

7



YEARS OF
RELATIONSHIPS

itv

70 itv **YEARS OF
RELATIONSHIPS**

CONTENTS

3-4

Introduction

5-24

3 Cultural Shifts: What's Changing
in the Nation's Relationships?

25-28

Timeline of Relationships

29

In the Mood for Love?



HELLO & WELCOME TO “70 YEARS OF...” YOUR POCKET-SIZED GUIDE TO 70 YEARS OF BRITISH CULTURAL CHANGE

This year marks 70 years of TV advertising in the UK and 70 years of ITV being on air. In order to celebrate this cultural landmark - ITV media will be taking advertisers on a journey through 70 years of British cultural change in order to better understand our ever changing present.

We'll be exploring how the adverts and shows on ITV have shaped, reflected and changed the consumer landscape of mainstream Britain, through the lens of four pillars of consumer behaviour - play, dining, spending and relationships.

In this fourth and final edition of '70 years of' we're picking apart the very connections that bring us together... Relationships

AN EXPLORATION INTO HOW THE NATION LOVES

We've utilised a blend of semiotic analysis, 70 years of ITV's subtitle data and expert interviews to understand how the content on ITV has reflected, shaped and changed the nation's relationships.

Who we choose to be with (in whatever capacity) can have a great impact on how we navigate society. But with divorce rates and the number of people living alone increasing it makes us wonder: what has changed in how people view commitment. The content we consume and the technology we use have played a major role in shifting dating culture and the nature of relationships. Our motivations for being in relationships in modern Britain are more diverse than ever before, the playbook on love is no longer the same. If you're a brand who cares about indulgence, connection or togetherness you'll want to keep on reading.



Over the last 70 years we've seen relationships go from being defined by hard line commitment to questioning **whether having a boyfriend is embarrassing**. We've gone from starting a nuclear family with someone we know from our locality to a far more fragmented approach to love where we have total agency and endless options. With 75% of singles not trying to find a partner in the past year and 77% of singles agreeing that there are many benefits to being single (Mintel, 2025), this indicates that the British public are reevaluating relationships.



“WE HAVE ROMANTICIZED NEEDING ANOTHER HUMAN, WHEN I BELIEVE THE MOST ROMANTIC THING IS NOT NEEDING SOMEONE BUT WANTING THEM AROUND ANYWAY.”

MICHELLE ELMAN, MEDIA LIFE COACH ON ITV'S THIS MORNING



3 CULTURAL SHIFTS

SHIFT 1 FROM THE STABILITY OF WE TO THE POWER OF ME

The relationships we formed were once the bedrock of our society. They laid the foundations for communities and marked milestones in our lives from marriage to having your first child. Relationships weren't aspirational they were expected and often our personal and familial lives revolved around one relationship or another. Marriage as an institution wasn't questioned, for the majority it was simply understood. Eventually our hearts began to rule over our heads and we abandoned the relationships orchestrated by societal norms. Now we see the role of relationships as better serving our individual needs.

60s - 70s EXPECTATIONS OVER ASPIRATIONS

In the 60s, marriage was very much the norm. Everyone got married and they did it young, in fact the 1960s saw the record lowest age for marriage at **24 for men and 22.5 for women**.

Marriage was not moralised but simply expected by society. It was an institution at the very centre of our lives driven by logical planning rather than desire. Often we partner with someone based on how complementary they were to our lives rather than how right they felt for us.

In 1966 an episode of Man Alive took a closer look at the professional matchmaking service known as **The Marriage Bureau** we see a woman being taken through marriage profiles. What stands out from the attributes of a potential husband listed aren't about his appearance or occupation but about his social class.

“We couldn't introduce people out of their class, we couldn't expect them to be happy, it would be wrong for them”

1966: LOOKING FOR LOVE? VISIT THE MARRIAGE BUREAU MAN ALIVE

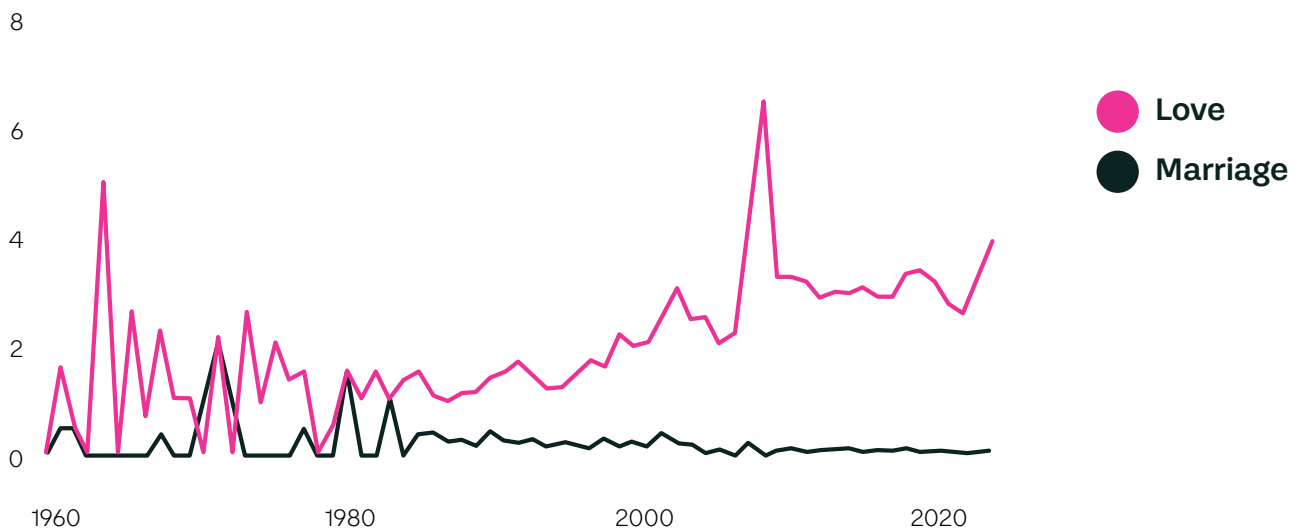
Marriage in the 60s often asked people to fulfil a role in each other's lives according to an incredibly logical set of expectations that determined how well you fit together. This wasn't void of any sort of romance according to Man Alive host Trevor Philpott, there still needed to be some kind of “chemical attraction” present but planned criteria took precedence.



