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POP THEORY



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.

Pop Theory looks 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.

As always we'd love to hear from you!

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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?

