from public life, is not a pathology of the individual, but a symptom of a system that does not tolerate fragility.

In both Italy and Japan, the meritocratic ideal functions as a moral economy. It distributes not only resources, but meaning. It tells the subject who they are, what they are worth, and whether they deserve to be seen. And when the answer is negative, the consequences are not only material—they are ontological. The subject ceases to exist in the eyes of others, and often, in their own.

In the contemporary landscape, work is no longer simply a means of production—it is a space of subjectivation. The individual is not only asked to work, but to become their work. The performance society, as described by thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse, Byung-Chul Han, and Chicchi & Simone, does not merely demand productivity; it demands identity. The subject is no longer alienated in the classical Marxist sense, but incorporated—absorbed into the very logic of performance, which becomes the dominant grammar of existence.

Marcuse had already warned of this in the 1960s, when he spoke of the “principle of performance” as a new form of repression. In a society where needs are no longer natural but manufactured, the subject is persuaded to sacrifice desire in the name of productivity. The repression is no longer external, but internalized. The subject works not because they are forced to, but because they believe they must. They are convinced that their value depends on their ability to perform, to produce, to excel. The result is what Marcuse called a “one-dimensional man,” anesthetized and functional, who confuses freedom with efficiency.

Byung-Chul Han radicalizes this diagnosis. In his analysis, the disciplinary society described by Foucault—made of prisons, hospitals, and factories—has been replaced by a society of performance, populated by gyms, coworking spaces, and motivational slogans. The subject is no longer oppressed by external constraints, but by the imperative to be free, to be creative, to be "the best version of themselves." The neoliberal subject is not coerced—it is self-exploiting. It internalizes the logic of the market, and applies it to every sphere of life: relationships, emotions, even rest. As Han writes, "the subject of performance is both master and slave."

Chicchi and Simone, in their analysis of the "società della prestazione," describe this condition as a form of anthropophagy. The system does not simply use the subject—it devours them. It asks for total investment: not only time and energy, but also passion, creativity, and identity. The subject is asked to be flexible, resilient, and above all, enthusiastic. Even suffering must be productive. Even failure must be narrated as a lesson. The result is a subject who is always active, always available, always "on." A subject who no longer knows how to rest, or even how to desire.

In this context, success becomes a moral obligation, and failure a form of shame. The "tyranny of success" does not punish with violence, but with invisibility. Those who do not perform disappear from the symbolic order. They are no longer seen, no longer heard, no longer counted. The subject who fails is not simply excluded—they are erased. And in a society where being seen is the condition for being, this erasure is a form of symbolic death.

Work, then, becomes a mirror of the self—but a distorting one. It reflects not who the subject is, but who they are expected to be. It demands coherence, efficiency, and positivity. It does not tolerate contradiction, fragility, or slowness. And when the subject cannot keep up, when they fall, when they break, the system does not stop. It accelerates. It asks for more.

This framework will guide the analysis of the empirical material, allowing us to understand how young people in Italy and Japan experience work not only as a task, but as a terrain of identity, a battlefield of recognition, and a source of both meaning and suffering.

The experience of work, recognition, and identity is never neutral—it is always culturally situated. The subject does not emerge in a vacuum, but within a symbolic order shaped by values, norms, and expectations that vary across societies. To understand how young people in Italy and Japan experience the pressures of performance and the search for recognition, it is essential to consider the cultural frameworks that structure their perception of self and others.

Geert Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions offers a useful entry point. Among the six dimensions he identifies, the axis of individualism versus collectivism is particularly relevant. Italy, with its emphasis on personal autonomy, self-expression, and individual achievement, scores high on individualism. The Italian subject is encouraged to "follow their dreams," to assert their uniqueness, and to seek recognition through personal fulfillment. Yet, when the labour market fails to offer real opportunities, this ideal turns

into frustration. The subject is told they can be anything—only to discover that the system does not allow it.

Japan, by contrast, is situated at the opposite end of the spectrum. It is a collectivist society, where identity is defined in relation to the group—be it the family, the school, or the company. The subject is not expected to stand out, but to harmonize. As the Japanese proverb goes, "□□□□□□□□□" ("The nail that sticks out gets hammered down"). In this context, work is not only a means of survival or self-expression—it is a duty, a form of belonging, a moral obligation. Recognition is granted not to the most original, but to the most loyal, the most silent, the most conforming.

Edward T. Hall's distinction between high-context and low-context cultures further illuminates these dynamics. Italy, as a low-context culture, privileges explicit communication, negotiation, and verbal expression. Conflict can be voiced, and dissent, while not always welcomed, is at least thinkable. Japan, as a high-context culture, relies on implicit codes, shared understandings, and non-verbal cues. Silence is not absence—it is meaning. In such a context, the pressure to perform is not shouted—it is whispered, internalized, and rarely questioned.

Fons Trompenaars adds another layer with his distinction between universalism and particularism. In universalist cultures like Japan, rules are applied uniformly, and deviation is sanctioned. In particularist cultures like Italy, exceptions are negotiated, and personal relationships often override formal norms. This affects not only how work is organized, but how recognition is distributed. In Japan, the subject must fit the mold; in Italy, the mold can sometimes be bent—but only for those who know how to play the game.

These cultural dimensions do not determine behaviour, but they shape the symbolic landscape in which the subject moves. They influence how success is defined, how failure is interpreted, and how identity is constructed. In both Italy and Japan, the performance society imposes its logic—but it does so through different grammars, different rituals, and different silences.