In the 70s we saw more of an emphasis on the individual roles of men and women in heterosexual marriages. Leaning into what society expected a man and a woman to be. **Findus Beef Curry** sees a wife depicted in a soft domestic caretaking role preparing “something special” for her husband who dropped home unexpectedly. This idea that successful marriages are ones where the couple knows best how to serve and treat each other is reinforced in **Mr&Mrs**, a show where husband and wife are tested on how well they know each other. Contestants are asked questions about scenarios in their personal lives and shamed for when they got it wrong, as if marriage was predicated on how accurate your knowledge of your partner’s temperament was.

The blanket expectation of marriage that once covered British society was waning. The institution of marriage was giving way to the dream of love and romance. People wanted the companionship and comfort of long-term commitment without all the weight that came with marriage. We saw this reflected in our content with mentions of **“marriage” declined by 75% on Coronation Street** while **mentions of “love”** only continued to climb.

Mentions of “marriage” and “love: on Coronation Street between 1960 - 2026



1997 FINDUS BEEF CURRY



80s - 90s

LOVE IS ON THE MENU

Society was departing from an era of logical planning to one of illogical passion. Advertising was full of people passionately embracing their base desires, whether it was being sexually fulfilled or indulging in adverts depicting desire and passion. Ads were selling sex showing us that love was something to consume and to be consumed by. Both men and women were subject to objectification as we see in this **Bodyform** advert from the 90s.

In this hot and sweaty advert a woman expresses her adventurous and flirtatious tendencies by disturbing a handsome half-dressed tradesman working on a silo before proceeding to steal his car after she distracts him with her looks and banter.

Women observing and objectifying men wasn't a new phenomenon but it was entering the mainstream in an unashamed way. This "animalistic browsing" that was taking place was a key pillar of the dating shows at the time. **Man O Man** was a show that put women in the driver's seat, given the opportunity to judge a bachelor who would try and convince them that he's their dream man.

This was a significant shift from the 60s where women would try to emphasise their femininity for the sake of finding a partner to the 90s where women felt liberated enough to exercise their sexuality.

This newfound agency of women aligns with the rise of third way feminism, a movement popularised by the Spice Girls who stood for an assertive and care-free version of womanhood - one that reclaimed what it meant to be "girly". Women began to prioritise instant gratification over progress. **Mentions of "sexy" peaked in 1988 and 1992** on Coronation Street reflecting how physical appearance and sexualising one another was entering everyday language.

"1993 BODYFORM " ADVERT



2000s - 2010s

TOUGH LOVE

The idealistic lustful whirlwind of the 80s and 90s began to settle as the 2000s came around, love was in the air and was slowly crashing down to earth. The precursor to the dating show of the century had launched, **Celebrity Love Island (2005)**. This infamous dating show saw typically D-list celebrities gather in a luxury villa in Mallorca to find love but what they didn't know was that the show was set up for sex and scandal rather than romance. The surveillance style setup of the show revealed the raw and messy nature of finding a partner whether it was for temporary pleasure or long-term commitment. It was in this same decade where mentions of **"awkward" across our dating shows increased by 220%**. For viewers this was an emotional rollercoaster where they could see a potential love story play out on live television and it was far from ideal. Love Island thrived off of showing us the reality of some of TV's imperfect love stories.

Seeing love play out with all its flaws taught us that relationships could be a whole lot of work and our lives didn't need to revolve around them. We could do the work on ourselves first and then focus on a relationship later. Relationships were something that would add to our lives rather than fulfilling us entirely and therefore they needed to be worth our time. In the civilian reboot of Love Island in 2015 we saw good looking 20-somethings get it on in a luxury villa of their own. Similarly to Celebrity Love Island we saw the journey of these islanders but without any expectations or previous knowledge of who they were. They were supposed to be like us. When we saw them go through issues we could relate (to some extent) to the genuine barriers to finding love - whether it was "putting all your eggs in one basket" or trying to "crack on" with someone in another couple.



