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POP THEORY

TURNS ONE!



The year one mega-edition.

Every edition from our first year, all in one place.



We're celebrating one year of Pop Theory! Join us as we toast ITV's mainstream pop culture newsletter with this mega-edition, featuring every installment from the past year.

Choc full of deliciously bonkers, banal and unashamedly mainstream insights, Pop Theory aims to bring those of us who work in the media closer to the mainstream audiences we serve. It's a monthly dose of inspiration that helps brands get under the skin of popular culture, by understanding not just what's going on, but more importantly why it's happening.

Over the past 12 months we've covered everything from the rise of Gymskin to the return of pub psychics and why we love and loathe the "Brit abroad" - and pretty much everything in between, inspiring a few campaigns and social activations along the way!

A big thank you to our subscribers! For those who haven't subscribed yet, have a nosy to see what you're missing out on!

As always we love to hear from you so please reach out for a coffee and a catch up

Lots of luv,

Your Pop Theorists Lucy & Anna



THE BEAUTY EDITION

British Bods, Botox and Bodybuilding women

According to creative strategy studio Morning.FYI's report Meta Beauty we've entered a new era of beauty known as Meta Beauty: *A new era of human identity & expression, defined by an internet-fuelled period of fantasy and dreaming.* While it might be true that the internet has long been a driving force behind beauty standards we cannot discard other influences like television (of course), celebrity culture and socio-economic factors.



A SURGICAL SHIFT

Cosmetic surgery worn with pride

We're in an era where our perceptions of ourselves are split between what we show online, what we see in the media and who we are in real life resulting in a skewed view of beauty. Which could be why it's becoming increasingly socially acceptable to have cosmetic surgeries done. Plastic surgery, often seen as a taboo, has seen a slow shift towards people being more open about cosmetic surgeries they've had done, now it's worn as something of a badge of honour. Celebrities like Olivia Atwood openly talks about the facial procedures she had done as well as breast augmentation but also highlights the dangers of not being expertly advised in her younger years. She tells Good Morning Britain that although she happily went ahead with the procedures the initial reason for them was societal pressure and trends at the time of when she was on Love Island. Veneers, fillers and face lifts have only continued to be the norm for reality TV stars who are by extension hyper-online.

TV Stars are more under the microscope than ever and so can't afford to be caught with a hair out of place let alone wrinkles or bags.

Similarly to celebrities we're all experiencing our own lives through some sort of lens whether it's our selfie camera's or someone else's. We're scrutinizing our appearances more than ever, as phone cameras become extensions of the mirror, amplifying our anxieties and deepening our concerns about how we look. In response, we're beginning to reject the shame once attached to cosmetic work, embracing it instead as a personal choice and form of treating ourselves.
Our theory is that while we're socially and economically pressured how we appear to others is stronger currency than ever before. Protein in their Competitive Wellness piece touches on this idea of a new kind of rat race where we strive for our health and wellbeing as a new kind of status symbol. They state that wellness has gone from being about winding down and relaxing to something to be achieved, recorded and rewarded. Trendy run clubs and community saunas fill up with nano-influencers and amateurs living a polished version of what a "healthy" lifestyle looks like.

Brands can learn a thing or two from these celebrities that are openly sharing what they've changed about themselves and their own perceived imperfections. The viewer and consumer can now see through it all, so why not wear changes to your image or positioning with pride and embrace some of the same radical transparency.

THE ASPIRATIONAL BRITISH BOD

Face and Body Tea?

This begs the question, how do us Brits feel about all this. Corrie Star Sally Carman who plays Abi Webster doesn't shy away from how she maintains her youthful looks "Oh, it's no secret - I have fillers, I have Botox, facials.... I do all of it.". This unashamed attitude resembles behaviours identified in ITV's Hun Culture research. It's a protest against the restricted and controlled ways of British society that shame you for showing off and being loud and proud of who you are. While cosmetic procedures seem like they're increasingly becoming normalised in 2023 69% of people felt the exact opposite and felt that it was sending the wrong message to young people (Attitudes towards Cosmetic Procedures, Mintel, 2024). Unsurprisingly the same research tells us that 25-34s are the age group most interested in cosmetic procedures as this is when signs of ageing begin to concern them. When combined with an increased disposable income and no dependents it feels like a no-brainer.

So how are Brits altering their bodies? According to the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons the top three cosmetic procedures in 2022 for both men and women were breast augmentation, abdominoplasty (the "tummy tuck") and Liposuction. Googling any one of these procedures you'll find they are defined by an "improvement" of the shape or look of a certain body part but this idea of betterment in beauty meaning something needs to be *perfect* is changing. However, as The Guardian reports following an interview with our very own Rylan—who recently swapped his perfect veneers for something 'more natural'—it seems the desire for an effortlessly natural, even 'imperfect,' aesthetic is growing.



This mirrors the rise of the 'no-makeup' makeup trend in the skincare world, where the goal was to appear untouched, even when considerable effort goes into achieving the look. What you could call “quiet beauty” is a marker of status that says you can afford to not try too hard.

Cadbury’s recent “Guaranteed not too last” campaign captures this sentiment of perfect imperfection. We see an empty tub of Cadbury’s Dairy Milk icre cream with just the residue of this dreamy chocolate treat , a relatable scene for any ice cream lover – and it’s not even advertising the product itself. Authenticity and relatability aren’t just buzzwords, they're something you can show. Particularly in our increasingly AI generated visual culture not being a bit rough around the edges and incomplete it how you show people your real authenticity.

WOMEN IN THE WEIGHTS ROOM

The Rise of Female strength training

The idea of what the perfect British body is continues to change particularly for women. It’s no doubt that being a woman in the world of health and wellness comes with its own challenges on top of the added pressure society places on women’s bodies. Often health and wellness for women is branded as demure, soft and stereotypically feminine – it’s partly why pilates has seen so much success (beyond the status symbol it carries akin to a luxury lifestyle) as it subtly tones and sculpts your core, glutes and arms, maintaining a ‘feminine’ shape – but femininity in health and wellness is changing. There’s a rise in women in the weights room, no doubt for the benefits building muscle has for your mental health and protecting your body in your old age, but also to redefine fitness for women. These women weight-trainers are posing new ideas of a healthy femininity, whether it’s a more visibly toned or muscular frame, it's a picture of an empowered woman. A 25-year-old, amateur bodybuilder Mia Collins found herself on a journey of self-discovery and discipline after pursuing bodybuilding. She sees weightlifting as a lifestyle choice that will benefit her later down the line.

According to research done by the University of Leeds the number of women participating in regular strength training has soared by 27% since 2024. This is thanks to relatable fitness influencers making women more visible in weight-training, giving women the confidence to adopt weight training as a part of their routines. Weightlifting as a sport once seen as a way for men to display their manhood and physical prowess has now become a much more inclusive and universal symbol of health and self-improvement.

If you’re a brand trying to centre women in your work it’s important not to reduce women’s issues pertaining to health by comparing them to what men face. Instead take the time to unpack how women want to be seen and treat them like the nuanced audience that they are. A great example of this is Dove’s The Code, tackling beauty perceptions through the lens of AI generated images, it’s not telling women how to look it’s reclaiming the beauty that already exists.





itv POP THEORY

BACK 2 SCHOOL EDITION

Girl Gangs, Final Bosses and Stay At Home Dads

Hello and welcome to your monthly dose of Pop Theory, the cultural insight newsletter that gives mainstream popular culture the respect it deserves. In the spirit of back to school season this month, we're taking a look at the trends and signals popping off in the playground including girl gangs, game lingo and present fathers.



GRL PWR

Female friendship is back vogue, just when Gen Z needs it most

After a long leave of absence, the girl gang is back. 00s girl bands are returning, new ones forming, social media mentions of 'girl gangs', 'girl squads' and 'sisterhoods' are rising. And for the first time in the show's history, female friendship has won Love Island.

The girl gang isn't anything new. Broadcasters, publishers and music labels have long relied on empowering female collectives to attract young female audiences - whether it be The Spice Girls, Sex and the City or The Sisterhood of travelling pants. But over the past few years the girl gang has been notably absent from popular culture. This decline is most evident in social media data, with mentions of 'girl gangs', 'girl squads' and 'sisterhoods' peaking in the late 2010s - coinciding with the MeToo movement and Taylor Swift's Bad Blood music video - and then sharply dropping off in the 2020s.

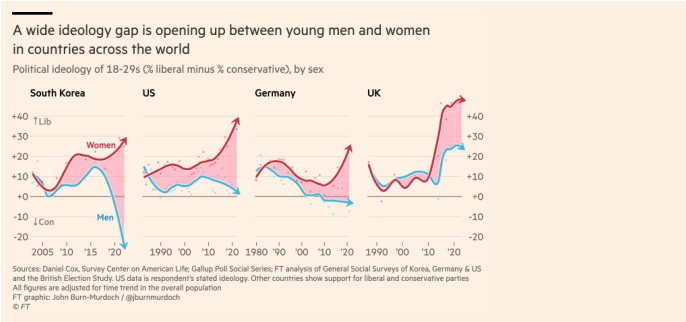


But in the face of a rapidly growing gender divide, we are once again turning to the girl gang for female empowerment and solidarity. Gen Z men and boys increasingly favour 'traditional' gender roles, while Gen Z women are becoming more left-wing and liberal in their attitudes. In ITV's own What Unites Generations report we found that Gen Z men were the most likely to agree with the statement 'freedom of expression had gone too far'.

This summer's season of Love Island held a mirror up to this cultural shift. When interviewed for ID magazine, eventual Love Island 2025 winner Toni and runners up Yasmin and Shakira spoke on how the real prize was the female friendship they found in the villa. The trios popularity partly down to how they called out and pushed against the bad behaviour from male contestants.

Gen Z women and girls aren't just voting for girl gangs, they're creating their own. The rise of irl and online misogyny has led to a rise in whisper networks such as The Tea and local 'are you dating this man' facebook pages. While the rise of lonely girl clubs and localised initiatives - such as Belfast's girl gang - speak to the growing number of women seeking out all female spaces and friendship groups.

Brands would benefit from taking notice. Gap's collaboration with global Gen Z girl band Katseye has been lauded as the much needed antidote to American Eagle's Sydney Sweeney debacle. Netflix's Kpop Demon Hunters - an animated film where a Kpop girl band defeat demons and their boy band nemesis - has been the first female kpop band to achieve a UK number 1. In a world of rising misogyny, aligning with moments of sisterhood and solidarity is an opportunity to win both the hearts and minds of Gen Z women.



FINAL BOSSES, EMOTING AND SIDE QUESTS

How gaming language snuck into the mainstream

The Ibiza Final Boss might be the meme of the summer, but its success speaks to something deeper than a distinctive bowl cut - the mainstreaming of gaming lingo. The Final Boss is a trope common in gaming worlds, where the protagonists take on an epic final battle against the main antagonist - think Bowser in Mario, Ganon in Zelda or The Harbinger in Halo. But of late the phrase has been used to describe individuals who are the epitome of something - for example Gemma Collins could be described as the 'Final Boss' of Essex.



It's not just the final boss trope that has made it out of gaming and into the mainstream. Fortnite's 'emote' victory dances have found themselves being recreated by sports stars as goal celebrations. Even more niche gaming tropes - like Dungeon and Dragons character alignment system - are finding its way into brand guidelines and meme pages, and even being applied to the likes of Love Island.