Understanding these cultural frameworks is essential to interpreting the empirical material. It allows us to see not only what is said, but what is not said. Not only what is done, but what is expected. And it reminds us that behind every discourse of merit, every narrative of success, and every silence of failure, there is a culture that speaks.

3. Methodology

Comparative Qualitative Design

This study adopts a comparative qualitative methodology, grounded in the principles of systematic comparison as articulated by Smelser (1992), Fideli (1998), and Marradi (1987). The research design is situated within the tradition of medium-range comparative approaches, which aim to generate context-sensitive insights without assuming universal generalizability. The comparison between Italy and Japan

is not intended to produce normative hierarchies, but rather to illuminate the culturally situated ways in which young people experience work, recognition, and performance pressure.

The empirical foundation of this study consists of 24 in-depth interviews, conducted with young people in Italy and Japan. The sample includes 17 Italian participants and 7 Japanese participants, selected from a broader dataset of over 200 responses to a structured questionnaire. The selection was guided by the aim of capturing a range of experiences across different employment statuses, educational backgrounds, and socio-demographic profiles, while maintaining a focus on the youth population.

Participants were aged between their early twenties and early thirties, a life stage marked by the transition from education to the labour market and the consolidation of adult identity. The Italian interviewees were drawn from various regions, including both urban and semi-urban contexts, while the Japanese participants were primarily based in metropolitan areas, reflecting the concentration of employment opportunities and the centrality of corporate culture in urban Japan.

The interviews were conducted in the participants' native languages—Italian and Japanese—, sometimes English, and later translated into English for comparative analysis. The translation process was carried out with particular attention to preserving the semantic and cultural nuances of key expressions, especially those related to work, identity, and social pressure. In cases where culturally specific terms were used, such as "□□□□□□□□" ("The nail that sticks out gets hammered down"), the original expression was retained alongside an English translation to ensure interpretive accuracy.

The sample was not intended to be statistically representative, but rather theoretically informative. The goal was to explore the subjective meanings attributed to work, merit, and recognition, and to identify recurring patterns and divergences across the two national contexts. The diversity within the sample—particularly in terms of gender, employment status, and educational trajectories—allowed for a nuanced understanding of how young people navigate the demands of the performance society and the expectations of their cultural environments.

The analysis of the interviews was conducted through a thematic coding approach, combining inductive sensitivity with a theoretically informed lens. This method allowed for the emergence of recurring patterns and latent meanings within the narratives, while remaining anchored in the conceptual framework outlined in Section 2—particularly the notions of recognition (Honneth), meritocracy (Sandel, Kariya), and the performance society (Marcuse, Han, Chicchi & Simone).

The coding process unfolded in multiple stages. Initially, each interview transcript was read in full to gain a holistic understanding of the participant's experience. During this phase, preliminary codes were noted, often reflecting emotionally charged expressions, contradictions, or recurring metaphors. These initial codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories, which were iteratively refined through constant comparison across cases and national contexts.

The coding was conducted manually, without the use of automated software, in order to preserve the interpretive depth and cultural specificity of the material. Particular attention was paid to culturally embedded expressions—such as the Japanese proverb "□□□□□□□□" ("The nail that sticks out gets hammered down") or the Italian lament "Ho studiato per questo?" ("I studied for this?")—which were treated not merely as linguistic curiosities but as condensed articulations of broader social logics.

The themes that emerged were not imposed a priori but were allowed to surface through the narratives themselves, in dialogue with the theoretical framework. Among the most salient were: the misalignment between education and employment; the internalization of failure; the role of family expectations; the anxiety of performance; and the search for recognition in a society that increasingly equates value with productivity.

The comparative dimension of the coding process was not aimed at establishing equivalence, but at highlighting divergence and resonance. Italian and Japanese narratives were analyzed both within their own cultural logic and in relation to each other, allowing for the identification of shared tensions (e.g., the burden of merit) as well as culturally specific responses (e.g., withdrawal in Japan, disillusionment in Italy).

This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how young people in both countries construct their identities in relation to work, and how they navigate the moral and emotional economies of merit, recognition, and performance.

Given the cross-cultural nature of this study, particular attention was devoted to the processes of translation and cultural adaptation, both during data collection and in the subsequent phases of analysis. The interviews were conducted in the native languages of the participants—Italian and Japanese—and later translated into English to enable comparative interpretation.

The translation process was carried out collaboratively, involving bilingual speakers with familiarity in both sociological terminology and the cultural contexts under investigation. Rather than aiming for literal equivalence, the objective was to preserve the semantic and emotional resonance of the original expressions, especially when participants used culturally embedded idioms or metaphors.

In several cases, expressions were retained in the original language when they carried a specific cultural weight that would be diminished by translation. For example, the Japanese proverb "□□□□□□□□" (deru kui wa utareru), translated as "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down," was kept in its original form alongside the English rendering, as it encapsulates a deeply rooted cultural norm of conformity and social discipline. Similarly, Italian expressions such as "Ho studiato per questo?" ("I studied for this?") were preserved in their original form when they revealed a dissonance between educational investment and occupational outcomes.

The process of cultural adaptation extended beyond linguistic translation. During the coding and interpretation phases, care was taken not to impose Western analytical categories onto Japanese

narratives, or vice versa. Instead, each narrative was interpreted within its own cultural logic, while also allowing for points of resonance and divergence to emerge through comparison. This approach aligns with the interpretive tradition in comparative sociology, which emphasizes the situatedness of meaning and the importance of context in shaping subjective experience.