"...To crack on, to put all your eggs in a basket, to pie, to ghost, to mug off, all of these phrases have reflected a period of time and have influenced the audience. Language has become one of the most talked about parts of Love Island...Watching the show you almost feel like the language used is a way for the viewer to understand what point of the relationship they are in."

MIKE SPENCER, DIRECTOR OF UNSCRIPTED AT LIFTED ENTERTAINMENT





Love Island was made famous for a multitude of reasons but what stood out was the language that mainstream popular culture has adopted to describe different stages in any one relationship.

These colloquial terms helped us to relate to one another, turning dating and relationships into a shared experience. Seeing an islander get “mugged off” or “ghosted” may help a viewer feel seen. In this way the show was rewarding both islanders and viewers for embracing complexity and messiness in relationships because this was apparent in the real world. In the 2010s, running social media commentary of Love Island became a cultural phenomenon. People used the same language from the show to discuss, dissect and relate over accounts of love and tragedy together. Underneath all this, we see that some drama and friction in a relationship can be worn like a badge of authenticity. A love well earned.



2020s LOVE LANGUAGES

Working hard for relationships wasn't working for everyone. A lockdown, economic downturn and a cost of living crisis had people re-evaluating the role of relationships in their lives and how much effort they wanted to put in. Therefore the 2020s were defined by intentionality and individualism. Ensuring relationships were adding to our lives was what mattered and we adopted therapy-speak as a means of deflecting and even exiting relationships, justifying our behaviour with pseudo-therapy phrases like “setting boundaries”, “gaslighting”, “red flags” and “narcissist”. Platforms like TikTok have only accelerated this trend of therapising ourselves out of relationships. Individuals hyper-analyse out of wanting a relationship, viewing it as emotional labour and as a result we're now de-prioritising love for compatibility with our specific needs. Modern relationships are expected to offer more than just companionship; they need to contribute to personal improvement, mindfulness, and overall satisfaction. When these needs are not met, the relationship becomes optional.

SO WHAT?

MORE THAN JUST ROMANCE

Consumers are now having to carve out space for someone in their life whereas in the past that space was already reserved for a partner as society expected. Relationships are no longer an expected life stage for everyone and brands should no longer assume that our lives are centered around relationships.

While fairy-tale relationships are still aspirational brands can't ignore the importance of all the other relationships in our lives, with friends, with family and even with pets! How can you as a brand enrich the relationships between our multifaceted relationship networks?

CASE STUDY

BUMBLE BFF

In 2016, dating app Bumble recognised that a 'match' didn't always have to equate to love. Unlike the overly functional nature of relationships in the 60s, and a warmer, more wholesome adaptation of the spontaneous and often situational nature of the 90s, the role for romantic relationships today exists as extension of a platonic relationship and individual fulfilment.

The brand realised that the could use the same foundations (literally the same programming) for seeking friendships as they were already employing for romantic relationships in their app: introducing Bumble BFF (Bumble For Friends) - swipe right on potential friends to connect with. Bumble acknowledged that the traits we look for in love are indistinguishable from those we look for in friendships: someone to laugh with, someone to rely on, someone to share our interests, hobbies and good company... but the only difference is that it's not a requirement to fancy your friends.



FUTURE OF RELATIONSHIPS

A NETWORK OF RELATIONSHIPS

We're entering a future where people aren't necessarily expecting to be in relationships anymore. The next phase of the role of relationships is in how that role is now expanding beyond romantic partners. In 2026 we can have our needs fulfilled from all the kinds of meaningful relationships around us – our networks are vast and we're able to meet people in all different types of ways, from friends and family to online communities and IRL events. Brands can both support and represent the multitude of relationships that exist in our lives by shining a light on the diversity of relationships that exist around us. **Tesco Food Love Stories** does a great job of bringing to life both biological and chosen family ties through hearty home-cooked meals. Some people may not expect to fall in love or find the right person but most people can expect to have some sort of platonic connection with one or more people, fulfilling their needs of comfort and companionship.





SHIFT 2

FROM COMMUNITY COURTSHIP TO ALGORITHMIC MATCHMAKING

How we find each other is changing drastically. Our methods and motivations for finding love have gone from being based on community and interpersonal connections to dating shows and algorithmic recommendations. Technology hasn't just changed how we find people, it's influenced how we view relationships as a whole. In a world where we have the ability to connect with anyone we desire, courtship and dating has become much more of a personal pursuit.

Today, we possess the power to connect with and pursue potential partners based on highly specific, and often unattainable, criteria. We live in a digital landscape that grants us far greater control over how, when, and whom we choose to date. Ultimately our dating decisions are now driven by convenience and personal preference.