Brands are starting to catch on, with McDonald's using the gaming phrase 'side mission' in their latest creative to speak to the moment you deviate from your original objective in favour of picking up a maccies. But with 90% of children and teenagers in the UK and the US identifying as gamers, it's worth thinking about what gaming phrases you can use to describe your product benefits or weave into creative storytelling. Perhaps your brand is more of chaotic good in a category of lawful evils, a final boss of insurance or perhaps you're just one of life's many side quests.

DADS THE WORD

Are fathers finally getting their main character moment?

Culture might be finally moving on from Homer Simpson. Long gone are the bumbling sit-com dads or over protective action heroes, in 2025 TV is giving the complex nature of fatherhood the dramatic treatment it deserves. Two of the year's biggest dramas Playing Nice and Netflix's Adolescence have placed fatherhood at the forefront of their storytelling, with ITV's Playing Nice holding the title of the most 'binged in a day' show on ITVX.

But why is fatherhood a subject that's hitting home with audiences? Well, what it means to be a 'Dad' is changing. The number of dual income households has increased significantly, with almost ¾ of UK households with children having both parents/carers in work. Post-pandemic the number of stay at home dads has increased by a third. These social and economic changes have resulted in dads carrying a bit more responsibility for children. The Fatherhood institute suggests that there has been an 18% increase in time spent on childcare by fathers since 2020. This shift in the role of the father as a breadwinner to an active co-parent is evident in the increase in number of Dads petitioning for equal shared custody and the rise in fathers experiencing serious mental health issues in the period before and after their child is born (now 1 in 10).

Fatherhood is becoming more involved and more complex, for brands perhaps it's time to rethink how we represent the reality of modern fatherhood, as less Homer Simpson and more James Norton.

Want more pop culture insight? Check out our 70 years of insight series, exploring 70 years of cultural change through the lens of TV programming





THE IDENTITY EDITION

Britishness, Bus auntie and The Great Lock-in

This October Pop Theory takes a look at what puts the Brit in Britishness. From how to unite a frustrated nation to the rebrand that mainstream British popular culture is in need of and what it means to "lock-in" in the final quarter of the year. This edition looks at the markers of British identity, how the country can behave like a brand and adoption of hustle culture.

FRUSTRATION IN THE NATION

A quick guide on how to Unite Brits

Britishness is a hot topic right now. It has us questioning our loyalties, our identities and the future of our country. Once a nation known for pride in monarchy (whose popularity level is at its lowest according to Design Bridge's research), and government institutions like the NHS, Brits feel like they're continuously being failed by their leadership. We've seen this sentiment time and time again in our What Unites a Kingdom 2025 research. **7/10 believe that life in the UK is tougher today for many people than it has been for many years** and that we need **significant societal change**. This is felt across the generations – not just Boomers! – as we saw in our What Unites Generations piece where all generations said they felt like the government wasn't looking out for them.



These feelings of frustration are a symptom of the overall decrease in the standard of living, a cost of living crisis and ongoing conversations around immigration. It's felt across demographics and is expressed in different ways. A minority are taking to the streets, as seen in recent protests spearheaded by anti-immigrant activist Tommy Robinson. At the other end of the spectrum many are striving to make little changes where it counts – Gen Z and Millennials are most likely to get involved in volunteering and engaging with their local communities (What Unites Generations, 2025) – while others are retreating into their bubbles and protecting individual interests. What Unites a Kingdom 2025 showed us is that we have an innate sense of justice that we'd like to uphold especially in a time when we feel like we're being taken advantage of. How we react to our social climate says something about how important fairness is to us. It raises the question: How can brands and content help us collectively stand up for something? Well, If you want to unite British audiences, give them something to stand for whether it's defending the case for Walkers crisps in your sandwich (or out) or for justice Corrie's Gail Platt. We've seen the success of storylines where the underdog goes against the system in Mr Bates vs the Post Office. Where audiences are craving justice, give them narrative or symbols to get behind.



Between being culturally relevant to socially conscious consumers and political backlash but as we've seen everything can be political so why not create debate in your own arena. Channel 4 conjured up their own controversy and confusion in a push to create virality around their "Trump v the Truth" documentary. The stunt saw a series of satirical tweets in all capitals in typical, 'hacker' style, heckling the broadcaster making people think there was a hack. A great way to speak to a politically charged audience is by giving them something to fight for. Creating causes people can get invested in or controversy that stirs up audiences in the right way.

BRAND BRITAIN

Why Britain needs a rebrand

Is the best of Britain behind us? Creative agency Design Bridge took us through their recent research, a deep dive on how marketers can look at Britain as a brand and how "brand britain" is in dire need of a refresh.

For a moment we all thought Cool Britannia was back. A period in the mid 90s of British pride which materialised in pop culture and adorning the Union Jack everything you could possibly wear. 2024 saw the reunion of Oasis and the return of a Labour government but these markers of Britishness felt stuck in the past. New markers of Britishness shouldn't shy away from referencing our rich cultural history but the execution should feel like it has longevity, it should feel timeless. So how do you make a new British classic?

Brat Summer which is still referenced today in the wake of CharlieXCX's sixth studio album – was a unique pop cultural phenomenon inspired by UK rave culture, something that when you zoom in on it could have only happened in Britain. It's a modern moment inspired by the past that her audience yearns for.

"BRITISHNESS IS INSPIRED BY ITS PAST WITHOUT BEING BOUND BY IT. IT'S OUR NATION'S CORE BRAND ASSETS."

Design Bridge's research aimed to dispel the idea that everything old is bad and that brands especially have lots of good in their past that they can reinvent to appeal to the modern day Brit. Whether it's Barbour giving their classic waxed jacket a refresh in their collaboration with GANNI, Liberty refining their type logo for a digital-native audience or Stormzy wearing a union jack on a stab-proof vest doubling as a Banksy 1-of-1 art piece. There's a spectrum to how loud or subtle you can be when making a statement that can stand the test of time but the formula is simple: taking a piece of heritage as inspiration and using it as the backdrop for a relevant and timely display of culture. The future of Britishness lies in the reinvention of its past for a modern audience which Burberry did masterfully as they headlined London Fashion Week.



We've seen brands all over the world lean back into their original positioning and histories, Burberry is a great case study of British luxury with cultural capital. In 2023 the brand revealed an "archive inspired" logo featuring the classic horse-riding spear-wielding knight on horseback signalling a new-found pride in the brand's history. In their long-form content they've spun the love-hate relationship we have with the weather in their "It's always Burberry weather" campaign featuring the likes of Olivia Colman and Cole Palmer. They're winning in short form too with the latest edition to their cultural cache of influencers, Bemi Orojuogun otherwise known as 'Bus Auntie'. Britishness is on the brink of evolution as the country goes through unprecedented trials and change. We encourage brands to leverage proud moments from their history that highlight quality and timelessness as a way to justify pricing and show people what Britain is made of.

THE GREAT LOCK-IN

A default setting or a cheat code?

Speaking of Burberry weather, Autumn has hard launched. The unpredictable rainy weather sets in, F/W campaigns are in full swing. Summer is officially closed for business. On TikTok this season is being dubbed The Great Lock In, an online movement spearheaded by TikTok and Instagram users to collectively motivate themselves and their peers to put their heads down and make the most of the final four months of the year. Most people aren't achieving new years resolutions set in January but it's during the 'back to school' period where panic starts to set in. September is the second 'fresh start' of the year, it's the perfect time to get back on the horse and end your year on a high. We see this reflected in TV, particularly on our soaps where mentions of **"hustle"** increased by **197%** between 2013 and 2020 as we found in our 70 Years of Play research. We see Gen-Z and Gen Alpha commonly attached language or slang which to behaviours or in-jokes. So if we're not locked in are we not driven, focused on our goals and motivated? In our What Unites Generations research, 53% viewed Gen-Z as 'unmotivated' and 55% viewed them as 'entitled' but after spending time with them we found that they are highly career-driven and motivated.

It begs the question: is “locking in” a cheat code that becomes activated around this time of the year? Or is it a default setting that we’re forced to uphold in times of economic crisis and social unrest? For many this hustle grindset has become the default simply to survive social and economic downturn and to achieve personal goals.

TikTok anthropologists theorise that we’re being forced into the route of hustling to survive due to the polarisation of class resulting in a balanced and moderate lifestyle being squeezed out. The social-contract that promised you stability and comfort hasn’t satisfied the needs of the masses in recent years and now it’s the norm to prioritise not only a 9-5 but supplementary streams on income.

For the chronically online of us you will have seen the TikTok trend “Rare aesthetic:”, a slideshow of images from the early 2000s and 2010s depicting a simpler, more optimistic time that your average Gen Z or Millennial Brit could be nostalgic for. Out of the many versions of this trend the two that hit home for me were “rare aesthetic: british primary school/nursery in the 2010s" and “rare Aesthetic: Winter in a small UK town”. I cite this trend to reflect on a time when younger generations who feel like the social contract of education, work, and retirement has been broken didn’t feel as much uncertainty and what it means for us Brits to feel like we own our futures.

In What unites a kingdom 2025, a refreshed look at the mood of the nation, we captured this sentiment of individualism trending up as people put themselves first - ‘me before we’. The question we pose to brands is: how can you acknowledge these individuals' efforts and help them feel like there is some light at the end of the tunnel?





REINVENTION EDITION

Cheap talk, Brits abroad and trendy anoraks

Seasons change, but most things stay the same. This has never been more true in culture. However much we like to focus on new trends, micro-shifts and game changing platforms - the content we love and the products we buy don't change as much as we'd like to think, in fact most new hot things are just something people have always loved in a new and shiny wrapping. In this edition of Pop Theory we're taking on the reinvention of the Brit Abroad, embracing a new wave of chat shows and exploring how cargo trousers became sexy.

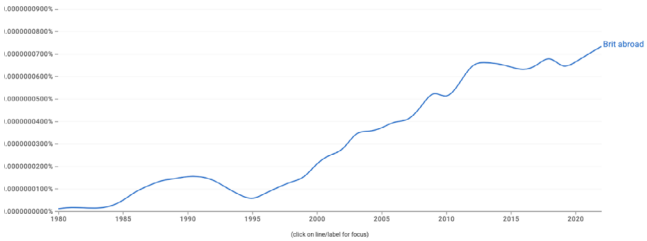
BOOZING, SUN LOUNGER BATTLES AND REGRETTABLE TATTOOS

Why media should embrace the "Brit Abroad"

Us Brits have a love hate relationship with our holiday selves. The stereotype of hapless and occasionally reckless 'Brit Abroad' has been attached to us as a nation since the 1980s - when, thanks to huge increases in household income and decreased flights, international holidays became accessible to the everyman. It represents the antithesis of British values. While at home we pride ourselves on keeping a stiff upper lip, our holiday selves are the polar opposite - more outspoken, more irrational and less constrained by crippling social awkwardness.



In 2025 we've arguably reached **peak Brit abroad**. The number of Brits holidaying abroad is surpassing pre-pandemic levels, with 95 million overseas trips being taken in 2024. Mentions of Brits abroad in fiction and non-fiction books is the highest it's ever been. And perhaps more potently Brit Abroad memes defined summer 2025, with 'Nothing Beats A Jet 2 Holiday' and the 'Ibiza Final Boss' garnering global fame.



