

itv

POP THEORY



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. As always we love a chat, so pop us an email at lucy.irving@itv.com if you'd like to hear more about our proprietary research.

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.

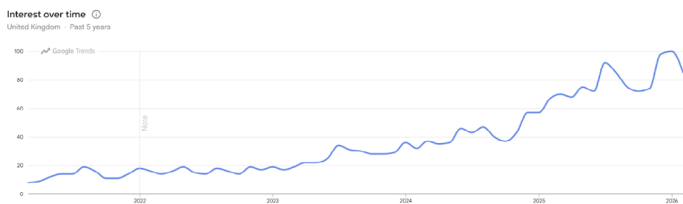


C-dramas are the new short form, vertical specific (made to be watched on phones) format taking over feeds and seemingly public spaces.



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 100,000k 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.