60s – 70s

ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

In the 1950s and early 1960s who you ended up with was driven by similarity and rational decision making rather than preference. Was this person of a similar intellect to you? Did they understand your sense of dress? Could they

These were the questions pondered by the British public at the time. Compatibility was about whether you could keep up appearances with your significant other or spouse, whether you looked like you made sense together. Choosing a sensible spouse set you up for success which in this case was starting an incredibly normal nuclear family. This is all changed with the introduction of the contraceptive pill, first introduced in 1961. Once mainstream it empowered a generation of sexually liberated women but not without limitations of course. Users of the pill had to be married, with written consent from their husband and have sex no less than once a week. In 1967 the pill became accessible to all women regardless of marital status, a turning point in the normalisation of relationships beyond the institution of marriage.

The “proper” way of finding a partner that aligned with what people expected of couples was out, replaced by an innate animalistic attraction to the opposite sex, driven by instinct and lust. The sensible approach to dating lacked passion and boxed people into sensible choices for partners rather than what they really desired. In this Pepsi advert dubbed **Come Alive** we see an attractive pair frolicking on the beach and enjoying a bottle of Pepsi. Close-ups of contoured bodies and idyllic scenery conveyed the feeling that we were entering a much more carefree era for dating and courtship. One fuelled by a natural magnetism between men and women and characterised by an effortless approach to pursuing love. It became more about your vibe and less about preferences going against the status-quo of classic dating culture.



80s - 2000s THE CHOICE IS YOURS

The 80s was a complex and paradoxical time for couples. People were attempting to normalise living together before marriage whilst facing the looming Thatcherist policies that implemented traditional “Victorian family values” demonising the act. Despite this younger couples cracked on, normalising what their older generations still called “living in sin”.

This sort of gamified choice was apparent in **Blind Date** where three bachelors would attempt to woo a woman with rehearsed answers, reactions and tacky pick up lines. Both the male and female contestants are carefully selected to produce the most fun and flirtatious version of the dating, signalling that dating is the most fun for the flirty, outgoing and charismatic of us.

This defiant nature that was festering amongst young couples was shaping dating into a social sport where men performed and women projected their desires. Dating was a game and those who had wit and charm thrived. **Blind Date** showed us how much choice single people could have. And not being deemed worthy was something akin to an “ick”.

The 2000s saw TV remove the veil on romance and propel us into an era of “real” relationships broadcasted on our televisions. This consisted of sitcoms like **Coupling** that provided commentary and satire on the highs and lows of dating, sex and relationships and ultimately the choices we had to make. Then there was **Footballer’s Wives**, a drama which signified the shift from emotionally intimate relationships to more transactional arrangements.

2010s SETTLING IS A SIN

The 2010s peeled back the layers even more on relationships. Love was becoming complicated and the challenges that came with it felt like an inevitable prerequisite for anyone getting into a relationship. Showrunners wanted to respond to this craving to understand the intricacies of relationships that viewers had, in the hope that they could find love that made perfect sense for them.



DINNER DATE



Dinner Date (2010) takes through a culinary journey of bachelors and bachelorettes finding love through the stomachs of three blind dates. With the success of each date hinging on not only vibes but particular preferences the pressure was on. First impressions are taken from a menu prepared by the bachelor/bachelorette for comparisons between cuisine and compatibility to be made. With a mockumentary style editing we get a comedic but genuine look at how two people get on; their likes, dislikes and attempts to impress are all under the microscope in these intimate at-home dinner-dates. The structure of the show that pits one single person against three others emphasises the role of selection in dating, transforming a once romantic pursuit into a process that filters out the 'wrong' kind of people.

Relationships needed and consequently less compromises were made. Standards were higher, expectations were lower and the right person was a concept that very much existed but took hard graft to find. It's almost as if there was no friction or disappointment in finding your person, it wasn't worth it. To settle was considered a sin.



“With the evolution of phones, apps, and social media platforms the way we find people and date has changed dramatically. It has also created a culture for seeing people as ‘upgradable’ in my opinion and this has often played out on TV. Whilst dating, you could be speaking to multiple people across multiple platforms in multiple locations. If you prefer one person to another you can move on very quickly and leave that person ‘ghosted’. These situations have played out on many TV shows and reflect reality.”

MIKE SPENCER, DIRECTOR OF UNSCRIPTED AT LIFTED ENTERTAINMENT



"There's a lot of conversation about chivalry, romance, and yearning and a lot of conversation around whether men should financially provide or not, ... Not too long ago, we were talking about emotional unavailability and being nonchalant. Being nonchalant to now being like "chalant" is a really huge leap."

LAMISA KHAN, CO-FOUNDER OF MUSLIM SISTERHOOD

2020s **THREE'S A CROWD**

Beneath all of the demands of single people in the previous decade is a desire for a classical romance, reappropriated by Gen-Z as "yearning". Our experts argue that our wanting to yearn and be yearned for clashes with our strict rules around love.

This behaviour is rooted in how we view a potential partner. They have become something that can be examined, assessed, that can either tick all or boxes or not. How compatible we may be isn't gauged organically anymore, it's measured. We see this in both subtle and explicit ways on television.

