

THE REAL ISSUE



gah!



Manchester
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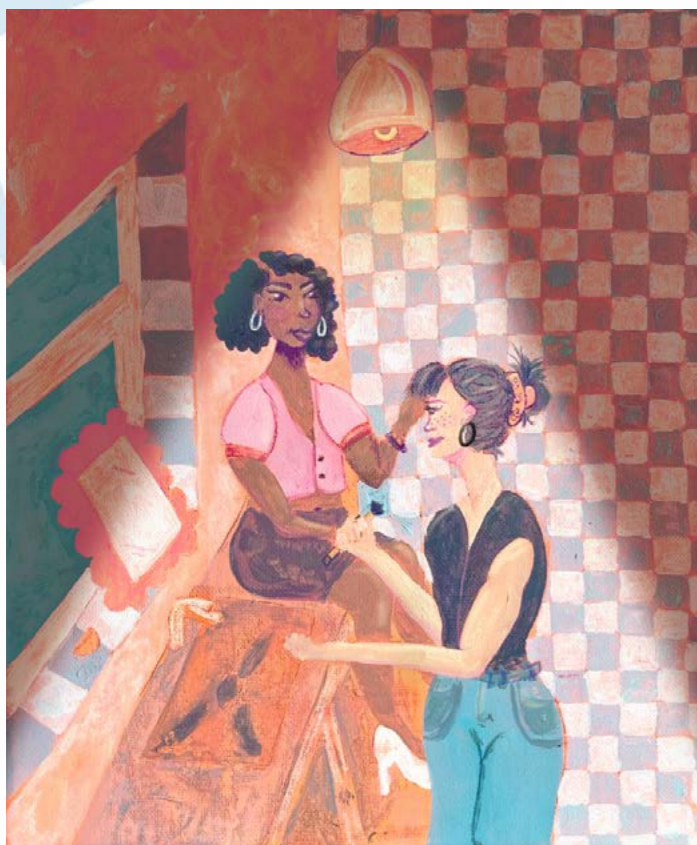
Featured Artist **Brynelle D'Arcy**
@beedrcyart

Brynelle D'Arcy is a Yorkshire-based artist, currently living and working between Brighouse and Manchester. She is studying Fine Art and Art History at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her vibrant, comedic yet personal practice combines acrylic, collage, marker, and bold ink line work, exploring themes of neurodiversity, animals and female expression.



Featured Artist **Abigail Lythgoe**
@abigaillythgoe

Abigail Lythgoe is a working-class, Bolton lass based in Greater Manchester. She is currently studying for her MA in Illustration at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her practice centres on expressive ink drawing and screen printing, combining bold colour, textured line work and intimate, character-led scenes that explore connection, everyday moments and the emotional landscape of contemporary life.



OUR TEAM

Project Coordinator

Natalie Carragher

Project Assistant

Farran Golding

Editorial Assistant

George Francis Lee

Editorial Team

Adam Taylor
Amber Jones
Amélie Siitonen
Esmée Simmonds-Short
Evie Atkins
Fabiola Gonzalez Prato
Harry Chandler
Imogen Burgess
Kaitlyn Brockley
Leire Ribeiro

Contributors

Alice Coombs
Cheyenne Berry
Ella Venn
Emma Eva Foote
Ian Burke
Imogen Lambert-Baker
Izzy Pitt
Jane Ashworth
Kit Deem-Stone
Samuel Blackshaw
Simi Bakarey
Tilly Snaith

Graphic Design Assistant

Nicola Cutts

Design Collective

Abigail Lythgoe
Adomas Lukas Petrauskas
Aleesha Khan
Ayesha Shahab
Callista Low
Connie McMullen
Joseph Coke
Madeleine Parford

Illustration

Abigail Lythgoe
Olivia Taberner

Photography

Cheyenne Berry
Kaitlyn Brockley

Special Thanks

Aidan Arrowsmith
Elle Simms
Helen McCormick
Ian Whadcock
James Draper
Jess Edwards
John Lean
John Walsh
Kaye Tew
Nathalie Griffith
Sue Platt
Tony Cat
Vince Hunt



Cover Artist **Abigail Lythgoe**
@abigaillythgoe

CONTACT

Follow @aAh_mag

Email aAh.editor@gmail.com
Visit aah-magazine.co.uk

Address: aAh! Magazine, Manchester Metropolitan University, Grosvenor East Building, M15 6BG

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Design **Ayesha Shahab**

Welcome to The REAL Issue

What is real, anyway? We are, dear readers, perhaps in the age of the unreal. We date through apps. We chat mostly through text boxes. Robots write our emails. We lose sleep watching videos of nonsense that we know do us harm, yet feel no desire to switch off. A decade ago, we worried about fake news ruining our brains, but the enforced proliferation of AI slop into almost every aspect of our lives makes that era feel almost quaint.