Google ngram - mentions of the Brit Abroad in book publications

But with this resurgence comes reinvention. Once a symbol of national shame, a quiet reappraisal of the Brit Abroad is underway with social, TV and advertising embracing the softer side of the stereotype.

In TV the Brit abroad is no longer just a source of salacious shock docs - ala Sun, Sex and Suspicious Parents - but a source of gentler, self-deprecating humour. Observing Brits outside of our natural habitat only makes our quirks seem even more ridiculous. Benidorm made 10 seasons out of this fact and is still one of ITVX's most watched comedies. Other heavy hitting genres like travelogues and reality shows also play on this fish out water narrative. Love Island, Olivia Attwood's Bad Boyfriends, Temptation Island, Honeymoon Island etc etc heavily rely on the fact that Brits abroad are less encumbered by the shackles of cringe, with contestants able to flirt and feud more freely in Mallorca than back in Manchester.

Social media is flooded with viral Brit Abroad moments, from Big John recreating the speech from Gladiator in Rome, Jane McDonald's infamous 'Cake By the Ocean' cover while cruising in the Caribbean to the aforementioned Nothing Beats A Jet 2 Holiday viral meme and Ibiza Final Boss.

The Brit Abroad has long been avoided by brands for fear of off-putting 'aspirational travellers' who want to live like locals. But embracing the Brit Abroad stereotype has proven to be fruitful for the right brand. On The Beach saw commercial success embracing their mainstream British traveller - describing them as "the ones that want to squeeze every grain of fun out of the beach... They want to be free, let their hair down, forget the rules, and be silly when they feel like it, after 50 long weeks of work". Leading to a 15% year on year growth. Brits are falling back in love with the Brit Abroad, perhaps it's time the rest of the marketing industry did too.



PROFESSIONAL CHATTERBOXES

How the TV chat show is finding new life on social media

Whatever is successful on TV often finds itself reincarnated across social media - from The Side Men recreating Big Brother with InSide, Mr Beast's Squid Games tribute, Beast Games and Beta Squad's Blind Date series - unsurprisingly a reinvention of Blind Date. The faces and platforms might've changed but the fundamental rules of entertainment seemingly have not.

The chat show is no different. Despite controversies and declining ratings in the US, the chat show concept is still very much alive and well on social media. Clips of British chat show staples - the Graham Norton Show and The Jonathan Ross show rack up hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube Shorts. The Telegraph recently claimed that podcasts have 'killed' the chat show. Rather than killing - we would suggest podcasts are simply late night chat shows reincarnated. As Kurt Wilms, who heads up YouTube's division responsible for living room viewing said "We like to talk about it [vodcasts] as the new late-night talk show on TV...It's two heads talking to each other. And so, even if you go way back, the late-night talk show was kind of the original podcast, and so it's like we're coming full circle."

The public's desire for celebrity chat isn't waning, in fact they're finding new avenues to access it. Podcasts hosted by TV stars talking to other stars dominate the UK listening charts ranging from Louis Theroux quizzing Malala to Alan Carr asking Stacey Soloman about her dream holiday.

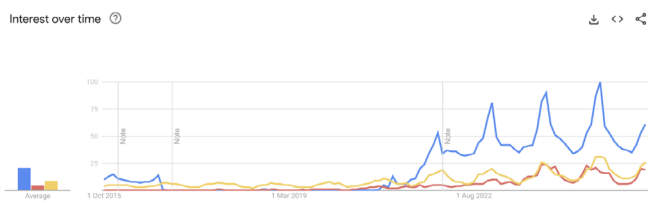


The new gods of chat can still be found on TV, albeit not hosting a prime time chat show. Some of the hosts of the nation's biggest chat podcasts include ex-reality stars like Jamie Laing of Made in Chelsea fame, Olivia Attwood - love islander turned documentarian and GK Barry a Loose Woman and recent Jungle campmate. From a quick scroll of news feeds it's clear that the relationship between TV and podcasts isn't the case of one killing the other, it's a mutually beneficial relationship. Much like Wilms suggested we've almost come full circle with ITV recently launching the Loose Women: Just Between Us Podcast, creating another avenue for viewers to hear from their favourite professional chatterboxes, without cannibalising existing linear viewership.

ARCTERYX IS THE NEW BLACK

What the success of 'gorpcore' says about the state of the nation

Gorpcore is not new, the utilitarian, technical fashion movement began the late 2010s but has now bled into the mainstream - with UK interest in outdoorsy brands Carhartt, Dry Robe and Arcteryx compounding from 2020 onwards.



Source: Google trends Blue: Carrhart, Red: Dry Robe, Yellow: Arcteryx

But what is 'gorpcore'? I hear you cry? Its catch all term for outdoorsy clothing, without necessarily being outdoorsy - or as Grazia recently stated "It's all about outdoorsy, practical clothing you could wear (while eating your trekking snacks) half way up a mountain somewhere. But instead of getting your steps in doing this physical activity, the gorpcore trend is actually about wearing these functional fashion pieces to brunch, the office or just mooching around (on level ground) to the shops at the weekend. So basically, how the activewear trend makes us all look like we're about to step into a pilates class, while instead picking up a matcha, the gorpcore trend makes us look like we're about to go on a hike – when we're also heading to get a matcha." Got it?

Importantly this micro (perhaps now macro) trend isn't going anywhere. Sole supplier suggests that fashion's obsession with the outdoors is just getting started and that outdoorsy brands are transitioning from early adopters to a mass mainstream audience. While GQ proclaimed that gorpcore is dead. Not because it's out of fashion, but it's become so ubiquitous it's almost impossible to call it a trend anymore. It's not just designer or specialist brands that are tapping into the outdoorsy movement. Highstreet brands like Uniqlo, ASOS and River Island are adding 'technical' features to their clothing - creating utility jackets, vests and trousers with extra loops, carabiner hooks and pockets suitable for a hike up Snowdon or a trip down the shops.

But why this sudden reinvention of function as fashion? An article in The Critic links the rise of gorpcore with the rise in apocalyptic thinking in the US - with everyday citizens adopting a survivalist style. In the UK the rise of gorpcore can be attributed to a perfect storm of social shifts. The first being a shift similar to the US, although we're not at the level of US apocalyptic thinking - everyday Brits are prioritising self preservation, with 7/10 Brits believing that we've become more selfish as a country (ITV What Unites A Kingdom 2025). The second important social shift is the rise of wellbeing culture. As shown in ITV's Wellbeing Matters research, Brits believe strongly in the healing power of nature. As a result, outdoorsy-ness has become a social flex, something that thousands of Hinge users put in their bios in the hope to attract a soul mate and influencers like Molly-Mae use to garner instagram likes. Spending time outdoors means you have more free time - those on the breadline, working long shifts in multiple jobs, with caring responsibilities can't afford the time nor money to make multiple spontaneous trips to the Lake District.

For brands perhaps there's an opportunity to zig while others zag - in a time when everyone's dressing like they're scaling scarfell pike perhaps we can promote vivid self expression, celebrate impracticality and embrace the glorious indoors.

*Love Islanders Amber Gill and Molly Mae hague and Tommy Fury embracing gorpc*ore







THE COZY EDITION

Little treats, Christmas Creep and marriage culture

In this edition of Pop Theory we look at how we celebrate ourselves and each other with the things that bring us joy and make us feel warm and good inside and how they've been sold back to us. From Christmas, 'Treat Culture' and the institution of marriage, we question the intentions behind these celebratory cultural phenomena and take a look at why they appeal to us so much.

SWEET TREATS, BINGEY BEHAVIOURS AND EVERYDAY PLEASURES

Treat culture as the ultimate survival strategy for the 2020s

Little treat culture isn't anything new, we have always rewarded ourselves with something that might be a little bit bad for us be it a sugary snack or a midnight TV binge. Beyond just being a lighthearted escape from the mundane, 'little treats' have become something of a coping mechanism for Brits. A survival strategy for the trying times of the 2020s. Maybe you were learning to bake banana bread in lockdown or rewatching a comfort series like Friends to make it through. Treat culture is our preferred method of managing our dopamine levels during times of crisis.



We explored this in our piece Hey Hunni: The ultimate guide to Hun Culture – the epitome of treating yourself – with the cultural code **Life's too short**, a hun culture mantra used to validate our most instinctive and impulsive desires. It's a mindset that lends itself particularly well in a ''cozzie livs" (cost of living crisis). For Huns "Life's too short" is a way to combat the rigidity of upper-middle class Britain that calls for restraint and self-control but for the wider public it seems like a more self-serving ritual.

According to Cultural Agency FireFish in their 2025 report on Treat Culture, this phenomena turned survival strategy has reached full saturation. It has grown in parallel with the economic downturn and financial pessimism sparked by COVID and lockdown which normalised the indoors, cosiness and inspired what they call "controlled daily pleasures" – doses of enjoyment that get us through the day.

"Gen Z and Gen Alpha, the memeified logic of Little Treats has become second nature, influencing their relationship to food, status, luxury and pleasure." and brands are responding accordingly. Premium supermarket own brand lines such as Tesco's Finest and Sainsbury's Taste the Difference offer everyday exclusivity that we're looking for. With decadent products that combine a concoction of luxurious ingredients such as Sainsbury's Belgian Dark Chocolate & Fudge Sourdough it's no wonder that UK supermarkets have experienced a 14.6% increase in premium own-label sales in 2024.

If you're a brand that leans to the more indulgent, pleasure-seeking side of things then it's important to recognise that what makes a treat a treat is the occasion. Why not make a big deal of the occasion that leads up to a treat. How can you make your customer say "I probably shouldn't" when they really should. McDonald's Raise Your Arches advert is all about the cheekiness of the first nudge suggests a treat. The advert celebrates the occasion leading up to a treat using the strength of their brand identity as the "The Golden Arches".

HUSBAND MATERIAL, EMBARRASSING BOYFRIENDS AND THE STATE OF MARRIAGE

Marriage as a new status symbol in a cost of loving crisis

In the 70s marriage was once the norm and in fact an expectation on adults, with 7/10 people over the age of 16 in relationships being married. In 2024 it's now only 4/10 people. So what happened? More marriages were ending in divorce which were driven by a multitude of socio-economic and political factors. COVID alone led to a decrease in divorces due to court closures however when lockdown lightened in 2021 divorces spiked hitting 113,505 that year most likely due to the stressful circumstances (Russell Cooke, 2025)

"The desire for aesthetic food objects is reflected in the growth of the global tableware market, which is projected to reach $63.7 billion by 2030 [GlobalNewsWire] and the hype around kitchenware – a recent Le Creuset discount sale led to four-hour queues and police intervention [Guardian]."

(FireFish, Treat Culture 2025).

Back in October renowned writer and cultural commentator Chante Joseph broke the internet with her provocative British Vogue piece titled Is Having A Boyfriend Embarrassing Now?. The article did the rounds on all social platforms and had women questioning the implications of having a boyfriend in 2025. With some even messaging the writer to say they'd reached an epiphany and broken up with their boyfriends. The clickbait article aside Joseph's message that many readers missed was that men aren't worth centering in your life as a woman, at least not to the extent that we see today. According to her, boyfriends aren't the husbands-to-be they once were and singledom has much more to offer a woman in 2025.