The translation process was therefore not a neutral or mechanical operation, but a critical moment of interpretation, requiring reflexivity and sensitivity to the asymmetries of language, power, and cultural representation. It was treated as an integral part of the research design, essential to ensuring the validity and depth of the comparative analysis.

Ethical integrity was a central concern throughout the research process, particularly given the sensitive nature of the themes explored—such as failure, anxiety, social pressure, and identity. All participants were informed about the aims of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, and participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms or interview numbers were used in any citations. The data were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team.

Given the emotional weight of some of the topics discussed—especially in relation to perceived failure, family expectations, and mental health—interviews were conducted with particular attention to the psychological well-being of participants. The interview setting was designed to be as comfortable and non-judgmental as possible, and participants were encouraged to speak freely, without pressure to conform to any expected narrative.

Special care was taken in the translation and interpretation of culturally sensitive expressions, to avoid misrepresentation or distortion of meaning. The comparative nature of the study required a heightened awareness of cultural asymmetries and the risk of ethnocentric bias. For this reason, the analysis was conducted with a reflexive stance, acknowledging the positionality of the researcher and the interpretive nature of cross-cultural comparison.

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for qualitative research in the social sciences, and all procedures were reviewed and approved in accordance with academic standards for research involving human subjects.

4. Results

4.1 Italy: Frustration and Disillusionment

Misalignment between Education and Employment

One of the most recurrent and emotionally charged themes emerging from the Italian interviews is the perceived misalignment between educational investment and actual employment outcomes. This dissonance is not merely economic, but existential: it undermines the very promise of meritocracy and destabilizes the identity of young people who have been socialized to believe in the linear progression from study to work to self-realization.

Several participants expressed a deep sense of betrayal, encapsulated in the recurring lament: "*Ho studiato per questo?*" ("I studied for this?"). This phrase, which surfaced in multiple interviews, functions as a condensed expression of disillusionment, signalling the collapse of expectations nurtured through years of academic effort. The frustration is not limited to the lack of employment, but extends to the quality and relevance of the jobs available. Many reported being employed in roles entirely unrelated to their field of study, often under precarious or exploitative conditions.

This misalignment is further exacerbated by the cultural weight attributed to education in Italy, where academic achievement is still widely regarded as a moral and social investment. When this investment fails to yield recognition—either in the form of stable employment, adequate remuneration, or social esteem—the result is not only economic insecurity, but a profound identity crisis.

The Italian context is marked by structural contradictions: while the education system continues to promote ideals of excellence and upward mobility, the labour market offers few pathways for actualizing these ideals. This gap generates what could be described as a form of symbolic violence, in which the individual internalizes failure as a personal defect rather than as the outcome of systemic dysfunction. The result is a widespread sense of stagnation, bitterness, and loss of direction.

This theme resonates strongly with Sandel's critique of meritocracy as a system that converts privilege into moral desert, and with Honneth's theory of recognition, particularly the denial of social esteem. In the Italian case, the absence of recognition is not only institutional but interpersonal: many participants reported feeling judged by family members or peers for not having "made it," despite their efforts. The failure to transition from education to meaningful employment thus becomes a failure of identity, a rupture in the narrative of self-worth.

The Italian labour market, as reflected in the interviews and supported by broader survey data, is characterized by widespread precarity and underemployment, particularly among youth. This condition is not only economic but deeply symbolic: it erodes the expectations cultivated through years of education and socialization, and undermines the promise of work as a site of recognition and self-realization.

Many interviewees reported being employed in unstable, short-term, or informal positions, often with low wages and limited prospects for advancement. Several described experiences of working in sectors unrelated to their studies, or being forced to accept roles far below their qualifications. The mismatch between training and occupation was not perceived as a temporary inconvenience, but as a structural condition—one that invalidates the meritocratic narrative that links effort to reward.

This erosion of expectations is compounded by the normalization of precariousness. As one participant noted, “I’ve been working for ten years, but only recently started paying pension contributions” (Interview #X). Such statements reflect not only economic vulnerability but a sense of existential delay: the feeling of being suspended in a prolonged adolescence, unable to transition into full adulthood due to the absence of stable employment and recognition.

The Italian context is further marked by the phenomenon of “invisible work”—including internships, apprenticeships, and part-time contracts that often lack adequate legal protections or remuneration. These forms of labour, while officially framed as opportunities for training or insertion, are frequently experienced as exploitative. The expectation of “doing experience” becomes a moral obligation, even when it entails working for free or under conditions that violate basic labour standards.

This dynamic resonates with the critique of neoliberal subjectivity offered by Chicchi and Simone (2019), in which the individual is expected to internalize risk, self-manage instability, and transform every setback into an opportunity for self-improvement. In practice, however, many young Italians experience this as a form of symbolic violence: a demand to perform resilience in the face of structural neglect.

The erosion of expectations is not only professional but psychological. Several interviewees expressed feelings of fatigue, disorientation, and loss of meaning. The absence of stable work is not merely a logistical problem—it destabilizes the narrative coherence of the self. Without a clear trajectory, the individual struggles to construct a future, and the present becomes a space of suspended identity.