I do not know you, but I know you need to get off your phone. I know this because I do, too. We all do. We often talk of "real life", yet we have all willingly migrated to a digital realm full of online friends, notifications and distractions. Digital life may be the default, but it doesn't have to be. Being in the real world now takes effort. It takes time. It can feel unnatural, like a chore. But there are few things in life that are worthwhile that don't ask for a bit of discomfort.

Unknowingly, by reading this, you've already made the first step back to reality. Flick through this issue right now. Feel the tangible pages, the texture of the paper. See the kaleidoscope of artwork, witness the result of hours of writing, proofreading, and behind-the-scenes arguments about spelling. Flick through the pages and witness the work of several dozen humans with thoughts, feelings, heartaches, dreams, and lives entirely of their own. This is the product of people, not a programme. Magazines have never been more important – they are an antidote to the ragebaiting, lingo-stuffed "content" that screams and claws for our attention.

In this issue you'll find dispatches from community cinemas, interviews with punk bands, low-league football clubs, ways to get back into the analogue world and spotlights on the people who are already there. Read it. Spill your tea on it. Give it to a stranger. This is not drivelt churned out by ChatGPT, it's real.

George Francis Lee
aAh! Magazine Editorial Assistant
Follow @aah_mag

CONTENTS

- 06 THE PEOPLE DRIVING REAL CHANGE IN MANCHESTER
- 08 THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT JOHN WALSH
- 12 CAN THE ARTS & AI REALLY COEXIST?
- 14 ANALOGUE APPRECIATION
- 16 THE PUNK-ISH PASSION OF ALL-WOMEN BAND OPEN FLY
- 18 THE DUB TECHNO CHESS CLUB
- 20 WEAR ABOUTS
- 22 DUPE CULTURE
- 24 HIDDEN HOMELESSNESS
- 26 GREEN PARTY'S HANNAH SPENCER
- 28 EVERYONE WANTS A VILLAGE
- 30 FIVE ANALOGUE HOBBIES
- 32 BRICK PHONE DIARY
- 34 CHATBOTS
- 36 A REAL FOOTBALL CLUB
- 38 OPINION: "WHY I'M LUCKY-ISH"
- 39 EXPERIENCE: "I HAD TO BE REAL WITH MYSELF..."
- 40 ASK aAh!
- 41 BRAINROT VOCABULARY
- 42 POST CREDIT CLUB
- 44 CATHERINE WILCOX'S 'SCRIPTORIUM'
- 45 REAL (NOT IMITATION. NOT ARTIFICIAL. NOT FALSE.)
- 46 WHAT'S ON

Design Ayesha Shahab

THE PEOPLE DRIVING REAL CHANGE IN MANCHESTER

By George Francis Lee
Design Nicola Cutts

Manchester is a city that never stops changing. From the mills and factories that belched out the Industrial Revolution over 200 years ago to the sprouting skyscrapers of today, the city is never stationary. The reality of Manchester is shifting, and much of it can be viewed through a cynical lens. But what about those changing our home for the better? From transforming rubbish to funding student-led projects, we've put together a list of the people making change – real change – in Manchester.

1838 COLLECTIVE

1838 Collective is an artist-led, non-profit organisation based at Islington Mill in Salford. Founded by MA graduates in Manchester School of Art, who recognised the difficulties of maintaining an artistic practice after leaving education, this volunteer group organises events to bring artists together. Whether it's coffee mornings, reading groups, or workshops, this community has become a vital network for emerging artists across Greater Manchester.

@1838_collective



PLASTIC SHED

Let's be real – who among us likes plastic? Certainly not this Stockport-based social enterprise. Plastic Shed transforms bottles, bags and all other sorts of rubbish into things people actually want to reuse – from clipboards made of milk bottle lids to vinyl plant pots. They run workshops on how to make your own eco-conscious creations, or you can simply donate your plastic waste for their upcoming projects.

@plastic_shed

NIAMOS

In the heart of Hulme, based in its turn-of-the-century hippodrome, lies the home of NIAMOS. Also known as the Nia, this historic theatre now hosts everything from The Green Party's by-election watch party to open-mic improv music nights. With its fingers firmly on the pulse of Manchester's music and radical political scenes, NIAMOS provides a much-needed space for real change in the city.

@niamos_mcr

BLETHER

Named after the Scottish term that means to talk endlessly without making much sense, Bletcher combines theatre, queer culture and a self-described silliness as an antidote to the commercial art world of Manchester. Based in Levenshulme Old Library, the collective embraces a daft and DIY approach to art – creating spaces where people can unmask and let loose. And, to be honest, there aren't many groups in Manchester that would host a drag JLS tribute act.

