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# POP THEORY



## THE COZY ISSUE

### 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.

As always we'd love to hear from you!

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## 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 you've someone 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.



## THE ONLY WAY IS ESSEXMAS