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POP THEORY



THE RELATIONSHIP ISSUE

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.

As always give us a shout at lucy.irving@itv.com as we'd love to hear from your hot takes!

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.