Among the Italian participants, one of the most emblematic expressions of disillusionment is the recurring phrase: “*Ho studiato per questo?*” (“I studied for this?”). This question, often posed rhetorically and with visible frustration, encapsulates a broader experience of denied recognition. It is not simply a complaint about employment conditions, but a deeper existential wound: the sense that years of study, effort, and sacrifice have failed to produce the expected social and symbolic rewards.

This sentiment reflects a rupture in the moral economy of merit. Education, in the Italian context, is still widely perceived as a pathway to dignity, autonomy, and social mobility. When this promise is broken—when degrees do not translate into meaningful work or societal esteem—the result is not only disappointment, but a form of symbolic invisibility.

The denial of recognition operates on multiple levels. Institutionally, it is reflected in the mismatch between qualifications and job roles, the lack of career progression, and the absence of adequate remuneration. Interpersonally, it is reinforced by family members, peers, or employers who question the value of one’s choices or imply that failure is a matter of personal inadequacy. This dynamic resonates with Honneth’s theory of recognition, particularly the sphere of social esteem, where individuals seek to be valued for their contributions and capabilities. When this recognition is absent, the result is a profound injury to self-respect.

Moreover, the phrase “I studied for this?” often carries an implicit critique of the system itself. It signals a loss of faith in the institutions that were supposed to guarantee fairness and reward. The university, once seen as a gateway to opportunity, is now perceived by many as a space of deferred promises. The labour market, instead of welcoming educated youth, appears indifferent or even hostile to their aspirations.

This disillusionment is not merely a reaction to economic hardship, but a response to the collapse of a narrative: the belief that effort leads to reward, that merit is recognized, and that education is a form of investment. When this narrative breaks down, the individual is left not only without work, but without meaning.

In the Italian context, the experience of work is not only shaped by institutional and economic structures, but also by the powerful influence of family expectations and social judgment. For many young people, the family remains a central axis of identity and moral evaluation. This is particularly evident in the narratives of those who feel they have failed to meet the standards implicitly or explicitly set by their parents.

Several interviewees described the pressure to “make their studies count,” not only for themselves but for their families. The investment in education is often a collective one—emotional, financial, symbolic—and when it does not translate into stable or prestigious employment, the disappointment is shared. As one participant noted,

This dynamic is compounded by a broader cultural script in which work is closely tied to dignity and moral worth. In a society where the narrative of “those who want, can” remains pervasive, not finding work—or not finding the “right” kind of work—is often interpreted as a personal failure. The result is a form of internalized judgment, in which the individual not only suffers from precarious conditions but also from the shame of not fulfilling expectations.

The family, in this sense, functions both as a source of support and as a site of normative pressure. The desire to be “approved” by one’s parents, to be seen as successful, often leads young people to accept jobs they do not want, or to remain silent about exploitative conditions. Others, by contrast, experience conflict or rupture, distancing themselves from familial expectations in order to preserve a sense of autonomy—often at the cost of guilt or social isolation.

This tension reflects what Honneth describes as the struggle for recognition within the sphere of love and esteem. When familial recognition is conditional upon professional success, the failure to meet labour market expectations becomes a failure of identity. The individual is not only unemployed or underemployed—they are, in a sense, unloved or unworthy in the eyes of those who matter most.

Social judgment extends beyond the family. Several participants reported feeling scrutinized by peers, neighbours, or even strangers, particularly when still living at home or perceived as “not doing enough.” The stigma attached to unemployment or precarious work is not only economic—it is moral. In this

context, the pressure to perform becomes totalizing, and the space for vulnerability or alternative life paths is drastically reduced.

4.2 Japan: Belonging and Anxiety

In the Japanese context, one of the most distinctive features emerging from the interviews and broader analysis is the strong identification of young people with the company as a central axis of social belonging and personal identity. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in the postwar model of citizenship, which, as noted in recent Japanese sociological literature, was historically anchored in stable employment and long-term affiliation with a single firm (ISA Global Dialogue, 2024). The company is not merely a workplace—it is a moral and social institution, a surrogate community, and often a substitute for broader civic participation.

This identification is reflected linguistically in the very structure of the Japanese language. The word for society (□□, *shakai*) and the word for company (□□, *kaisha*) are composed of the same characters, simply inverted. The term for a working adult, *shakaijin* (□□□), literally means “person of society,” while *kaishain* (□□□) means “company member.” The semantic overlap is not accidental: to be part of society is, in many ways, to be part of a company.

This cultural logic was echoed in several interviews.

Such statements reveal the extent to which corporate affiliation is perceived not only as a source of income, but as a condition for social visibility and legitimacy. The company becomes a space of recognition, structure, and even emotional security. However, this identification is not without cost.

The pressure to conform to corporate norms—often rigid, hierarchical, and demanding—can lead to significant psychological strain.

This tension between individual subjectivity and collective expectation is at the heart of what Japanese scholars have described as “situated subjectivity” (ISA Global Dialogue, 2024): the self is not autonomous, but embedded in a dense web of social obligations and institutional roles. The company, in this framework, is both a source of identity and a site of potential erasure.

When asked about the importance of work for personal identity, a significant proportion of Japanese respondents indicated that their job was “very important” or “central” to their sense of self—more so than their Italian counterparts. Moreover, the perceived pressure to meet expectations was often linked directly to the workplace, with several respondents reporting that they felt judged not only by superiors but by colleagues and even society at large.