Love Island (2015) is crafted so that interactions seem as organic as possible but hidden in plain sight Maya Jama, Ian Sterling and a militant production team nudge the narrative for optimum drama and "cracking on". The third parties use their power to out bad behaviour and expose scandalous sex lives' through challenges and semi-scripted scenarios. This speaks to a wider trend about how hosts on dating shows have always been intermediaries to love, gently steering and twisting the story to maximise entertainment. Often contestants are forced to choose a partner in a strategic and mediated way in their approach to love. **My Mum Your Dad** (2023) similarly make use of a romantic mediator with Davina McCall as matchmaking host for a group of single parents. McCall is assisted by the adult children of the contestants who lovingly manipulate their parents' dates from a surveillance room causing mischief, mayhem and matchmaking. The whole premise of My Mum Your Dad is akin to a more traditional kind of matchmaking process, where collective decision making was encouraged.

SO WHAT?

BRING THE MAGIC BACK TO DATING

People often perceive dating as binary, they're either looking for something or they're not. This thinking minimises the chance for off the cuff and slightly whimsical meet-cutes to happen. Dating doesn't need to be this systematic process where we're limited to 1-on-1 interactions in serious settings, it can begin in casual, lighthearted group settings or events.

With audiences craving more IRL experiences there's an opportunity here for brands to bring the magic back to dating by being a trusted facilitator of spaces where people could potentially meet the one.



CASE STUDY THURSDAY

Thursday is a newer contender to the dating app market, with the specific intention to reduce the amount of time that people use the app. In the boom of digital courtship, Thursday initially sought to curb 'overdosing' habits on dating apps, granting users access to the app only once per week (on a Thursday, funnily enough), where intentions to take things IRL had to be made clear, quickly. This grounds the strategy back to the origins of romantic discovery; chance encounters with deliberate outcomes. Seeing success in more meaningful interactions (that resulted in more physical dates), Thursday took things one step further: transforming their app from a space to connect and accelerate online relationships, Thursday used the platform to promote a smorgasbord of 'IRL' events for single people to attend with the intention of finding a match. They recognised that, in a society where it's the norm to stay inside, people just need a nudge to get out and get talking - removing digital personas from the equation entirely.

FUTURE OF RELATIONSHIPS



ASSISTED DATING

Whether it's through AI, matchmaking services or taking counsel from family, the future of dating is assisted. The way this shift is developing it will be commonplace to have a third party involved in your dating decisions. **Thursday** becomes a trusted facilitator for singles to bump into each other in a safe space, **Hinge** is the matchmaker that gets deleted once you've found someone and **My Mum Your Dad** gives single parents a hand at dating again.

A level of collective or communal decision making when it comes to dating is something people are beginning to see the fruits of. For a brand to push those initial digital interactions into the physical is to create a pipeline for more meaningful relationships.



SHIFT 3

FROM CINEMATIC FANTASY TO TELEVISED REALITY

Over the last 70 years, our perception of relationships has undergone a radical transformation, traveling from the polished, cinematic ideals of the mid-20th century to a modern landscape defined by vulnerability and intense emotional labour. We have transitioned from an era where couples acted as flawless, synchronized units to maintain communal status to a "documented reality" era, where a relationship's value is measured by its public resilience and transparency.

The fairytale fantasy has been replaced by a relationship-in-progress reflecting the modern era of relationships that no longer aspire to a static, perfect romance. Perception has moved from the private domestic sphere to a publicly broadcasted currency, where the "fall apart" is now seen as a necessary milestone in an individual's journey toward emotional authenticity.

60s

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

In the 60s it was all about keeping up appearances. Not only did you need to look like a couple that made sense you needed to be in sync with one another. The more harmonious you looked the better. Twink Hair Lotion's advert depicts a handsome couple showing off silky locks and even silkier dancemoves. The couple are matching in both looks, dancing ability and wouldn't be questioned for how they met or what they were doing together, promoting an image of flawlessness.

However it wasn't just how you looked it was about what you as a couple represented – your social power and status. This **National Benzole Petrol** ad sees a couple in a convertible racing a woman on a horse speeding down a beach in a scene that could be from a movie. Being a couple was worn like a badge of social power and these ads signal that a man and woman needed each other to thrive, their roles were distinct and purposeful.



"NATIONAL BENZOLE PETROL" ADVERT

70s DOOMED ROMANCE

In the 70s is when the way men and women were viewed in relationships began to equal out. Women gained more economic freedom and autonomy with the Divorce Reform Act in 1969 and the Equal Pay Act in 1970, bringing traditional gender roles into question. **George and Mildred** (1976) was a sitcom that reflected these very shifts through the lens of an everyday suburban married couple. Set in the battleground of the home it was a parody of the frustrations of a suburban marriage speaking to the unmet romantic needs of a husband and wife both still having to keep up appearances under the guise of being happily married. This trope of a doomed romance and not being very good at love continued in the series **The Lovers** which saw an unlikely pairing between main characters Geoffrey and Beryl. The premise of the show begins with the couple reuniting and discussing the subject of marriage which is why they had split up in the past. Marriage is spoken about aspirationally but doesn't feel like a realistic goal as Geoffrey complains about Beryl being too passionate as the reason for their breakup. No matter how desperate and ambitious our female lead is about marriage her dream remains unfulfilled.