Joseph's claim about a lack of 'husband material' in the midst of a cost of living crisis and a romanticised image of marriage in the media brings an interesting tension to the surface. With couples delaying and even forgoing marriage altogether because of the financial pressure and alternative views on relationships (Mintel), the growing marriage culture reflected on TV makes it increasingly feel like an aspiration. It's evident in hit shows like Married at First Sight UK or MAFS and Love is Blind. On MAFS marriage is the product of the social experiment at the core of the show that emphasises the importance of compatibility and finding 'the one'. Love is Blind revolves around not seeing your partner until one of you is ready to propose, subconsciously telling viewers that finding your match is something that transcends the dating process that the everyman is familiar with. Love finds those who are lucky and marriage is what it looks like when done right.

While there doesn't seem to be a direct effect on marriage rates they remain incredibly popular which may be explained by the opportunity for viewers to be a fly on the wall on someone else's date. Similarly to Love Island, the fandom is driven by the running commentary around the show – fans can have an opinion on what a good relationship looks like without consequences. We call this phenomenon, identified in our What Unites Generations research, as Vicarious Living. It describes how viewers seek to escape through content that features experiences or situations far removed from their ordinary lives.

While views on marriage continue to evolve it's clear that people aspire to finding connection in the right way for them, so if you're a brand playing in the game of love then acknowledging the audience aspires to different images of love is key.



HOLIDAY SEASON, CHRISTMAS CREEP AND THE PRODUCTIZATION OF ANTICIPATION

The great emotional escape of the year

The Christmas period is by far the biggest shopping moment of the year, in many ways it's the original. With December being considered the peak month for holiday shopping for 44% of consumers (Mintel, 2024) and each year it's been slowly creeping up the calendar. With the famous Christmas lights on Oxford St being switched on as early as the 3rd November in 2025, it feels like the holiday is getting earlier each year. For the capital this ceremony is a delight for tourists and pedestrians alike and a signal from commercial entities to shoppers that it's time to start thinking about gifts. The Christmas Lights are a direct translation of the 'Christmas Creep' that sees brands and shoppers prepping earlier and earlier. If little treats are our survival strategy for the day then Christmas shopping is our survival strategy for the last quarter of the year. Where winter isn't welcomed with open arms Christmas is embraced for all its coziness, warmth and sales of course!

Brands prepare months in advance to maximise the Christmas window and have mastered the productization of anticipation for the holiday itself – the essence of Christmas Creep. High production value Christmas adverts from the likes of Marks and Spencers, John Lewis and of course the hit Waitrose ad featuring Keira Knightley. In Britain Christmas ads are highly regarded for wrapping up on a high note. Whether it's aspiration or warmth, as a brand showing up around Christmas, success comes from paying attention to what people need at the tail end of the year and reflecting it back to them.





NEW YEAR'S EDITION

Twixmas telly, flattening culture and getting a bit emosh

Welcome to the new year edition of Pop Theory exploring the freshest pop cultural phenomenons, such as the rise of twixmas, raw emotion in an era of AI and answering the question is culture fragmenting or just flattening?

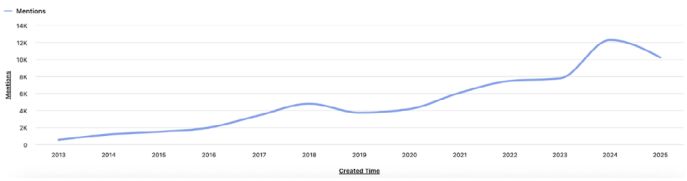
GOODBYE XMAS TELLY

How twixmas became the biggest media moment of the year

Twixmas or twixtmas is a name for the peculiar cultural no-mans-land between christmas and new year's. Mentions of twixmas first appeared in 2013 (according to social listening tools) , originally marketed as a holiday opportunity by travel brands. But the period has moved beyond seeking winter sun to mean something entirely different. Since 2020 twixmas has become a cultural celebration of slowing down, bed rotting and indulging in bingewatching TV, with 4/10 Brits admitting doing nothing during this period of time.

Mentions of twixmas have been on the rise since 2013 - peaking in 2024 and likely this year (as we're currently in the midst of twixmas as of writing this newsletter!)





(sprinklr social listening "twixmas" 2013 - 30 dec 2025)

This has led to the birth of a number of unexpected cultural hits - from reality behemoth The Traitors (launched in November 2022 but only reaching mass popularity in the twixmas period of that year) to BBC Four's 2018 "Bros: After the Screaming Stops" documentary. In recent years twixmas has become the moment to launch iconic content. From Stranger Things launching season 5's volume 2 on xmas day in order to own twixmas viewing to oscar bait film Marty Supreme launching in cinemas on boxing day.

The rise of twixmas is interesting given the backdrop of Christmas Day viewing suffering, with the BBC viewing slumping by a third after its Gavin and Stacey mega hit in 2024. For brands twixmas is an opportunity to reach a captive audience who aren't doing much other than watching telly and munching on leftovers, ahead of the January new year, new me rush! And for those looking for twixmas viewing recommendations, don't worry ITV's own This Morning has your back!

BIG FEELINGS

Why 2026 will be the year pop culture gets emosh

Every action must have an opposite reaction. 2025 was arguably the year of AI, seeing the rise of 'ai slop' on socials, in adverts and even music. But as 2025 closes out we're beginning to see the grassroots of a cultural reaction against a world of palatable machine generated content. We predict that 2026 will be the year that pop culture gets raw, emotional and flawed.

We're already seeing the rise of radical, human-driven rawness and transparency in pop music. Lily Allen's triumphant return with West End Girl saw her ruthlessly expose the raw details of her ill-fated relationship with David Harbour. Including explicit descriptions of infidelities, transcripts of real voice notes and voiced over texts. Raye's recent hit 'WHERE IS MY HUSBAND!' similarly is praised for its radical honesty and directness.

Live events are also booming, partly due to audiences desire for real in-person experiences. Viral clips of artists performances like Chappell Roan's Coachella gig zoom in on the minutiae of their facial expressions in performances, with fans often praising their emotional openness. In telly some of 2025 biggest hits were distinctly raw and hard hitting - particularly Netflix's Adolescence.

This is not to say that there is a direct cultural pushback against the use of AI at all, although there definitely is in some pockets of culture. But rather it's the increasing presence of AI content (especially on social) that is influencing the kind of content we're seeking out. We're searching for content that feels deeply human and real, in an increasingly fabricated landscape. For UK audiences there is a desire for realness, honesty and authenticity, with Brits naming 'honesty' as the number one value they feel is missing in modern society.

For brands the way to truly stand out in 2026 will be about harnessing the power of emotion, transparency and honesty. A fantastic example of this being Waitrose's Christmas advert - which told an awkwardly human love story, in contrast to Coca Cola's 'holidays are coming' ai rehash. For content makers, it's all about removing the veneer slickness and perfection and instead embracing the rawness and unpredictability of live events.



ARE WE IN THE ERA OF CULTURAL FRAGMENTATION OR CULTURAL FLATTENING?

For the past decade the media industry one narrative has dominated panels, podcasts and boardroom discussions; media fragmentation. But a new challenger to the dogma of division is rising, that of cultural flattening.

The cultural flattening argument posits that instead of driving us into hyper-specific micro communities and individually curated feeds, social media algorithms are instead working to make culture more homogenous.

In defence of fragmentation, it's true that the number of media channels and amount of content we are exposed to is almost infinite. There is an argument that social media bubbles are warping our view of the world - as seen in the rise of misogynistic online spaces and the far right. But where the idea of fragmentation starts to fall flat is when you look at culture as a whole it becomes clear that in many ways, across generations, social classes and borders, our overall tastes are becoming increasingly similar.



The rise of all encompassing social media platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram have made it harder than ever to create distinct subcultures. Forbes suggests that because we are exposed to so much more, it's harder than ever for culture to be underground. As a result subcultures become mainstream before they even have time to fully form. The death of distinct subcultures and the decline of closed off internet safe spaces (such as bebo, myspace, tumblr) are entwined. Now social media spaces are shared with everyone from parents, to neighbours and potential employers. As a result it's harder than ever to keep something secret or even have an inside joke.

At the other end of the spectrum, algorithms aren't just making everything mainstream, they are working to homogenise the content itself. In his book 'Filterworld' Kyle Chakya suggests that algorithms are rewarding similar forms of content, therefore homogenising cultural output across borders. An example of this would be YouTube pushing content that confirms to certain standards - for example being longer form, high production and featuring an exaggerated expression in the thumbnail (similar to Mr Beast's output).

In TV we see cultural flattening too. Although consumption of content is fragmented the content preferences and tastes aren't.
In ITV's What Unites Generations research we found a distinct lack of division between the generations. Over 55's were just as likely to be watching Olivia Attwood's Getting Filthy Rich series as Gen Z were. Parents and their adult children were discussing the latest Love Island drama or Corrie episodes. Part of this flattening is that with access to everything and anything we're still looking to have shared cultural touch points. Thanks to young adults being more likely to live at home and increased access to one another through tech and social media, cultural sharing is more frequent.

From an advertiser perspective it's important to think about how to reach multiple audiences that are consuming the same content, even if they are consuming it in different ways. In an increasingly fragmenting media landscape it might be more fruitful to align with a moment or type of content across channels rather than specific media channels.



THE RELATIONSHIP EDITION

The perceptions and realities of relationships in mainstream media

In December's Pop Theory we discussed husband material, the state of marriage and embarrassing boyfriends centered around Chante Joseph's viral article *Is having a boyfriend embarrassing now.* This time round we're taking a look at how the relationships that start on-screen are fair in the real world and whether we're smart enough to tell the difference between what's genuine and what's not.

THE REALITY OF REALITY RELATIONSHIPS

Celebrity breakups, family feuds and the silent third partner

Earlier in January it was made known to the public that the iconic Love Island couple Indiyah Pollack and Dami Hope split-up after three years together. The duration of their relationship may not seem all that significant but in Love Island years it's a considerable amount of time, given that they were subject to scrutiny and consistent commentary from the public, who may have played a role in this break-up. A leaked video from a bystander of Indiyah allegedly seen with American streamer Marlon, sealing the deal in the eyes of the public. Since, Indiyah has apologised and announced her return to work on the Love Island Morning After podcast, proudly putting it behind her.



The public often have some kind of parasocial relationship with celebrity couples but what's interesting here is how involved the public can end up being. By exposing Indiyah's faults, how the story of indiyah and Dami plays out is shaped by their many followers online. Consistent commentary and pressure from fans can quietly shape how celebrity couples show up in the public realm. For example when people on X were speculating when Dami would propose whenever the couple were seen on holiday must have added pressure even if they didn't formally respond.

More recently we saw another rift in a picture-perfect celebrity relationship sparked by Brooklyn Beckham. Sir David Beckham and Lady Victoria Beckham's eldest son, who voluntarily estranged himself from the family after claiming they were controlling and manipulating his life. Of course no one expects any family to take a child leaving the home lightly, especially not in this manner, but with the entire family being in the limelight, revered for being the nation's model celebrity family, it was bound to cause a storm online. While some took Brooklyn's side adamantly defending his choice to go 'no-contact' with his parents, many are celebrating the "win" that Victoria had off the back of the controversy – her song "Not Such an Innocent Girl". This was a result of a fan campaign to support the iconic Lady Beckham aka Posh Spice in the midst of this family feud where fans pushed her single to the top for the first time ever leaving it at number one in the UK iTunes charts at the time of this issue.