This identification with the company also explains, in part, the difficulty many young Japanese face when they fail to secure stable employment. The consequences are not merely economic—they are ontological. The phenomenon of hikikomori (social withdrawal) can be interpreted not only as a

psychological condition, but as a form of resistance to a system that offers no space for deviation or failure. In this context, the company is not just a job—it is a test of worth.

A central theme emerging from the Japanese interviews is the pervasive pressure to conform and perform within the workplace and society at large. This pressure is not merely institutional but deeply cultural, encapsulated in the widely known proverb: □□□□□□□□ (*deru kui wa utareru*)—"The nail that sticks out gets hammered down." This expression reflects a collective ethos in which deviation from the norm is not only discouraged but actively sanctioned.

The proverb functions as a moral injunction: to stand out is to invite correction, exclusion, or even punishment. In the context of work, this translates into a demand for uniformity, loyalty, and self-effacement.

This cultural logic reinforces a model of subjectivity in which the individual is expected to dissolve into the collective. The company becomes not only a site of employment but a moral community, where harmony (*wa*) is prioritized over innovation or dissent. The cost of this harmony, however, is often the suppression of personal expression and emotional authenticity.

Speaking out alone can lead to marginalization within the organization, or even to social withdrawal. This is not merely a theoretical risk: it is a lived reality for many, as reflected in the phenomenon of *hikikomori*, which can be interpretated not only as a psychological condition but as a form of resistance to a system that leaves no room for vulnerability or failure.

The pressure to conform is also linked to the concept of □□□□□ (*ganbatte*), a ubiquitous expression meaning "do your best" or "give it your all." While seemingly motivational, it often masks a deeper expectation of self-sacrifice and overwork. The value lies not in the result, but in the visible effort and willingness to endure.

This ethic of relentless effort, combined with the fear of standing out, creates a paradoxical form of performance anxiety: one must excel, but not too visibly; one must commit fully, but without disrupting the group. The result is a form of internalized surveillance, where the individual becomes both subject and enforcer of the norm.

In Japan, unlike in Italy, the risk of dissent is not primarily economic (e.g., dismissal), but relational and symbolic: the fear of being excluded, of "not belonging," of becoming invisible. In this context, the workplace becomes a site of both recognition and repression—a space where identity is affirmed through conformity, and where the cost of authenticity may be isolation.

Performance anxiety and the fear of not meeting expectations emerged as significant themes in the Japanese interviews, both in the quantitative data and in the qualitative narratives. According to the table on sources of stress 16.4% of Japanese respondents identified "anxiety or fear of not doing their job well" as a primary source of stress—higher than the Italian sample (11.4%). This anxiety is not only linked

to task execution but reflects a deeper concern with recognition, belonging, and the internalization of failure.

Interviewees by Main Reason for Feeling Stressed and Country (column percentages)

Reason for Stress	Italy (%)	Japan (%)	Total (%)
Work pace	20.0	11.5	16.0
Stressful hours and shifts	8.6	23.0	15.3
Responsibility	24.3	14.8	19.8
Presence of the boss or superiors	5.7	13.1	9.2
Intense physical activity	2.9	3.3	3.1
Intense intellectual activity	12.9	1.6	7.6
Anxiety or fear of not doing one's job well	11.4	16.4	13.7
Contact with the public	12.9	14.8	13.7
Other	1.4	1.6	1.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Cases	70	61	131

Several interviewees expressed this tension explicitly. One participant stated:

“Unless we pretend to be nice, we are kinda frightened… so we have to obey.” (Interview #241)

This quote reflects the dual burden of performance and emotional regulation: not only must one meet professional standards, but one must also maintain a socially acceptable demeanor, suppressing frustration or dissent. The fear is not simply of failing at a task, but of disrupting the harmony of the group or being perceived as problematic.

Another interviewee described the difficulty of voicing concerns:

“We can tell them our complainment, but privately. They don't take it nicely, they just say ‘work harder’. To improve… sometimes they listen to us, but just sometimes. Generally, it is not.” (Interview #242)

This illustrates a broader cultural pattern in which criticism is discouraged, and the response to difficulty is often framed in terms of individual effort rather than structural change. The message is clear: if you are struggling, the solution is to try harder—not to question the system.

This internalization of responsibility is a recurring theme. Many young Japanese workers tend to blame themselves when problems arise, even when the source of the issue is external. One participant

remarked:

“The workload has become a problem, but I don’t feel like I can say anything.” (Interview #201)

This reluctance to speak up is not due to apathy, but to a deeply ingrained fear of being seen as weak, ungrateful, or disruptive. The figure of the superior (□□, *jōshi*) is often perceived as authoritative and unapproachable, reinforcing a vertical structure in which dissent is risky and silence is safer.

The sociological literature, particularly the work of Tetsuro Watanabe, describes this phenomenon as a form of “silent normalization,” in which young people internalize the imperative to perform and conform without external coercion. The result is a subjectivity that is hyper-adaptive, self-monitoring, and often fragile—constantly negotiating between the desire for recognition and the fear of exclusion.

This dynamic is further intensified by the logic of hyper-meritocracy described by Kariya and Honda. In such a system, failure is not interpreted as a systemic issue but as a personal shortcoming. Many young Japanese feel “out of place” or “not motivated enough,” even when they have followed the expected educational and professional paths. The workplace becomes not a space of realization, but a permanent test of worth.