In contrast advertising shows us a different reality, one that replaces a doomed marriage with sensual and seductive pursuits. This **Denim Aftershave** advert captures that “animal attraction” that reduced both men and women to their animalistic selves. A woman slowly caresses a man's chest dressed in denim with aftershave on her hand, both faceless – because it didn't matter what they look like, the viewer knew that they were attractive and attracted to each other. Where marriage is doomed, sexual attraction prevails and both men and women are sexualised.



70s – 2000s

POWER COUPLES

Charles and Diana's wedding was a defining moment in British history. It was the ultimate fairytale wedding marking a major shift in public perception of relationships.

It set the precedent for big and flashy public romance, positioning the **Royal Family** as the embodiment of traditional British family values and an exemplar of marriage. Charles famously responded to a question about being in love with **"Whatever 'in love' means,"** a comment now seen as a sign of the ill-fated relationship to follow. The scandal that followed shattered the fantasy proving that the royal romance was too good to be true. The public had a front-row seat to this love bubble bursting, making the breakdown of celebrity relationships just as appealing to watch as the making of them.

Charles and Diana Engagement Interview





Relationships were increasingly revealed to be more performative, full of PR stunts and celebrity pairings becoming common conversation in the tabloids. As the 2000s approached the focus began to shift onto the entire lifecycle of a relationship, a journey of perceived romance – how we get together and how we fall apart became the nation’s new obsession – **the power couple**.

The Beckhams served as a case study for this phenomenon. A lavish wedding and a record breaking deal with OK! Magazine turned their private vows into a shared cultural moment. By the time it was over the couple had become a brand, with coordinated outfits and an aspirational story.

These case studies showed us that having a relationship in the public sphere came with consequences. When the media could put your private life on a pedestal it meant that they had equal license to bask in its downfall. The media landscape of the late 90s and early noughties exacerbated this shift, encouraging chaos and drama to the point where it became aspirational. The “fall apart” was becoming just as significant of a milestone as finding love itself.

2010s - 2020s THE LOVE RAT RACE

The era of power couples had now evolved, power couple status was now available to the average person.

Love Island civilian edition of the show was able to raise up normal lads and lasses from across the country working predominantly “normal” jobs into D-list celebrities.

Romance was no longer a private bond that unfolded in the domestic sphere, it was a currency that could be broadcast to boost one’s value in an evolving dating marketplace. Finding a partner if done correctly could lead to great influence, brand opportunities and even your own docu-series in the case of **Molly-Mae!** It was evident that there was an appetite to follow the journey of publicly broadcasted relationships. **Love Island** took this one step further in gamifying the lifecycle of a relationship under the guise that those who grafted the hardest, who overcame the toughest tests and gained public approval were worthy of a relationship. Being in a loving relationship bought you freedom from the dating market.

A similar mechanism is in place with the colloquially termed “apps” such as **Hinge** and **Tinder** that adopt swipe and tap gestures to sort through a number of no’s before you find your yes. We have become far removed from the fantasy and fairy tale towards a more cynical and grounded look at relationships, one that only rewards relationships authenticity once they’ve survived conflict. The legacy that the 2000s left behind was defined by the breakdown of “power couples” reframing our expectations and perceptions of romance today. In this current era of love, navigating “bad eggs” and personal scandals is seen as a necessary emotional labour. The new status symbol of love is struggle and transparency.

WAITROSE PRESENTS

The Perfect Gift



SO WHAT?

HONEST LOVE

Relationships can no longer be portrayed as surface level, ignoring the emotional realities of how modern relationships exist today. Audiences are far more likely to resonate with an honest love that reflects the emotional realities of relationships rather than this cinematic fantasy we see on screen.

When portraying love brands need to be reflective of the relationships now defined by progress, mutual growth, emotional literacy and shifting gender roles providing consumers with the realism and honesty they deserve.

CASE STUDY WAITROSE CHRISTMAS 'THE PERFECT GIFT'

In 2025, Waitrose took on the supermarket category at Christmas with its incredibly praised hero ad **'The Perfect Gift'** - a 4 minute love story between Kiera Knightley (as herself) and Joe Wilkinson (as Phil), drawing from classic romance tropes most prevalent in the early noughties - the likes of **Love Actually**, **Four Weddings and a Funeral** and **Nottinghill** - meeting the concept that cooking for someone is simultaneously a grand and a subtle gesture of love. The campaign seamlessly integrated the nostalgia and whimsical romance loved by their audience, with the grounding realism of Wilkinson's authenticity and relatability. Over 2000 years of different kinds of love, captured in literature, photographs, films, myths and folklore, has left us observing grand gestures from the outside in, in the knowledge that this kind of romance lives primarily in fictional worlds, not our reality. Yet, with the blend of Knightley's ties to other-worldly romance stories and Wilkinson's modern, colloquial disposition, Waitrose's 'The Perfect Gift' perfectly encapsulates aspirational love that feels within reach.

FUTURE OF RELATIONSHIPS

DATING IS A MARKETPLACE

With apps and matchmaking services relying on profiles consisting of measured attributes about your looks and personality, trying to meet someone now feels like a personal branding job!