Once upon a time the tabloids were respected for making sweeping statements about celebrity couples but now it seems that the power lies in the public's hands. Whenever celebs make these woefully human mistakes is when online commentators thrive pushing a narrative or sparking sporadic off-shoot moments of virality and no cost of their own. *Is there ever room for a brand to get in on the goss and be a reactive parasocial member of the family or of the celebrity couple of the week?*

THE RISE OF THE PSEUDO-INTELLECTUAL

A literacy crisis, "Smart TV" and the battle against AI slop

If you've been following the online hype train of HBO's highly-acclaimed finance drama Industry you'll have seen lead star Myha'la who plays Harper Stern admit that she doesn't understand the financial jargon central to the plot about the lives of London's elite. Industry is what people are calling "smart TV" not just in the high-art sense of beautiful cinematography and the high production value HBO is known for but in the sense that viewers can learn a thing or two. Jam-packed full of drama, high stakes and a good-looking cast the show is not only about politics of London's financial sector but about the social and political commentary threaded throughout the show. Industry shines a light on the scandalous and seedy behaviour that goes on behind closed doors (and out in the open) in the institutions that run our country. Viewers are forced to decide whether these are really bad people or just complex, challenged with power and maybe even broken.

The notion of a show that prompts commentary speaks to a wider trend on social media recently: *The rise of the intellectual.* When AI slop content, economic pressure and uncertainty are all piling on top of the average viewer there is a little time to slow down and consider what we consume.

There's a growing fear around our relationship with algorithms and how it's leading to a lack of independent and critical thought has some people opting for a slower-paced lifestyle void of mind-numbing content.

This trend has given rise to a pocket of content creators known as the “intellectual influencer” or for those more inclined to fashion the "intellectual it-girl”. These labels consist of creators purposely trying to act like a pause in the algorithm by creating slower, more edifying content that can be anything from breaking down a trivial topic like making sourdough or something as profound as an art movement. The “intellectual it-girl” is essentially where smart becomes sexy again. Self proclaimed intellectual it girl Aishat explains that in 2026 the intellectual girl is someone who prioritises substance as well as aesthetics, with others defining it as someone who is "disgustingly educated”. These loose definitions group together a cohort of Gen-Z tiktokers who are defining their own rules for self-development through personal curriculums and guides for how to reclaim your life from the doomscroll. On the surface it seems like a more positive but comparable version of the male self-development movement fuelled by stoicism and questionable notions of masculinity but is it all just a performance or is a desperate effort to reverse the damage done by the constant instant-gratification of the feed.

The desire for upskilling and levelling up their knowledge isn’t new, in fact we captured this sentiment in our What Unites Young Adults research in 2022. Calling it “Limitless Ambition” our participants, Dominic told us that *“I feel better about myself when I’ve made good progress on a song or spent more time learning French. It’s important to make an effort to learn something new or improve otherwise I would drift aimlessly.”*



There’s a growing craving for a return to friction, performative or genuine, for a gentler, more thought provoking media diet with content that isn’t just consumed but is digested. In the fashion space where critique is rife, brands are returning to re-celebrating their heritage and craft and where they come from to showcase their support for this movement and to show that they see the consumers that want something real.



LOVE SELLS

Extreme romances and rivalries

Speaking of a return to the analogue, a recent Netflix TV adaption of bestselling gay romance Heated Rivalry has captured the hearts of viewers. The show centres two male rival hockey stars turned lovers but have to hide it which are the ingredients for a hit show with the female audiences that the show is mainly marketed as. The Guardian reports that the show has led to a 5,805% increase in book sales since airing which aligns with not only this shift towards analogue means of content but a craving for escapism and community WARC Reports.

It makes me question whether an attainable image of romance is realistic in the mainstream media, rather than stories of extremes as we’ve seen. We’re either deeply invested in a sexy romantic tale of forbidden love or an odyssey of gamified dating where marriage or money is the ultimate prize. In truth, viewers can’t help but enjoy a tragic tale of love. Audiences latch on to these polarising ideas of “romance” maybe not being so aware of how it may be shaping their outlook on relationships.

Currently at ITV we’re investigating these very questions about how the public navigates the turbulent perception of modern relationships in our upcoming research: 70 Years of Relationships launching in March.



THE POWER EDITION

Midlands powerhouses, Chinamaxxing and the individual vs the collective

Welcome back to Pop Theory's March edition! This month we are exploring pop culture power shifts, from the rise of Chinese cultural clout to the rise and rise of the individual to the media industry waking up to life outside of the M25.

C-DRAMAS, CHINAMAXXING & BOBA

is China the next big cultural influencer after South Korea?

You might have seen someone on the bus, train or even in cafes watching a Cdrama, you just didn't know it at the time. This happened to me on the 35 to Shoreditch, a woman in her 50s playing what I would later learn to be, a 'Cdrama' out loud on her phone - titled something akin to 'Vain step mother is obsessed with money'.

As a cultural strategist my job is to understand what people are watching and yet, this has snuck right under mine and seemingly the wider media industry's noses. Now some of you might have heard of K-dramas, maybe even J-dramas, but it turns out everyone and their nans are watching C-drama's.

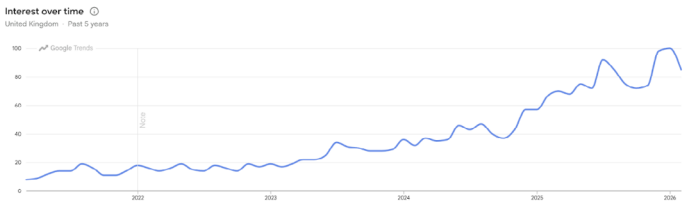


C-dramas are the new short form, vertical specific (made to be watched on phones) format taking over feeds and seemingly public spaces.



The themes of C-dramas follow popular morality or fairy tales, featuring figures like greedy bosses, ugly stepsisters or evil stepmothers, all who get their comeuppance.

Popularity of these short form series has increased exponentially in the UK, with google searches increasing by over 95% 2021- 2026.



But what does this popularity say about the state of media? Well it could feed into our love of longer form content packaged into short form bite-sized clips, or perhaps the enduring popularity of good vs evil. But perhaps it's more interesting to look at how Chinese content and culture is becoming increasingly popular in the UK.

Chinamaxxing, is a recent TikTok trend in the UK and US - where according to the BBC "Chinese wellness practices, once associated with the tacky and geriatric, have suddenly found themselves in vogue... From warm apple-boiled water to indoor slippers and longevity exercises, people are sharing videos of themselves "learning to be Chinese" . Chinese rapper SKAI IS YOUR GOD has been the brains behind multiple viral TikTok sounds on brits for you pages. 2025 saw the Labubu craze rise and fall, while bubble tea continues to dominate UK high streets. Bubble tea specialist Bubbleology has 27 sites across the UK stretching from Southampton to Swindon to Chester and Edinburgh.

For the first time ever in 2026 UK citizens are now able to travel to China visa-free. This increased connection between the UK and China could re-shape our cultural connection. This connection is explored in ITV's drama series Red Eye starring Chinese-born British actress Jing Lusi. The BBC's race across the world covered extensive parts of China, while Channel 5 recently explored China with Ben Fogle. But perhaps there are opportunities beyond just content that satisfies our growing cultural curiosity. For brands, the growing popularity of Chinese pop culture offers an opportunity to highlight Chinese produce beyond Lunar new year or celebrate the humble Chinese takeaway as a sign of cultural exchange. Either way, with more Brits setting foot in China than ever before, it looks like the Chinese 'pop culture wave' is just getting started.

INDIVIDUALS VS THE COLLECTIVE

In an age old battle - who holds the power in society?

Is it for "me" vs "we" is something advertisers, marketers and behaviour analysts have always hotly debated when it comes to consumer motivations. But in 2026 the scale is definitely tipped in favour of the individual.

In ITV's latest 2026 update of our landmark nationally representative research What Unites the Kingdom we found a growing trend towards insularity and a rejection of the collective. Almost half (48%) of Brits agreed with the statement "We should prioritise protecting our own" while just

33% agreeing with the counter statement “We have a responsibility to look after everyone”. Similarly Brits are more likely to agree than disagree with the statement “My family and friends are the only community I care about”. And perhaps most upsettingly only 13% say that their communities are thriving.

We’ve seen this shift towards individualism and insularity start in 2025 with 77% of Brits believing that “we’ve become more self centred and less considerate as a society”. But in 2026 its reaching new highs, with a record number of term time holidays taken in January 2026 by families.

But perhaps there are green shoots of collective power surfacing, live events and big TV hits are performing better than ever before as Brits clinging onto fewer by bigger moments of collective joy. With Glastonbury 2025 selling out in record time and landmark series like Celebrity Traitors and I’m a Celeb pulling in over 10 million viewers per episode. The World Cup in June 2026 marks just such a moment where the balance may tip in favour of the collective. With Brits, according to our 2026 What Unites A Kingdom research, looking forward to the World Cup more than their own birthdays!

For brands and content makers, the World Cup offers a rare opportunity to speak to Brits as a collective rather than just individuals. In the meantime, personalised offers, solo binging content and dog eat dog survival formats are likely to reign supreme!

CULTURAL POWERHOUSES

How Britain's cultural stalwarts are finally acknowledging life outside of the M25

ITV broadcast the 46th annual edition of the BRIT awards on 28 February 2026 at the Co-op Live arena in Manchester, the first time in the ceremony's history that it was held outside London. The Brits are just the latest cultural stalwart to find itself outside of the M25.

This year we’ve seen the likes of MasterChef and Silent Witness both to transfer themselves from London to Birmingham. With the latter making a point to highlight Birmingham specific stories and cultural tensions.

Desire to leave London is at a 12 year low, according to The Times. But, in other cultural measures London is found lacking. In a report by Adobe, Manchester was named the ‘vibiest’ city in the UK, with 12.9m instagram posts of the city per 100,000 residents. With London coming in second place (9.7m) and Edinburgh in third (7.8m). Making Manchester the unofficial UK capital of influencers. It also won out on the food and drink scene, boasting the highest number of cafes, coffee shops, and restaurants per 100,000 residents. In a similar vein Time Out named Digbeth in Birmingham the second coolest neighbourhood in the UK (just behind London’s Camberwell).

For brands, it’s all about leaning into local pride and cultural nuances - think Aldi rebranding to ‘Aldeh’ in Manchester to celebrate Oasis reuniting. Highlight the cool factor of UK towns and cities outside of London, leaning into local scenes and popping up in unexpected places.





THE (TENTATIVELY) HOPEFUL EDITION

Diamond geezers, the death of doom scrolling and comedy's big comeback

Welcome back to Pop Theory's April edition!

DIAMOND GEEZERS & DEANOS

How Essex's 'hard men' are becoming an unlikely antidote to toxic manosphere thinking



You might not have heard of live streamer Gymskin, he's not garnered the headlines of HS TikkyTokky (the subject of Louis Theroux's Manosphere doc) or toxic influencers like Andrew Tate. But thanks to a viral live stream clip featuring a questionable shoulder shuffle he's quietly shifting the narrative around British masculinity.

Described as 'delightfully ITV' in the Screenrot podcast and the 'The type of guy who would have had an early season of Big Brother in a chokehold' by Huck magazine. Gymskin's happy go lucky persona and hard man gym credibility has been winning over an audience of teenage boys, who now pull up on their lime bikes to gatecrash his live streams for the chance to 'drop the shoulder' with him.