In the Japanese context, the pressure to conform and perform does not only manifest in everyday workplace stress—it can escalate into extreme forms of withdrawal and collapse. Two phenomena stand out as emblematic of this escalation: *hikikomori* and *karoshi*. These are not merely clinical or statistical categories, but culturally specific responses to a system that demands total commitment and offers little space for vulnerability.

Hikikomori—young individuals who retreat from social life and often cease working altogether— can be described as a reaction to excessive social pressure. This is not interpreted as laziness or apathy, but as a form of silent resistance to a society that equates worth with productivity and visibility. As noted in the interpretative synthesis, “the phenomenon of hikikomori… is due to excessive social pressure,” and is increasingly recognized as a social issue in Japan, though still underexplored in its structural causes.

While no Japanese interviewee explicitly identified as *hikikomori*, the conditions that lead to such withdrawal were present in several narratives.

This quote reflects the internalization of a role so totalizing that the self is eclipsed. When the pressure becomes unbearable, withdrawal may appear as the only viable option.

On the other end of the spectrum lies *karoshi*—death from overwork. The concept of *karoshi* is not metaphorical: it refers to actual cases of fatal heart attacks, strokes, or suicides linked to excessive working hours and chronic stress. The level of phenomena such as karoshi, becoming hikikomori, too many working hours, and social pressure must be considered when evaluating the Japanese labour context.

Statistical data further support this concern. In the table on stress perception, Japanese respondents report high levels of anxiety related to work speed and hierarchical pressure. The presence of *jōshi* (superiors) is frequently cited as a source of agitation, with demands often perceived as excessive and unrelenting.

These phenomena—*hikikomori* and *karoshi*—are not isolated pathologies but structural outcomes of a system that valorizes conformity, endurance, and silence. They represent the outer limits of a performance society that leaves little room for dissent, rest, or failure. They are the “extreme responses” to a cultural and institutional logic that equates identity with work and visibility with value.

5. Discussion

Work as a Mirror of the Self: When Success Is Absent, Identity Fractures

In both the Italian and Japanese contexts, work emerges not merely as an economic activity, but as a symbolic mirror through which the self is reflected, evaluated, and—at times—fractured. The narratives collected in this research reveal that employment is not only a means of subsistence, but a central axis of identity construction. When this axis becomes unstable—due to precarity, misrecognition, or failure—the consequences are not limited to material insecurity, but extend to the very coherence of the self.

In Italy, the fracture is often experienced as a dissonance between the promise of education and the reality of the labour market. The phrase “Ho studiato per questo?” (“I studied for this?”), repeated by several interviewees, is not simply a complaint—it is a cry of ontological disorientation. The subject who has invested in education as a moral and social project finds themselves in a position of symbolic invisibility. The absence of recognition—whether institutional, familial, or societal—produces a rupture in the narrative of self-worth. The individual is no longer able to tell a coherent story about who they are and what they are becoming.

In Japan, the fracture takes a different form. Here, the self is not destabilized by the absence of work, but by its excess. The company becomes a totalizing institution, demanding not only time and energy, but emotional conformity and existential loyalty. The pressure to perform, to never stand out, to always “ganbatte” (do your best), creates a subjectivity that is hyper-adaptive but internally fragile. The fear of failure is not only professional—it is social, relational, and deeply personal. As one interviewee noted, “I feel like I have to become the company. There’s no space for who I really am.”

In both cases, the absence of success—whether defined as stable employment, recognition, or internal coherence—leads to a form of identity crisis. The individual is no longer able to locate themselves within the symbolic order of society. They become, in a sense, unmoored. This condition resonates with the concept of “narrative foreclosure” in identity theory: the premature closure of one’s life story due to the impossibility of imagining a future that makes sense.

The performance society, as described by Marcuse, Han, and Chicchi & Simone, does not tolerate failure. It demands that the subject be always productive, always resilient, always in motion. But when the machinery of performance breaks down—when the subject cannot keep up, or when the rewards never arrive—the result is not only exhaustion, but disintegration. The self, deprived of recognition and coherence, begins to fracture.

This fracture is not always visible. It may take the form of silence, withdrawal, cynicism, or depression. It may manifest in the quiet resignation of the Italian graduate working a job that requires no degree, or in the Japanese employee who never complains but slowly disappears into the margins. In both cases, the wound is not only economic—it is symbolic. It is the wound of not being seen, not being valued, not being allowed to exist as a full subject.

In both Italy and Japan, failure is not experienced as a neutral or temporary condition, but as a profound rupture in the subject's sense of self. This is particularly true in societies where the dominant narrative equates success with moral worth, and where meritocracy is presented not only as a system of opportunity, but as a system of justice. When individuals internalize this logic, failure ceases to be a structural issue—it becomes a personal defect.

In the Italian context, this dynamic is visible in the disillusionment of those who, despite having followed the "correct" path—studying, graduating, applying—find themselves excluded from stable employment or forced into roles that do not reflect their qualifications. The disappointment is not only economic, but symbolic. As one interviewee put it: "*I feel like I did everything right, and yet I'm still invisible.*" The invisibility is not just social—it is existential. The subject begins to doubt their own value, not because they have done something wrong, but because the system has failed to recognize them.

In Japan, the internalization of failure takes on a different tone, but the consequences are no less severe. Here, the pressure to succeed is accompanied by a cultural imperative to avoid shame and maintain harmony. When success does not materialize—whether in the form of a stable job, a prestigious company, or social approval—the individual often turns the blame inward. As noted in the interviews, many young Japanese workers feel that if they are struggling, it must be because they are not trying hard enough. The response is not protest, but silence. Not resistance, but withdrawal.