Relationships have become commoditised participants being seen as upgradable options. Dating continues to be increasingly performative – your person has to add to your image and personal brand as we now broadcast our lives online and for some of us on TV too. Dating is a marketplace and we have become advertisers for our own relationships, trying to prove that we've made the best choice. In the same way we indulge in the journey of celebrity relationships, we want to have our own story to tell. We see this at different life stages and demographics of relationships where there is an archetype for what a specific kind of relationship should look like.



TIMELINE OF RELATIONSHIPS

1960s

FROM COURTSHIP TO THE CONTRACEPTIVE PILL: THE DECADE WHERE TRADITION COLLIDED WITH THE PERMISSIVE SOCIETY

British attitudes to relationships in the 1960s were defined by tensions between post-war conformity and social liberation. With marriage and domesticity still pushed as the ultimate goal for young women, a cultural shift created an interesting relationship identity for young couples. For everyday life, the traditional family remained the normalised standard. In contrast, this decade saw the birth of the "permissive society," where a blossoming youth culture began to separate sex from marriage.



KEY MOMENTS

GRITTY REALITY VS. ROMANCE

The launch of ITV's **Coronation Street** (1960) rejected Hollywood romance in favour of the unglamorous, combative, but fiercely loyal reality of Northern working-class marriages, led by formidable matriarchs. Later in the decade, ITV launched **Mr. & Mrs.** (1968), a game show that turned knowing your spouse's mundane habits into a televised spectator sport.

THE ULTIMATE ROMANTIC FANTASY

The launch of the **Cadbury's Milk Tray** advert (1968) introduced the "Milk Tray Man." This James Bond-style figure went to extreme, death-defying lengths just to leave a box of chocolates in a woman's bedroom, setting a deeply cinematic, masculine standard for romantic gestures.

THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

The introduction of the **contraceptive pill on the NHS** (1961) fundamentally changed the power dynamics of dating, separating intimacy from reproduction (though it was initially only available to married women).

1970s

A ROMANTIC CROSSROADS OF LIBERATION, LEGISLATION, AND DOMESTIC REALITY

Attitudes to relationships were a mix of newfound freedoms and tough economic realities. The stigma of divorce began to fall away, fuelled by the 1969 Divorce Reform Act (which came into effect in 1971), making it easier for couples to escape unhappy marriages. In contrast, traditional gender roles were being heavily challenged by the Women's Liberation movement, and popular media began to openly discuss the messy realities of sex, mismatched libidos, and marital breakdown.



DOMESTIC BATTLEGROUNDS

ITV sitcoms like **George and Mildred** (1976) parodied the frustrations of suburban marriage. It used humor to explore shifting gender roles, social climbing, and the quiet desperation of the British bedroom (specifically Mildred's unmet romantic needs).

THE COMEDY OF FLIRTATION

The iconic **Cinzano adverts** (1979) featuring Joan Collins and Leonard Rossiter perfectly captured the clash between aspirational sophistication and bumbling British reality. Rossiter's frantic attempts to flirt with the glamorous Collins always ended with a drink spilled on her, mocking the overly serious, sensual alcohol ads of the era.

SHIFTING THE POWER DYNAMIC

The **Equal Pay Act** (1970) was a pivotal moment. By giving women a path to financial independence outside of marriage, staying in a relationship became increasingly a choice rather than an economic necessity.

1980s

A DECADE OF DIVISION, FROM POWER COUPLES TO PUBLIC PANIC

British relationships in the 1980s were defined by a sharp divide. On one hand, the booming corporate culture created the aspirational "yuppie" power couple, where relationships were treated as partnerships of mutual success and status. In contrast, the fairytale ideal of romance clashed violently with the harsh, terrifying reality of the AIDS epidemic. This was the decade where dating became highly commercialised and fraught with a new, existential anxiety about physical intimacy.



KEY MOMENTS

GAMIFYING ROMANCE

ITV's **Blind Date** hosted by Cilla Black (1985) turned dating into Saturday night light entertainment. It introduced the UK to the concept of dating as a cheeky, public game show, complete with catchphrases ("Here's our Graham...!") and televised holidays.

THE SLOW-BURN SOAP OPERA

The **Nescafé Gold Blend adverts** (1987) starring Anthony Head and Sharon Maughan became a national obsession. The serialized adverts followed two sophisticated neighbors engaging in a flirtatious, will-they-won't-they romantic tension over instant coffee, perfectly capturing 80s yuppie aspirations.

THE REALITY CHECK

The government's haunting and iconic **"Don't Die of Ignorance"** public health campaign (1987), featuring falling tombstones, fundamentally changed casual sex. It brought a chilling halt to the era of free love and made safe sex a mainstream conversation.

1990s

A PARADOX OF CYNICISM AND EXTREME ROMANTICISM

Attitudes to relationships were a mix of newfound freedoms and tough economic realities. The stigma of divorce began to fall away, fuelled by the 1969 Divorce Reform Act (which came into effect in 1971), making it easier for couples to escape unhappy marriages. In contrast, traditional gender roles were being heavily challenged by the Women's Liberation movement, and popular media began to openly discuss the messy realities of sex, mismatched libidos, and marital breakdown.