His influence has now extended to the point where now Madonna's 'into the groove' hit number 18 in the UK singles charts this month, for the first time since 1985, with the likes of Cruz Beckham, the RSPB and model Calum Harper recreating the clip.

His love of Costa Coffee (even if they occasionally 'burn the bean'), appreciation of plants and kindness to strangers is seeing him be lauded as an antidote to the manosphere - albeit the bar is set relatively low!

But Gymskin is just the latest in a stream of geezers quietly dispelling the manosphere myth that masculinity is synonymous with violence, domination and exploitation.

Big John, insta-famous lover of Chinese takeaways and father to British heavyweight boxer Johnny Fisher, has been praised by GQ as 'the male role model we're missing: unaffected, unabashedly principled, committed to the (right) old fashioned values of respect and compassion. In an era of toxic influencers, podcast bros and political division'. His recent video of himself ordering at a restaurant in Dubai, saw him described as a 'master of the craft' with the video reaching 26 million views on X.



But it's not just online personalities that are challenging the manosphere. Infamous 'tough man' Danny Dyer publicly criticised the rise of manosphere thinking in Rolling Stone, saying "Misogyny, sexism, homophobia and racism are all on the rise again. We've regressed as human beings, so we need some sort of reset, don't we?".

For brands looking to challenge the growth in manosphere thinking, perhaps looking to the east end might just be the solution! Brands have won out before by subverting expectations of the essex/east end hard man including Vinnie Jones in the British Heart Foundations CPR demonstration, or Danny Dyer as an unlikely Casino empresario for Paddy Power. So perhaps it's time brands brought in the big guns to tackle toxic masculinity in it's own back garden.

NOT SO NIHILIST NOW

Gen Z are fighting doomscrolling doomspirals with kindness and empathy

When it comes to the mood of the nation it might at first glance appear to be all doom and gloom. In our recent What Unites A Kingdom 2026 report we found that we are erring on the side of introversion and insularity, with Brits more likely to agree than disagree with the statement "My family and friends are the only community I care about" and almost ½ of Brits agreeing we should 'protect our own' rather than 'look after everyone'.

This chimes with recent findings in the Financial Times which cites a decline in conscientiousness and extraversion within the UK population. Gen Z have long been dubbed 'generation me', accused of introverted tendencies, selfishness and but they aren't behind this turn towards insularity and individualism.

In What Unites A Kingdom 2026 we found that Gen Z are more than twice as likely to say that inclusivity should be a national priority than Baby Boomers. And when asked to select the values most important to them Gen Z and Millennials were twice as likely to choose 'Kindness' than those born before 1964 (Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation).

There are also signs that Gen Z are slowly beginning to ditch doomscrolling in favour of real connections. According to the Financial Times

mentioned in The Guardian, time spent on social media worldwide peaked back in 2022, and had fallen by almost 10% by the end of 2024. In What Unites A Kingdom 2026, the majority of gen Z (44%) said they were actively trying to reduce the amount they shared online vs just under a quarter who weren't.

Similarly online dating is in decline with the value of shares in Match Group, the owners of Tinder and Hinge, have dropped by nearly 80% since the pandemic. With Match acknowledging that younger people were seeking "a lower-pressure, more authentic way to find connections".

For brands and content makers, this serves as a reminder that no matter how bleak the headlines, the future is much brighter than we'd like to think. Perhaps playing to Gen Z's optimistic nature can pay dividends.

THE COMEDY REVOLUTION WILL BE TELEVISED

UK Comedy is making a triumphant return to broadcast

Back in the summer of 2024 The Rest is Entertainment boldly proclaimed the 'death of TV comedy'. But if the first few months of 2026 are anything to go by, it seems that comedy on broadcast TV has well and truly risen from the grave.

SNL UK, based on the iconic US sketch show broadcast on Sky, doubled its live viewership to half a million by its second episode this month, with its Prince Andrew cold open skit already reaching over 2 million views on YouTube. On the other side of the comedy spectrum, Mackenzie Crook's off-beat sitcom 'Small Prophets' was the BBC's biggest comedy launch since 2024 - reaching 7.7million viewers (28 day viewing window). Motherland spinoff Amandaland is set to return to screens this year, with its 2025 Christmas special being the second most viewed show on Christmas day (7.4 million) just behind The Scarecrows' Wedding (8.7 million).

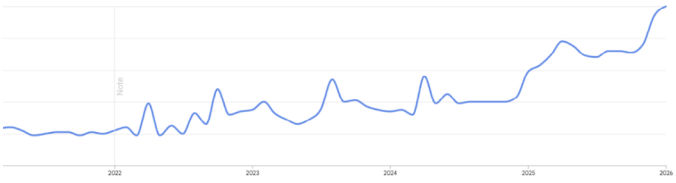
ITV's newly launched comedy prank show Celebrity Sabotage ranked as the number one primetime show for 16-24s for two consecutive weeks this month.



2026 is also due to see Twenty Twenty Six (an update of W1A and Twenty Twelve) a new satire focused on the logistics of the 2026 football World Cup. And the return of Changing Ends, Alan Carr's biopic sitcom, for season 4 on ITV alongside a third series of G'Wed.

But it's not just telly where viewers renewed appetites for comedy are manifesting. Live comedy has seen a boom with one in five Brits are choosing to take their date to a live comedy show, a huge shift from only 2% in 2014, according to Ticketmaster. In a time where the majority of Brits describe themselves as feeling 'exhausted' (ITV What Unites A Kingdom 2026), we are seeking out moments of laughter and levity. In fact google searches for 'whimsy' have increased significantly since 2021.

Google search data for 'Whimsy' 2021-2026





HOME TURF EDITION

Belonging, bittersweetness and the silver linings summer

Welcome back to Pop Theory. This month, we're exploring the distinctly **British mood** taking shape this summer, where **uncertainty, resilience** and **belonging** are colliding in interesting ways. From the contrast between **political cynicism** and **football-fuelled togetherness**, to a more **local, neighbourhood-led summer** and the rise of **dysoptimism**, this edition looks at how audiences are finding **comfort, connection** and cultural meaning closer to home.

THE GREAT BRITISH WHIPLASH

How political frustration and football fandom reveal a need for shared belonging



The local elections on 7th May and England's first World Cup game on 17th June are six weeks apart. The contrast is almost too neat to be real. A fractured vote followed by mandatory national togetherness, with 9pm kick-offs backed by government-extended pub licensing hours. The usual political parties have just had a total shake-up, and then... England plays Croatia at 9pm on 17th June. Scotland have their first World Cup since 1998, a country that has spent twenty-eight years

waiting for this, now watching deep into the night with that same mix of desperate hope and total awareness that it might all unravel.

What makes this theme interesting is the specific British habit at its core. When institutions feel like they've let people down, football has a remarkable track record of filling the gap. ITV's What Unites a Kingdom 2026 research found Brits are looking forward to the World Cup more than their own birthdays. The Pub on that June weekend is a documented national behaviour. Between the election result and the first matches, a nation will be doing what it does best: recalibrating.

ITV has the broadcast rights to twenty-nine group-stage matches and the final. England vs Croatia on 17th June is the first home nation game of the tournament on ITV1. Soccer Aid on 31st May at the London Stadium, with Angryginge, Rooney and Robbie Williams, is the warm-up act that lands at the perfect moment, two weeks before, when the national mood is building. ITV is the broadcast home of every major collective moment this summer.

For brands: The six weeks between the ballot box and the pub carry a very particular charge. Brands that acknowledge where the country has just come from, as well as where it's headed, will find the audience in a receptive mood. Show up only for the football, and you'll miss half the conversation.



THE NEIGHBOURHOOD SUMMER

Why staying local is becoming a more creative, deliberate and culturally meaningful choice

With jet fuel prices more than doubling since February and international travel looking increasingly uncertain this summer, Britain is finding more reasons to stay closer to home, and a funny thing is happening as a result. On TikTok, pub garden summers and fits are taking over #pubtok, keeping things fun and local. The back garden is becoming the occasion, with barbecue food spending running at nearly double the everyday equivalent. In fact, Kantar named treatonomics a top marketing trend for 2026, with consumers rewarding themselves with small, deliberate pleasures rather than waiting for the big milestones. In the supermarket aisle, Lidl and Ocado were the fastest-growing retailers as shoppers gravitated to clever or premium and left the middle ground behind.

We've also seen WGSN name 'exclusivity' one of their top trends for 2026. This points to a growing instinct to protect, maybe even 'gatekeep', the places and things that feel genuinely yours. Plus, Mintel is flagging anti-algorithm as a major consumer shift for the year. RAYE captured both in a single image in March when she installed a blue plaque outside a South London pub marking her greatest heartbreak, posted it on TikTok, and watched it go viral. It was a mix of physical, local and specific with the neighbourhood as the cultural stage.

You might have caught the premiere of The Neighbourhood on ITV1, Graham Norton's new show, where real families on a real street compete for £250,000 in a popularity contest. Here we're talking about social graces, street politics, families moving in, and our appetite for gossip and neighbourliness. As a description of

British summer 2026, you'd struggle to do better.

Josie Gibson's Big Country Build also captures the spirit of the neighbourhood summer on ITV with a Somerset renovation built around home-grown food, sustainable living and eccentric neighbours, reflecting a Britain finding richness closer to home. Love Island launching in early June is the aspirational summer the sofa provides. ITV's summer schedule is built for a Britain spending more time at home and wanting more from it.

For brands: Think proximity. The domestic occasion is where British summer 2026 is happening, and the brands earning their place in it are the ones showing up specifically and honestly. Lidl's record market share is as much a cultural story as an economic one. The 'Lidl haul' is something people now post proudly, and that shift in tone is worth paying attention to.

DYSOPTIMISM

How audiences are holding hope and hardship in the same hand

VML's Future 100 2026 gave a name to something Britain has been feeling for a while: dysoptimism. In a nutshell, this is acknowledging the hard stuff without being beaten by it and finding moments of genuine joy without pretending the bigger picture has resolved. This runs across generations, postcodes and voting patterns, and it shows up in some unexpected places. England's relationship with the World Cup is perhaps the purest expression of it. The hope that it might actually come home 60 years later sits alongside the quiet collective knowledge that it probably won't... Both feelings are completely genuine, and the nation has been practising this particular balancing act for decades.

It's also the tone that explains some of the biggest cultural moments of recent times. Adolescence, a forensically bleak drama, became the most talked-about television of the awards season, sparking conversations that reached Parliament, schools and family WhatsApp groups simultaneously, earning eleven BAFTA TV nominations and winning four. Celebrity Traitors drew up to 15.4 million viewers to watch celebrities be brilliantly ruthless for charity in a Scottish castle and has been secured to 2030. BGT fills Saturday nights with the collective belief that something genuinely surprising might happen, and it does... Sonny Green, a market trader from Southend performing a poem about Tesco Clubcards, had Simon Cowell saying he loves his country. Then there's Eurovision on 16th May, producing real national investment in something Britain simultaneously refuses to take too seriously.

It's worth noting that WGSN also named a similar macro shift as Unserious Everything in their 2026 forecast, i.e. a consumer appetite for emotional release and irreverence as a response to a pressured world.

Linked to all this, ITVX hit 311 million streams in April 2026, its strongest-ever April performance and a 24% increase on this time last year, marking the sixth consecutive month above 300 million. The 2026 BGT series is the most-streamed in the show's history, with 17.4 million streams to date. Britain is watching together and at scale, and it's watching things that make it feel something real.

