

A promotional banner for the ITV show 'Pop Theory'. It features a man and a woman standing in front of a building entrance. The man is on the right, wearing a dark quilted jacket, and the woman is on the left, wearing a black leather jacket over a striped shirt. The background shows a building with a police crest on the door and height markers on the walls ranging from 5'0" to 6'6". The ITV logo is in the top left corner.

itv

POP THEORY

THE FEAR ISSUE

Spooky season is upon us, and what is giving us the fear this year feels a little less traditional than usual. In this issue, we're taking a deep dive into how the workplace has become the ultimate scary space, how FOMO in 2026 might be more about our feeds than our friends, and how memes could just be the best medicine for fear.

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

BUREAUCRATIC NIGHTMARES

Why the workplace is at the centre of a new genre of horror

Horror and drama genres often reflect broader societal fears and anxieties. In the 00s and 10s the rise of the 'found footage' horror genre a la Blair Witch and Paranormal Activity spoke to increasing concerns over surveillance culture, the 90s and 80s the satanic panic, and the penchant for aliens in 70s, 60s and 50s formed thinly a veiled allegory for the post-war tensions with the U.S.S.R. But the mid-2020s has seen an interesting resurgence of a once small sub-genre - the workplace horror.

Hit 2026 horror films *Obsession* and *Backrooms*, both created by first time Gen Z directors, are both set within workplace environments. *Obsession* documents a workplace crush turned sour, while *Backrooms* sees the protagonist Clark get lost in the backrooms of his own failing furniture shop. Apple TV's ongoing hit *Severance* also documents the liminal horror of the workplace, showing office culture taken to the



extreme where workers sever their work lives and home lives. But it's not just in the US, recent dramas like ITV's 'The Blame' combine the old tropes of a detective whodunnit with the fresh horror of navigating a police department plagued by everyday misogyny and toxic misconduct.

But why is the workplace becoming a locus of our fears and anxieties? Firstly a lot of us are becoming less familiar with the workplace as a whole, with [nearly half of Brits still working from home some of the time](#). And for Gen-Z, [16.4% of whom are currently not in employment](#), the concept of a workplace feels even more distant. But the workplace isn't just an alien or unsettling place, it's increasingly associated with stress. Of those in work; [more than half report feeling stressed](#) in their workplace. In fact, [Google searches for workplace stress in the UK have increased by 120% since 2025](#). In ITV's recent [What Unites A Kingdom 2026](#) research only 12% of Brits cited their work (paid or unpaid) as something that brought them joy. As a result many Brits are de-centring work in their lives, with 41% of UK adults selecting having a good work-life balance as a top life priority ([What Unites Generations, 2025](#)) only 5% say that "having a successful career" is important to them (What Unites A Kingdom 2026). So much is this disaffection from the grind that Time Magazine in its future of work edition declared that ["ambition is out"](#).

For brands, it's worth noting that the work space is less a space of ambition and progress and increasingly a space of fear. In a time where workplaces are increasingly portrayed as dystopian, there is an opportunity for brands to portray themselves as disrupting the humdrum, helping workers escape the "nightmare" of hotdesking, coffee machines and *shudder* customers.

JOMO-MENTUM

Is missing out the new going out?

FOMO (an acronym meaning fear of missing out, whose origin can be traced back to a student newspaper published in 2004) was once a concept intertwined with face-to-face socialising, but now applies to a variety of human behaviours. Meanwhile, FOMO's wholesome counterpart - JOMO (joy of missing out) - is having a serious

cultural moment. But, in a world that is significantly experienced online, it seems we might be stuck somewhere in between FOMO and JOMO, unable to fully reap the benefits of either.

[Dazed use the concept of FOMO as a lens to examine our symbiotic relationship with trends, noting that FOMO is consumerism's best friend.](#)

With third spaces and distinct subcultures on the decline, we increasingly turn to social media to satisfy our intrinsic need for community and belonging, but this then feeds a cycle of anxiety over the trends we are constantly fed but could never possibly keep up with. By participating in trends, we are pursuing a fear of being disconnected from the collective, not physically, but culturally and symbolically. In this day and age, is failing to hop on board the Labubu bandwagon even more fear-inducing than missing a night out with your mates, and does this indicate a new brand of social connection - one that is defined by pressure to participate in trends and cultural rhythms rather than true kinship with other people?

