

itv

# POP THEORY

## HOME TURF

### Belonging, bittersweetness and the silver linings summer

Welcome back to Pop Theory. This month, we're exploring the distinctly British mood taking shape this summer, where uncertainty, resilience and belonging are colliding in interesting ways. From the contrast between political cynicism and football-fuelled togetherness, to a more local, neighbourhood-led summer and the rise of dysoptimism, this edition looks at how audiences are finding comfort, connection and cultural meaning closer to home.

As always, we love a chat, so pop us an email at [lucy.irving@itv.com](mailto:lucy.irving@itv.com) if you'd like to hear more about our proprietary research.

## THE GREAT BRITISH WHIPLASH

### How political frustration and football fandom reveal a need for shared belonging

The local elections on 7th May and England's first World Cup game on 17th June are six weeks apart. The contrast is almost too neat to be real. A fractured vote followed by mandatory national togetherness, with 9pm kick-offs backed by [government-extended pub licensing hours](#). The usual political parties have just had a total shake-up, and then... England plays Croatia at 9pm on 17th June. Scotland have their first World Cup since 1998, a country that has spent twenty-eight years



waiting for this, now watching deep into the night with that same mix of desperate hope and total awareness that it might all unravel.

What makes this theme interesting is the specific British habit at its core. When institutions feel like they've let people down, football has a remarkable track record of filling the gap. ITV's [What Unites a Kingdom 2026](#) research found Brits are looking forward to the World Cup more than their own birthdays. The Pub on that June weekend is a documented national behaviour. Between the election result and the first matches, a nation will be doing what it does best: recalibrating.

ITV has the broadcast rights to [twenty-nine group-stage matches](#) and the final. England vs Croatia on 17th June is the first home nation game of the tournament on ITV1. [Soccer Aid](#) on 31st May at the London Stadium, with Angryginge, Rooney and Robbie Williams, is the warm-up act that lands at the perfect moment, two weeks before, when the national mood is building. ITV is the broadcast home of every major collective moment this summer.

**For brands:** The six weeks between the ballot box and the pub carry a very particular charge. Brands that acknowledge where the country has just come from, as well as where it's headed, will find the audience in a receptive mood. Show up only for the football, and you'll miss half the conversation.



# THE NEIGHBOURHOOD SUMMER

## Why staying local is becoming a more creative, deliberate and culturally meaningful choice

With jet fuel prices [more than doubling since February](#) and international travel looking [increasingly uncertain this summer](#), Britain is finding more reasons to stay closer to home, and a funny thing is happening as a result. On TikTok, pub garden summers and fits are taking over #pubtok, keeping things fun and local. The back garden is becoming the occasion, with barbecue food spending [running at nearly double](#) the everyday equivalent. In fact, [Kantar named treatonomics](#) a top marketing trend for 2026, with consumers rewarding themselves with small, deliberate pleasures rather than waiting for the big milestones. In the supermarket aisle, [Lidl and Ocado](#) were the fastest-growing retailers as shoppers gravitated to clever or premium and left the middle ground behind.

We've also seen [WGSN name 'exclusivity'](#) one of their top trends for 2026. This points to a growing instinct to protect, maybe even 'gatekeep', the places and things that feel genuinely yours. Plus, [Mintel is flagging anti-algorithm](#) as a major consumer shift for the year. RAYE captured both in a single image in March when she [installed a blue plaque outside a South London pub](#) marking her greatest heartbreak, posted it on TikTok, and watched it go viral. It was a mix of physical, local and specific with the neighbourhood as the cultural stage.

You might have caught the premiere of The Neighbourhood on ITV1, Graham Norton's new show, where real families on a real street compete for £250,000 in a popularity contest. Here we're talking about social graces, street politics, families moving in, and our appetite for gossip and neighbourliness. As a description of

British summer 2026, you'd struggle to do better.

Josie Gibson's *Big Country Build* also captures the spirit of the neighbourhood summer on ITV with a Somerset renovation built around home-grown food, sustainable living and eccentric neighbours, reflecting a Britain finding richness closer to home. *Love Island* launching in early June is the aspirational summer the sofa provides. ITV's summer schedule is built for a Britain spending more time at home and wanting more from it.

**For brands:** Think proximity. The domestic occasion is where British summer 2026 is happening, and the brands earning their place in it are the ones showing up specifically and honestly. Lidl's record market share is as much a cultural story as an economic one. The 'Lidl haul' is something people now post proudly, and that shift in tone is worth paying attention to.

## DYSOPTIMISM

### How audiences are holding hope and hardship in the same hand

[VML's Future 100](#) 2026 gave a name to something Britain has been feeling for a while: dysoptimism. In a nutshell, this is acknowledging the hard stuff without being beaten by it and finding moments of genuine joy without pretending the bigger picture has resolved. This runs across generations, postcodes and voting patterns, and it shows up in some unexpected places. England's relationship with the World Cup is perhaps the purest expression of it. The hope that it might actually come home 60 years later sits alongside the quiet collective knowledge that it probably won't... Both feelings are completely genuine, and the nation has been practising this particular balancing act for decades.

It's also the tone that explains some of the biggest cultural moments of recent times. [Adolescence](#), a forensically bleak drama, became the most talked-about television of the awards season, sparking conversations that reached Parliament, schools and family WhatsApp groups simultaneously, earning

[eleven BAFTA TV](#) nominations and winning four. *Celebrity Traitors* drew up to 15.4 million viewers to watch celebrities be brilliantly ruthless for charity in a Scottish castle and has been [secured to 2030](#). *BGT* fills Saturday nights with the collective belief that something genuinely surprising might happen, and it does... [Sonny Green](#), a market trader from Southend performing a poem about Tesco Clubcards, had Simon Cowell saying he loves his country. Then there's [Eurovision](#) on 16th May, producing real national investment in something Britain simultaneously refuses to take too seriously.

It's worth noting that WGSN also named a similar macro shift as [Unserious Everything](#) in their 2026 forecast, i.e. a consumer appetite for emotional release and irreverence as a response to a pressured world.

Linked to all this, [ITVX hit 311 million streams](#) in April 2026, its strongest-ever April performance and a 24% increase on this time last year, marking the sixth consecutive month above 300 million. The 2026 *BGT* series is the most-streamed in the show's history, with 17.4 million streams to date. Britain is watching together and at scale, and it's watching things that make it feel something real.

**For brands:** This is likely to be one of the most valuable moods on British television this summer. Audiences can hold complexity, and the brands that trust them will land. The Waitrose Christmas ad arguably understood this, and the Coca-Cola AI rehash did not. The brief this summer is to find the warmth in the specific and true, without smoothing over the hard bits. There's more creative room in that space than most briefs currently allow.