For brands: This is likely to be one of the most valuable moods on British television this summer. Audiences can hold complexity, and the brands that trust them will land. The Waitrose Christmas ad arguably understood this, and the Coca-Cola AI rehash did not. The brief this summer is to find the warmth in the specific and true, without smoothing over the hard bits. There's more creative room in that space than most briefs currently allow.





THE ANGER EDITION

Rage rooms, angry music and potholes

Back in 2024, the Guardian posited that we have entered the 'age of rage'. With anger becoming the UK's baseline emotion. In ITV's latest mood of the nation report for 2026 we found that 79% of brits believe we are becoming more angry as a society, a 3% increase since 2025. So in this edition of Pop Theory we wanted to interrogate the idea of 'angry Britain' and how our collective anger is impacting mainstream popular culture, and what that means for brands...

COMING-OF-RAGE

Britain's women are embracing rage rooms, scream queens and gory fiction

While male anger dominates our headlines, a quieter rebellion happening in britains female population. Women are reporting higher levels of anxiety, exhaustion and stress than the UK's men (ITV's What Unites a Kingdom 2026 research). This potent combination is manifesting in increased levels of anger. According to a worldwide Gallup poll, the gap between men and women reporting feeling anger has been increasing since 2017 (incidentally when the metoo movement went mainstream). With women being 6% points more likely to report feeling angry than men, post covid.



But the majority of the nations women aren't smashing up phoneboxes or rioting in the streets, instead they are finding novel outlets for their inner angst...

"Rage rooms", rooms where punters can smash up cars, TV and fridges in safety gear, have seen a boom in business over the past year, with The Guardian reporting bookings at Virgin's Ultimate Xtreme Rage Room increasing by 219% and Weston-super-Mare's Activity Dome surging by 150%. They report that 90% of those bookings are being made by women.

Anger is also influencing female audiences cultural tastes, "Fem-gore" as a horror subgenre has exploded over the past few years. "Fem-gore" is female (and non-binary) authored content about people (usually women, usually young) who "stalk, slash, bludgeon, infect, slice, dismember and cannibalise". Books like Eliza Clark's "Boy Parts", Asako Yuzuki's "Butter" and Bella Mackie's "How to Kill Your Family" have dominated booktok reading lists. With the subgenre benign branded "American Psycho for girls" and their protagonists as "Patricia Bateman's".

This taste for female psychopathy is shaping our screens too. Sleeper hits such as Showtime's "Yellow Jackets" (also available on ITVX) and Sky's "Sweet Pea" - 'coming of rage' series interrogate young female anger. In film, the horror genre has seen a shift from women as victim/ avenging hero to rage fuelled perpetrator. Quoted in BBC Radio 4's Sideways podcast, Elizabeth Erwin, researcher in film and media at LeHigh University, states that in horror movies the nature of women's screams has changed from one of fear to one of catharsis and rage. She states *"we more of a place where the scream is more intentional and overt..it used to be that scream queens were just victims and now we see them as survivors...what I'm seeing in more horror movies is... screaming giving voice to that trauma".*

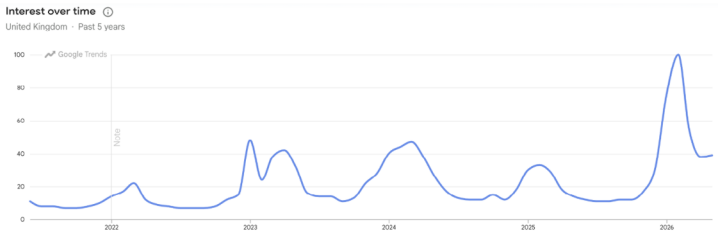
TV, film and fiction are embracing women's anger, so why not advertising? Geoff Copps, head of research at IPG Mediabrands UK, says *"One valuable property of anger is that it is deeply felt. In a world in which trust is at a premium, anger can act as a signifier of authenticity."* Notable examples of brands harnessing female anger to positive effect include Always "like a girl" campaign and Plan Uk's recent' 'terms and conditions'. For brands who's target audiences is women; harnessing and speaking to their anger could be a valuable way to build trust and feel authentic.

WHAT IS RAGEBAITING BRITAIN?

The answer lies at our feet...

The cost of living crisis and difficulty getting NHS appointments are getting Brits riled up, but it's the ground beneath our ties (or lack of it) that's really feeling our collective wrath. Yes thats right, potholes are what is really getting Britain's goat.

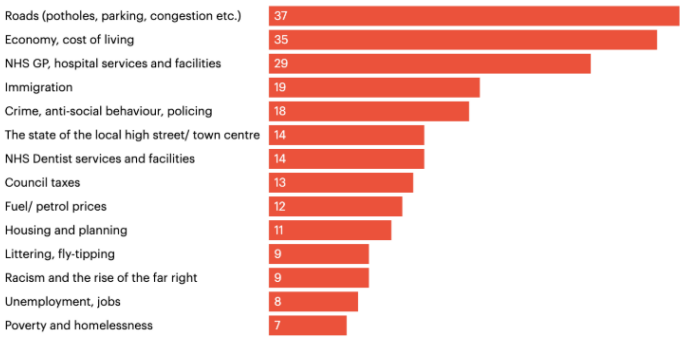
Potholes have been an eternal source of pain for Brits, but in 2026 they are getting more attention than ever. Google searches for them are at an all time high.



According to data from YouGov potholes (alongside the overall state of Britains roads) are the top issue for Brits ahead of the local elections, ahead of the economy, NHS and immigration.

Ahead of the local, mayoral and devolved elections, what do Britons say are the most important issues facing their local area?

What do you think are the most important issues facing your LOCAL AREA at this time? Please tick up to three. %



Social PR agency Block Report recently conducted a deep dive into Britains pothole obsession. This obsession, isn't completely unfounded, pot hole related breakdowns have increased by 19% with an estimated 6 potholes per mile in the UK. As a result pot hole related content is booming, ITV news second most engaged TikTok ever is about accident caused by a pot hole. Articles and viral videos focusing on novel solutions or protests from disgruntled residents consistently go viral.

So what does this mean for brands? Well as Block report suggest, if you want to 'be part of culture' start by fixing the damn potholes!

RAGING AGAINST THE MACHINE

Brits are seeking catharsis through angry music

Music is getting angrier, more insular and sadder; at least that is according to a study from the University of Innsbruck. They found that the lyrical content of music over the past half a century has become a lot more self-centred whilst also showing a decrease in positive, joyful lyrics and a rise in those that express anger, disgust or sadness.

This rise in angry music is reflected in the genres Brits are connecting with. LiveNation the world's largest concert promoter, said heavy-rock shows are up 14% year-over-year, with the likes of nu-metal bands Korn, Deftones and Linkin Park anchoring festivals alongside mainstays like Metallica and Iron Maiden. The BPI recently reported that last year rock music claimed its highest share of the UK singles market in nearly a decade in 2025.

So what's behind this rise in popularity of angry music? Well, it could be rising frustration, 75% of Brits believe society needs to change (WUAK 2026), a 5% increase since last year. It could also be attributed to a wider need for collective catharsis. The British Psychological Society reports on metal as an alternative to positive wellness language, instead honoring and playing with the intense emotions felt when going through difficult circumstances. In ITV's new What Makes Content Catch, that decodes popular culture, we found in that uncertain times we tend to find a feeling of solace and safety by engaging with darker themed content - such as angry music.





THE SUPERSTITION EDITION

Etsy Witches, Football Curses and Pub Psychic Nights are Gripping the Nation

As we navigate an uncertain world, Brits are increasingly leaning into the allure of superstition. From the growing popularity of TikTok tarot card readers to the rise of pub psychic nights, the nation is investing more time, money and faith into content, purchases and experiences that aren't backed by science, but instead have an otherworldly, metaphysical appeal. Witchy content has decades-deep resonance - 90's shows like Charmed and Sabrina the Teenage Witch still have loyal fanbases, and kids programme The Worst Witch remains an audience favourite on ITVX. Now - in an era defined by unpredictability - it seems that Brits are opening their hearts, minds and wallets to the world of superstition as a means of regaining that much-needed sense of emotional optimism. In this issue of Pop Theory, we're unpacking how and why superstition is manifesting (pardon the pun) across British lives.

STUDS, SPELLS & SCRUFFY SOCKS

Ahead of the World Cup, Pepsi asked England stars Harry Kane, Jordan Pickford and Declan Rice what their pre-game rituals are, revealing quirky, superstition-charged routines adhered to by the players. Harry Kane religiously puts on his kit left-to-right, while Declan Rice is loyal to his lucky breakfast of pancakes and syrup. But superstitions surrounding sport certainly don't end with the players; research from O2 reveals that 3 in 4 British sports fans believe that their personal pre-match ritual has led to a win for their team, while a spiritual leader from Ghana has recently been making playful headlines for both placing and lifting curses on England captain Harry Kane throughout the World Cup.

So, why do Brits lean into superstition when it comes to their favourite sports? Our What Unites Fans research found that the most active and





emotionally charged form of behaviour amongst sports fans is a desire to have skin in the game; aka, some form of control over the narrative and outcome of their sport. Enter, superstitions. Sports fans often lean into lucky symbols and rituals as a means of calming nerves and feeling like they are doing their bit to influence positive outcomes from a distance. We captured the spirit of a sentimental sports fan when we spoke to Wolves fan Stuart, from the outskirts of Birmingham - he told us "my Wolves socks are completely threadbare, but I still wear them for luck". Superstitions provide sports fans with a sense of emotional closeness to their team, and that much-desired feeling of making a positive, luck-inducing contribution to the shared outcome.



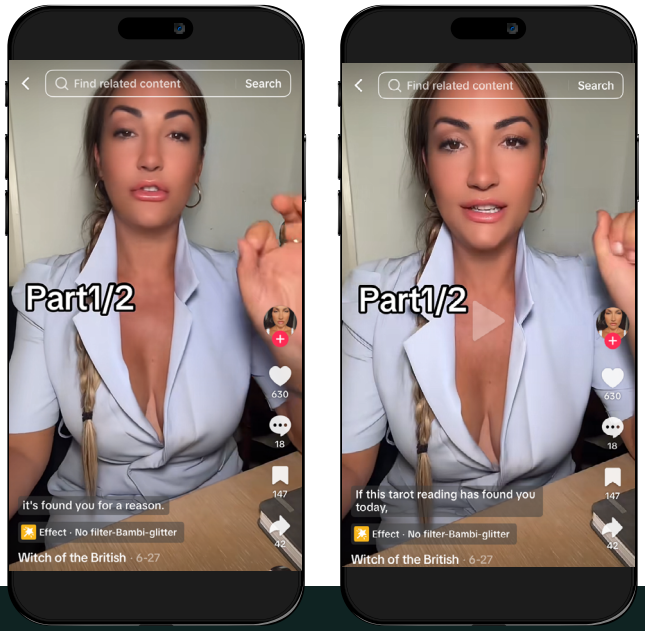
Sports fandom is a hotbed for superstitious beliefs and behaviours. For brands and creators, be brave and be dynamic when it comes to appealing to fan bases, because their superstitions come loaded with passion, a sense of heritage, collective emotion and disposition towards action. Take cues from the likes of Heinz Brazil, whose pre World Cup campaign speaks to the unfiltered passion embodied by being a football fan. Their campaign celebrates the stains on football jerseys that inevitably occur during tense match-watching moments, speaking directly to a widely-held sentiment in football culture; that a piece of clothing worn for a winning match should go unwashed in order to keep the winning streak alive.