Simultaneously, FOMO's cosy counterpart JOMO - a move towards intentional missing out - is having a serious cultural moment. Time spent solo or simply within the sanctuary of our own four walls is becoming increasingly culturally coveted; you only have to look as far as Molly Mae's movie nights and [Grace Beverley's home renovation content](#) to see how aspirational staying home is becoming. [A 2025 study by Virgin Media](#) found that 64% of Brits no longer feel the need to make an excuse for cancelling plans, 89% report feeling less pressure to attend social plans compared to the past, and 82% of Brits even see alone time as a 'reward' that they make sure to incorporate into their routine at least once weekly. When asked what they look forward to the most, 40% of Brits choose nights in, while only 29% of respondents prefer a night out ([ITV, What Unites Generations, 2025](#)). The verdict is clear; engineering both alone time and at-home time is the new norm. And, brands have already taken note. Ikea's ["There's no Feeling Like Home"](#) campaign cleverly tapped into the sentiment behind JOMO, inviting audiences to juxtapose the hurry and precariousness of the outside world with the peace and harmony that being at home brings.

So, is the fear no longer of missing out, but of going out? FOMO appears decreasingly tied up with missing out on physical connection, relationships and experiences, and more bound to status signalling and consumerism. While counter movements like JOMO appear to signal a shift towards protecting our own space, peace and

boundaries, do they speak more to our fondness for conducting life and relationships at home through our screens than they do a genuine perusal of missing out? [Data from Mintel](#) shows that 58% of Brits now prefer to stay in touch with others via instant messaging rather than in-person contact, signalling that FOMO no longer speaks to face-to-face socialising but instead to keeping pace with the neverending stream of content and notifications delivered to us via our feeds.

MEME-ING THROUGH THE MADNESS

How meme's are the latest fear-alleviating language

Back in 2020, when the world was deep in the depths of a global pandemic, the internet became flooded with memes that attempted to lighten the struggle with new fears, rules, restrictions and a grave new reality. Media outlets including [Forbes](#), [Time Magazine](#) and [Elle](#) published roundups of their favourite pandemic memes; it felt official - memes were a cultural language and safety mechanism for fearful times. Fast forward 6 years and memes and pop-culture humour are blossoming as a fear-mitigating form of communication used by brands, the public and even the government.

Ryanair has famously embraced memes with open arms to de-frictionise negative elements of their reputation. [25% of Brits fear flying to some degree, while about 1 in 10 people have a flying phobia](#). But, flight-fearing customers who may dread a lack of leg room, shaky landings, chaotic seat allocation or noisy neighbours on board a Ryanair flight can expect to be taken the mickey out of via [Ryanair's tongue in cheek Instagram account](#). Strategist Michael Corcoran - who works on Ryanair's brand identity - declared that [being nicer wasn't going to mitigate any of the friction existing between flyers, perception of quality and Ryanair](#). Instead, using memes to acknowledge consumers' fears and hesitations head-on has created a brand that is relatable, entertaining and ultimately flourishing - [Ryanair reported a 5% increase in guests this September compared to the previous year](#).

Even politics has entered the meme chat. The 2024

general election was [dubbed the TikTok general election](#) off the back of extensive meme wars waged between political social media accounts; one meme published by the Labour party [used Cilla Black's classic 'Surprise, Surprise! to take the mickey out of Tory opponent Rishi Sunak](#). In reverse, the British public are responding to serious business with cheeky humour. When [millions of phones across England and Wales received a 'severe' level government text alert this August](#) warning the public about wildfires, it was met less by fear and panic, but more notably with humour-fueled confusion and [a commotion of memes](#).

Memes and pop culture references appear to be a new language spoken between the nation, brands and governments; a cultural shorthand that gets the message across in a direct, but lighthearted manner. It's not surprising that Brits turn to memes as a fear-alleviating tactic. A 'shared sense of humour' is the number one unifying force for the British public ([ITV, What Unites a Kingdom, 2026](#)), with 48% of Brits believing that humour brings us together, compared to just 15% who see 'optimism for the future' as a uniting force. And, perhaps memes and pop culture humour are simply an emblem of our unique keep calm and carry on attitude; 66% of Brits feel that a sense of proud resilience is a key force in uniting the nation ([ITV, What Unites a Kingdom, 2026](#)).

So, is laughter the best medicine for fearful times? When it comes to our anxieties, memes and pop culture references cleverly capture the essence of universally felt hopes and fears, turning heavy and lonely experiences into something lighthearted and collective. When it comes to scary subjects, brands might look to speak Brits' favourite language (humour); but, stay aware of the fine line between wit and trivialisation.