THE 30-SOMETHING CRISIS

ITV's **Cold Feet** (1997) defined the late 90s relationship anxiety. It perfectly encapsulated the transition from carefree 20s to the terrifying realities of commitment, marriage, infidelity, and starting families, resonating massively with a generation delaying adulthood.

A CONTINENTAL LOVE AFFAIR

The **Renault Clio "Papa, Nicole" adverts** (1991-1998) followed the flirty, independent Nicole and her series of romantic entanglements. It ran for seven years, ending in a spoof of *The Graduate* at her wedding. It was incredibly influential, cementing a chic, European ideal of modern romance.

THE BUMBLING BRIT IDEAL

Four Weddings and a Funeral (1994) defined the UK's romantic identity for a generation, framing British relationships as a series of awkward encounters, suppressed emotions, and grand, rain-soaked declarations.

2000s REALITY BITES IN ROMANCE: WHERE THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SQUARE TAKES OVER

The 2000s saw a new relationship consciousness emerge, driven by a reality TV culture that saturated the national conversation. Romance was no longer private; it was a public spectacle.

This constant exposure to other people's relationships culminated in the rise of social media, where couples were suddenly expected to perform their happiness online. Crucially, this decade also saw monumental legislative shifts that legally validated modern love in all its forms.



KEY MOMENTS

THE "WAG" ERA

ITV's **Footballers' Wives** (2002) capitalized on the celebrity obsession of the 2000s. It was the peak of "showmance" and trashy, public relationship drama, where marriages were treated as explosive brand deals filled with scandal, tanning lotion, and tabloid leaks.

DOMESTIC STORYTELLING

The **BT "Adam and Jane"** adverts (2005) starring Kris Marshall captured the essence of middle-class 2000s romance. The serialized ads followed a couple through dating, moving in, pregnancy, and marriage, proving that relatable, everyday milestones were highly marketable.

A MILESTONE FOR EQUALITY

The Civil Partnership Act (2004) was a seismic shift in British society, radically updating the legal definition of committed relationships and granting same-sex couples vital legal rights and recognition.

2010s A DECADE OF CONTRASTS: SWIPING AND STATUS SYMBOLS

The 2010s was a decade of dating contrasts, shaped by the smartphone revolution and the illusion of infinite choice. The explosion of dating apps gamified romance, turning the search for a partner into a high-speed, geolocation-based numbers game. In parallel, Instagram turned relationships into a curated visual performance. This created a culture torn between the brutal disposability of "ghosting" and the intense pressure to present a flawless, aspirational partnership online.



THE ULTIMATE REALITY MACHINE

The revival of ITV's **Love Island** (2015) created a new currency of relationship: the influencer power-couple. It reframed romance as a high-stakes game where finding a partner could literally equate to brand deals, instant fame, and "coupling up" as a strategic move.

EMBRACING THE FLAWS

As dating apps made people feel disposable, **the Match.com "Love Your Imperfections" adverts** (2015) pushed back. By highlighting quirks—like a guy who accidentally buys a girl a bus pass instead of a train ticket—it tries to inject quirky human authenticity back into an increasingly clinical, algorithm-driven dating scene.

THE GAMIFICATION OF DATING

The launch of **Tinder** (2012) completely rewired British dating. The "swipe right" mechanic democratized access to potential partners but also sparked a national conversation about dating app fatigue and superficiality.

2020s BUBBLES AND BURNOUT: THE DECADE WHERE DATING REQUIRED BOUNDARIES, THERAPY-SPEAK, AND WI-FI

The seismic cultural shocks of COVID-19 forced an immediate polarisation of relationships: couples either rapidly forged intense bonds in "support bubbles" or faced profound isolation. This was immediately followed by a collective dating burnout.

Today, TikTok pop-psychology dominates how we talk about love. Relationships have become highly scrutinised acts of intentionality, where emotional intelligence and shared values are prized over polished aesthetics, as singles navigate a landscape of high living costs and digital exhaustion.



KEY MOMENTS

MIDLIFE VULNERABILITY

ITV's **My Mum, Your Dad** (2023), hosted by Davina McCall, signaled a massive shift away from 2010s superficiality. By focusing on middle-aged singletons being set up by their adult children, it highlighted a modern desire for emotionally mature, gentle, and vulnerable dating rather than pure physical attraction.

THE EUPHORIA OF RECONNECTION

The **Extra Gum "For When It's Time"** advert (2021) perfectly captured the mood of the post-lockdown UK. Featuring hordes of people rushing into the streets for a massive, passionate make-out session to a Celine Dion soundtrack, it brilliantly parodied the pent-up desperation for physical intimacy after a year of isolation.

THE RISE OF THERAPY SPEAK

TikTok replaced the traditional agony aunt, making terms like **"red flags," "gaslighting," "narcissist,"** and **"boundaries"** the standard, everyday vocabulary for young Brits navigating the dating pool.



IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE?

BOOK IN A BESPOKE PRESENTATION FROM ITV'S CULTURAL INSIGHT TEAM

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