INSTITUTIONS OUT, SUPERSTITIONS IN

Honesty is the number one value that Brits want the government to promote in 2026, with a whopping 62% of the UK public agreeing with the statement "I feel resentful towards political and economic systems" (ITV What Unites a Kingdom, 2026). Our latest piece of research What Makes Content Catch found that a sense of certainty and stability was the top priority emotional need amongst audiences, reflecting the mood of a nation yearning for emotional reassurance but living with little faith in their governments to deliver protection and wellbeing. As our trust in institutions sits at a very low low, our interest in superstition-charged offerings is growing.

Across social media, many are turning to their FYP for emotional conviction. TikTok figures like Witch of the British are amassing millions of likes off the back of digital tarot reading content, speaking directly to viewers' hopes and fears via topics like romance, finance and career. The videos capture attention from the word go, commonly opening with mysterious lines like 'if this video has found you on X date, this message is for you'. One journalist exploring the TikTok tarot phenomenon hypothesises that tarot content - which alludes to being part of a larger system of planets, solar systems and determined destinies - helps audiences to feel part of something larger than life, and that the optimistic nature of the content offers a sense of safety and hopefulness that we are struggling to find elsewhere.

Across UK pubs, community clubs and even Toby Carvery's, a wave of ticketed group psychic nights are cropping up. A recent piece of research funded by The International Research Network for the Study of Science and Belief in Society discovered that many people who frequent psychic nights find themselves hooked on attending because the events help them to manage emotions ranging from grief and loss to curiosity about supernatural forces, all felt on top of the underlying uncertainty that characterises life in Britain today.



95% of psychic night attendees were female - many of whom had a longstanding interest in content about paranormal activity - and the events bridge humour and curiosity with larger-scale feelings about meaning, love and relationships. We recently found that audiences often engage with spooky, gory and taboo content and experiences as a means of managing fears and anxieties. Think of it as a form of low-stakes exposure therapy; we indulge in content that we know might make us scared, with the expectation that we will leave feeling more safe and secure (What Makes Content Catch, ITV, 2026).

For brands and media agencies looking to tap into this space, don't be afraid to embrace supernatural or mystical themes. Audiences love to test the waters when it comes to their hopes and fears, ironically in pursuit of feeling safe and secure.

MANIFESTATION FOR THE NATION

Recent YouGov research suggests that cultural rhythms of today are experienced through a crisis-shaped lens. Yet, manifestation - a self-development practice that teaches its followers to liberate themselves from limiting beliefs by blending practical psychology with notions of energy frequencies and higher powers - has sparked the curiosity of Brits. Research commissioned by Adobe showed that 1 in 4 Brits practise manifestation weekly, with 72% of 18-24 year olds and 69% of 25-34 year olds believing in the power of manifestation to help them reach personal goals and achieve dreams. Manifestation was popularised on TikTok, and for Gen-Z - many of whom were christened by the algorithm - manifesting is a ritual of everyday life. In 2024 Cambridge Dictionary named 'manifest' the word of the year, turning what was formerly a mere adjective into a certified cultural phenomenon.

Manifestation's popularity shows us how rapidly esoteric, self-development coded ways of thinking can take hold, especially in a time period where attitudes towards religion are scattered and 48% of Brits are prioritising protecting their personal wellbeing over that of the collective (What Unites a Kingdom 2026, ITV). Figures like Roxie Nafousi popularised manifestation beyond the walls of social media, rebranding a practice typically considered witchy and woo woo into something sensical to mainstream audiences. Through a mix of TV appearances (she's a This Morning regular), podcast appearances, social media content and even a best-selling book release, Roxie introduced a clean-cut, aesthetic edition of manifestation to Brits and inspired the nation to take destiny into their own hands. Love Island's very own Maya Jama is a key pop-culture proponent for manifestation, regularly taking to social media to share with her 2.3 million followers how powerful a force manifestation has been in her journey to success.

Some of us are even turning to Etsy to take that extra step towards securing our manifestations. Relationship problems? Manifesting last minute tickets to Harry Styles' tour? Rain forecast for your wedding day? Fear not, because there's an Etsy Witch for that. What on earth is an Etsy Witch I hear you ask. Etsy Witches are self-proclaimed practitioners who sell a myriad of different spells online - with many of the offerings on Etsy acquiring over 2,000 five star reviews. Etsy prohibited the sale of 'Metaphysical Services' back in the mid-2010s, but many witches manage to bypass this by listing their services under entertainment categories, and the UK spells market has been gaining significant traction since mid 2025.



Google searches for 'Etsy Witch' have been steadily on the rise since August 2025

So, for those wanting to lean into the cultural currency of manifestation, remember that you're speaking to audiences operating with selfhood, opportunity and empowerment at the forefront of their minds.





THE SILLY SEASON EDITION

Boozy Bingo, Playing with your food and our obsession with all things Jelly

August is traditionally “silly season” in the world of media, so for this month's edition of Pop Theory we decided to fully embrace the weird, wonderful and delightfully silly side of mainstream pop culture. We’ll be chatting through some of this year's silliest trends, from gen Z still splitting the G, to Bingo’s big comeback and why we love a silly little trinket.



SPLITTING THE G AND DUMP DINNERS

Why are so many brits playing with their food?

The food we eat and how we eat it has taken on a lot of baggage during the cost of living crisis. With pinched pockets, everyday brits are putting a lot more thought into their dining choices. In our 70 years of Dining research we talked about how everyday Brits are “meal maxxing”, essentially trying to get the maximum protein, taste and overall health benefits out of their daily meals. In fact mentions of “protein” rose by almost 600% post covid in ITV’s food content and food as “fuel” rose by a similarly astronomical 206%.

Pair this increasing focus on food having to be justified as productive, with the long term rise of wellness culture and the recent introduction of GLP1s; dining culture has

become pretty serious... or so you would think. Every shift in culture tends to trigger an opposite reaction. In this case a rising frustration with buttoned-up, serious approach to dining is manifesting in turning our indulgent or "non-productive" food and drink consumption into moments of play.

Trends like "dump dinners" - where TikTokers dump meals straight onto the table, much to the shock of their guests - are a signal of this desire to rebel against the seriousness of mainstream food culture. On the whole Gen Z are drinking less, with one in three of drinking age reportedly being teetotal. Those that are drinking are finding permission by partaking in playful drinking challenges and trends, such as splitting the G (still very much the rage according to our recent work experience students) or "setting the table" with a Moretti. Playful caffeinated drinks like Buzzballz are also on the rise amongst Gen Z, with Buzzballz becoming the fastest growing ready to drink brand in the UK.

Even in content, indulgent food is being reframed as permissible through play. Netflix shows like Is it Cake? Nailed It! And Snack Vs Chef focus on the creation rather than consumption, with food being a mechanism for gameplay rather than flavour. Even Great British Bake Off is increasingly placing importance on appearance rather than flavour. What does this mean for advertisers? Well for more indulgent FMCG brands play is the way to bypass Brits reservations about treating themselves. Engaging in playful challenges, visuals and gameplay helps customers resist the pressures to always be "sensible" in their dining choices.



DANCERS, DJ'S & COPIOUS VK'S

What Bingo's gloriously silly comeback says about the nations appetite for risk



Bingo is bigger than ever, it's now starting to infiltrate surprising pockets of culture. According to recent data nearly half of new bingo customers are Gen Z and millennials. Bingo is making a comeback in urban hubs, with multiple reports of new bingo halls opening up inside of the M25. In 2025, Bingo brand Buzz reported its first year of combined admissions and revenue growth since 2007. With a 5% growth in the second half of 2025.

But this is not your Grandma's bingo. Bingo has evolved into the equivalent of an afternoon club night featuring dancers, DJs and copious VKs. Bingo event brands like Bongo's Bingo and Hijingo, the former recently announcing a residency in Brixton, are largely responsible for the rise of younger bingo goers. With founder Johnny Bongo prescribing the popularity of the Bingo themed events to its ability to provide "a dose of escapism where you can leave your worries at the door for a few hours and let loose big time".

This growing desire for bingo speaks to a broader trend within British culture. In our What Unites the Kingdom 2026 research we identified a growing behaviour around "managed mischief". Brits aren't adopting an entirely hedonistic lifestyle, but they are engaging in pre-planned moments of excess, indulgence and silliness. While nightclubs and pubs are closing due to lack of demand, ticketed events like festivals and concerts are on the rise. Preplanned, daytime events like bingo play right into Brits appetites for pre-planned low stakes risk-taking.

JELLYCAT COLLECTIONS AND PLAYFUL PIMPLE PATCHES

Why can't young adults get enough of silly stuff?

Recently, our taste in stuff is increasingly being influenced by silly. Think packaging, fashion items and beauty tastes; Brits are turning to playful, childlike purchases as an investment, source of excitement and form of self-expression.

According to toy industry research group Circana, almost half of UK adults (43%) have bought a toy for themselves or another adult – with that figure rising to 76% amongst Gen Z shoppers (Circana, 2025). Brits are investing thousands of pounds in personal Jellycat collections, with some fans buying new jellycats every payday and treating themselves to a new toy as an antidote to a bad day. Kitschy bag charms are soaring in popularity; Google trends shows a steady incline in interest in the accessory since 2024, and M&S even launched a line of bag charms last year.

Silly is also influencing the beauty industry, which is increasingly experimenting with playful packaging, textures and colours that feel reminiscent of the shelves of Boots and Superdrug in the 2000s. Products like Milk Makeup's jelly textured blusher - which closely resembles a cube of strawberry flavour Hartley's - has taken TikTok by storm, with beauty enthusiasts gleefully remarking that the product reminds them of a lollipop or bag of sweets. Pimple patch brand Starface has playfully revolutionised what it means to have a pimple, transforming blemishes from a pain point to something we love to wear with pride - footballer Lauren James wore a star shaped patch to the Lionesses Euros victory parade last year. K-beauty is a key driver of the playful beauty movement (21%) of UK Gen Z consumers use K-beauty products), popularising offerings such as hand cream packaged like a Tamagotchi, teddy bear shaped lip masks and lip balms that double as keychains.

So, what is so appealing about stuff that is silly and childlike? Gen Z are known for embracing tropes with an infantile nature; "I'm just a girl", girl dinner, TikTok trends that whimsically contrast our parents' achievements at our age to our current struggles and an obsession with the development of the frontal lobe, which - according to TikTok psychology - doesn't fully develop until age 25. Young adults' transition into adulthood has been - and continues to be - blurred. Life trajectories are decreasingly linear; over 1/3 of Gen Z and Millennials still live with parents (What Unites Generations, ITV, 2025) and culturally, many of us are quick to lament the concept of adulthood.

The embrace of silly stuff appears wrapped up in a conundrum surrounding what it means to occupy a space that straddles childhood and adulthood. Many young adults have been denied the opportunity to take on heavy responsibility and agency typically associated with 'adulting', but are instead able to thrill-seek and express themselves through purchases that speak to that child-like, impulse driven feeling of buying something for the sheer sake of wanting it. For those wanting to tap into the silliness economy, remember to speak to audiences' inner child.

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