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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.

As always we'd love to hear from you!

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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.



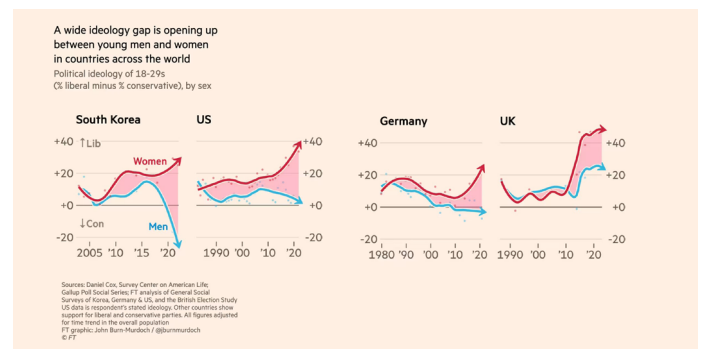
But in the face of a rapidly growing **gender divide**, we are once again turning to the girl gang for female empowerment and solidarity. Gen Z men and boys increasingly favour 'traditional' gender roles, while Gen Z women are becoming more left-wing and liberal in their attitudes. In ITV's own **What 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.

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