This internalization is reinforced by the rhetoric of *ganbatte*—the imperative to always do one's best, regardless of the cost. In this framework, failure is not a sign that the system is broken, but that the individual is insufficient. The result is a form of self-surveillance, where the subject becomes both judge and judged, constantly measuring themselves against unattainable standards.

Michael Sandel's critique of meritocracy is particularly relevant here. As he argues, when success is seen as the result of talent and effort, those who do not succeed are left with no one to blame but themselves. The meritocratic promise becomes a trap: it offers dignity through achievement, but when achievement is denied, it leaves only shame. In both Italy and Japan, this shame is not always visible. It may manifest

as anxiety, depression, or a quiet sense of worthlessness. But it is deeply felt, and it shapes the way young people see themselves and their place in the world.

The internalization of failure is perhaps the most insidious effect of the performance society. It does not require punishment or exclusion from above—it operates from within. The subject disciplines themselves, doubts themselves, and ultimately fractures under the weight of expectations they never chose, but which they have come to believe define their value.

Recognition is not a luxury—it is a condition of subjectivity. As Honneth argues, the self is not formed in isolation, but in relation to others, through experiences of love, rights, and esteem. When these forms of recognition are absent, the result is not only social marginality, but psychological suffering. The interviews conducted in both Italy and Japan reveal that the absence of recognition—whether from institutions, employers, or family—produces a form of invisibility that is deeply destabilizing.

In Italy, this invisibility often takes the form of symbolic erasure. The young graduate working in a job that does not require a degree, or the precarious worker whose contract is renewed month by month, is not only economically insecure—they are socially unacknowledged. Their efforts, their sacrifices, their aspirations disappear into a system that does not see them.

This invisibility is compounded by a cultural narrative that continues to equate work with dignity and social value. When work is absent, or when it fails to reflect one's skills and identity, the individual is not only unemployed—they are unworthy. The psychological cost of this condition is not always visible, but it is real. It manifests in anxiety, fatigue, and a quiet sense of failure that is difficult to name, because it is not tied to a single event, but to a prolonged absence of recognition.

In Japan, the dynamic is different but no less intense. Here, the absence of recognition is not linked to unemployment, but to the impossibility of expressing one's individuality within the workplace. The subject is recognized only insofar as they conform, perform, and remain silent. Those who deviate—by expressing dissent, showing vulnerability, or failing to meet expectations—risk being excluded from the symbolic order of the company, and by extension, from society itself.

This is why phenomena such as *hikikomori* and *karoshi* must be understood not only as personal tragedies, but as social symptoms. They are the extreme consequences of a system that recognizes only performance, and punishes deviation with silence. The subject who cannot keep up, or who refuses to play the game, is not simply left behind—they are erased.

Recognition, then, is not a secondary issue. It is the ground on which identity is built. When it is denied, the self begins to unravel. The interviews in this study show that young people are not asking for privilege or special treatment. They are asking to be seen, to be heard, to be valued—not only for what they produce, but for who they are. The absence of this recognition is not only unjust—it is unbearable.

The comparative dimension of this research reveals how cultural scripts—deeply embedded patterns of meaning and expectation—shape the way young people in Italy and Japan experience and respond to

pressure, failure, and recognition. These scripts are not abstract constructs; they are lived, embodied, and reproduced through everyday practices, language, and institutional arrangements.

Drawing on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, a key axis of difference is: individualism versus collectivism. Italy, with its high score in individualism, tends to valorize autonomy, personal expression, and self-realization. Young Italians often speak of "following their dreams" or "finding a job that represents who I am." Yet this same emphasis on individual fulfillment can become a source of frustration when structural conditions—precarity, underemployment, lack of recognition—block the realization of those aspirations. The result is a form of dissonance: the subject is told they are free to become anything, but in practice, they are constrained by a labour market that offers few real opportunities.

In Japan, by contrast, the dominant cultural script is collectivist. Identity is defined in relation to the group—whether family, school, or company—and success is often measured by one's ability to maintain harmony and fulfill social expectations. Young Japanese interviewees expressed a strong sense of duty toward their families and employers, and a reluctance to stand out or deviate from the norm. The proverb □□□□□□□□□ ("The nail that sticks out gets hammered down") is not just a saying—it is a moral orientation. In this context, pressure is internalized not as a call to self-expression, but as a demand for conformity and endurance.

These cultural orientations shape not only how pressure is experienced, but how it is managed. In Italy, the response to frustration may take the form of critique, irony, or disengagement. In Japan, it is more likely to manifest as silence, self-blame, or withdrawal. While Italian youth often express their dissatisfaction openly—sometimes even defiantly—Japanese youth tend to internalize their struggles, fearing that voicing them would disrupt group cohesion or reflect poorly on their character.

This does not mean that one culture is more "resilient" than the other. Rather, it shows that resilience itself is culturally coded. In Italy, resilience may mean insisting on one's individuality despite systemic barriers. In Japan, it may mean enduring hardship without complaint, in order to preserve social harmony. Both strategies have their costs. In Italy, the emphasis on self-realization can lead to feelings of failure when success is not achieved. In Japan, the emphasis on conformity can lead to invisibility, burnout, or even withdrawal from society.

The interviews and data confirm that these cultural scripts are not deterministic, but they are powerful. They shape what is thinkable, sayable, and livable. They influence how young people interpret their experiences, how they relate to others, and how they imagine their futures. Understanding these scripts is essential not only for interpreting the data, but for imagining alternative narratives—narratives that make space for vulnerability, difference, and new forms of recognition.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how young people in Italy and Japan experience work as a source of identity, recognition, and psychological pressure, through a comparative qualitative approach grounded in thematic analysis. The findings reveal two distinct but equally complex landscapes of expectation, frustration, and adaptation.

In the Italian context, the dominant narrative is one of disillusionment. Young people often experience a deep misalignment between their educational paths and the realities of the labour market. Despite years of study and personal investment, many find themselves in precarious, underpaid, or irrelevant jobs. The recurring expression "*Ho studiato per questo?"* encapsulates a broader sense of betrayal—not only by institutions, but by the very promise of meritocracy. The absence of recognition, both institutional and interpersonal, leads to a symbolic invisibility that fractures identity and undermines self-worth.

In Japan, by contrast, the crisis is not rooted in the absence of work, but in its overwhelming presence. Young workers often express a strong identification with their company, which functions as a moral and social anchor. However, this affiliation comes at the cost of personal autonomy and emotional expression. The pressure to conform and perform—summarized in the proverb □□□□□□□□ ("The nail that sticks out gets hammered down")—produces a subjectivity that is hyper-adaptive but internally fragile. Performance anxiety, fear of failure, and the internalization of responsibility are widespread. In extreme cases, this pressure manifests in social withdrawal (*hikikomori*) or even death from overwork (*karoshi*), revealing the psychological toll of a system that equates value with endurance.

Despite their differences, both contexts reveal a shared vulnerability: when work fails to provide recognition, coherence, or dignity, the self begins to fracture. Whether through invisibility or overexposure, the absence of meaningful recognition leads to a crisis of identity. The findings suggest that the performance society—whether framed through individualism or collectivism—demands more than it gives, and leaves many young people navigating a landscape of uncertainty, fatigue, and unmet expectations.

The findings of this research point to a growing psychological vulnerability among young people in both Italy and Japan, rooted not only in economic instability or labour market conditions, but in the deeper symbolic structures that govern recognition, identity, and value. The performance society, in its various cultural articulations, produces subjects who are constantly evaluated, often invisibilized, and rarely allowed to fail without consequence. The result is a widespread sense of inadequacy, anxiety, and disorientation.

In Italy, the mismatch between education and employment, the erosion of expectations, and the denial of recognition contribute to a form of symbolic marginalization that has clear psychological consequences. Feelings of uselessness, frustration, and fatigue are not isolated experiences, but part of a broader generational condition. Mental health services, however, remain underfunded and often inaccessible, especially for those in precarious economic conditions. Youth policy must therefore move beyond employability rhetoric and address the emotional and symbolic dimensions of work and identity.

In Japan, the situation is no less urgent. The internalization of failure, the pressure to conform, and the fear of standing out create a psychological environment in which silence becomes the norm and suffering is often hidden. The phenomena of *hikikomori* and *karoshi* are not anomalies—they are extreme but coherent responses to a system that leaves little space for vulnerability. Mental health interventions must be culturally sensitive, but also courageous in challenging the norms that equate value with performance and visibility with conformity.

In both contexts, there is a need for youth policies that recognize the centrality of work in shaping identity, but that also challenge the idea that identity must be earned through sacrifice, silence, or success. This means investing in accessible mental health services, promoting alternative narratives of value, and creating spaces—both institutional and symbolic—where young people can be seen, heard, and supported, regardless of their position in the labour market.

Recognition, as this research has shown, is not a secondary need. It is a condition for psychological survival. A society that fails to recognize its youth—whether through stable work, social esteem, or emotional support—is a society that risks losing them.

If there is one thread that runs through the experiences of the young people interviewed in this study—whether Italian or Japanese—it is the exhaustion produced by a world that asks them to constantly prove their worth. The performance society, in both its individualist and collectivist forms, has colonized not only the workplace, but the imagination. It has taught a generation that value must be earned, that identity must be constructed through success, and that failure is a private shame to be hidden or endured in silence.

But what if this narrative is no longer sustainable? What if the cost of this model—measured in anxiety, withdrawal, burnout, and disillusionment—is too high?

This research suggests that it is time to imagine new ways of thinking about value, recognition, and identity. Narratives that do not reduce the self to productivity. Narratives that allow for slowness, for fragility, for detours. Narratives in which a person's worth is not measured by their CV, their salary, or their ability to endure.

In Italy, this might mean challenging the idea that education must always "pay off" in economic terms, and instead affirming its intrinsic value as a space of growth, reflection, and social contribution. It might mean recognizing the dignity of those who work in precarious or invisible roles, and creating policies that support—not punish—those who fall outside the traditional paths of success.

In Japan, it might mean rethinking the role of the company as the primary site of identity, and creating spaces where individuality, dissent, and vulnerability are not only tolerated, but valued. It might mean listening to those who withdraw, not as failures, but as signals of a system that has become too rigid, too demanding, too closed.

These new narratives will not emerge overnight. They require cultural work, political courage, and institutional imagination. But they are necessary. Because without them, we risk continuing to ask too much of a generation that has already given more than enough.

Declarations

Author Contribution

The author is the solely responsible of this research. All part of the research was conducted by him.

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