@bletherforever

OTHER PEOPLE'S PARTY

Literature, especially poetry, increasingly feels like it's for some and not others. Other People's Poetry challenges that and asks us all to consider ourselves as poets for a change. Organised by Manchester Metropolitan University alumni, the group provides free and regular opportunities for new and experienced writers to try their hand at poetry in a collaborative space based in SEESAW, based on Oxford Road.

@other_peoplespoetry

GET IT DONE

Founded by creative producer Mimi Dearing, Get It Done has provided thousands of people with free and low-cost creative and cultural opportunities. Based in Manchester and London, the group gives tailored career guidance for young trailblazers to lead their own projects and make a big impact on their communities.

@we.getitdone



FRESHRB

Formed over ten years ago by Oladamola "Mr Babz" Babalola, this Manchester social enterprise uses media to deliver important messages about public health. Inspired by his own survival story with cancer, Babalola's group gives a voice to life-limiting and long term health conditions through storytelling in Manchester and beyond.

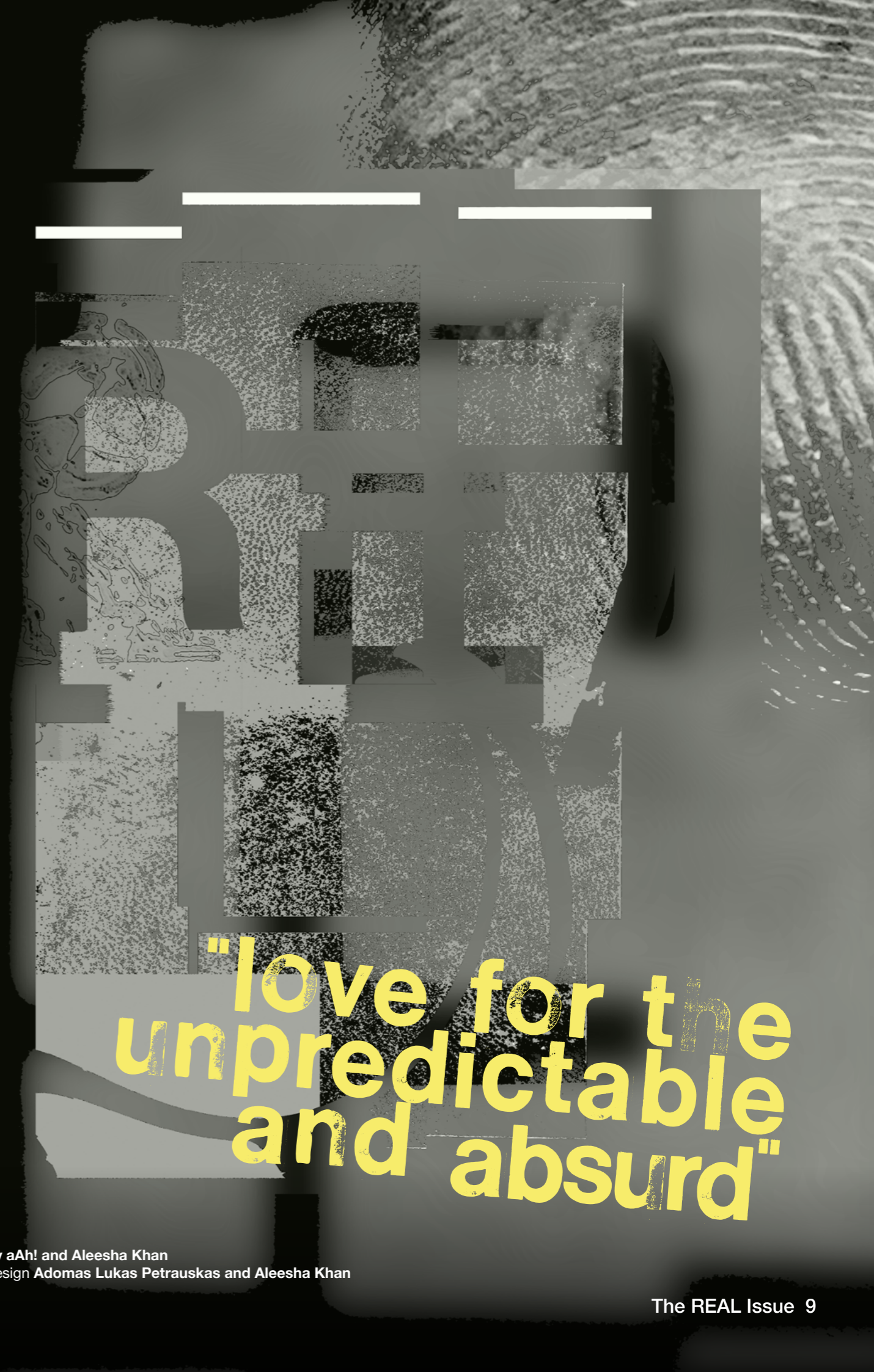
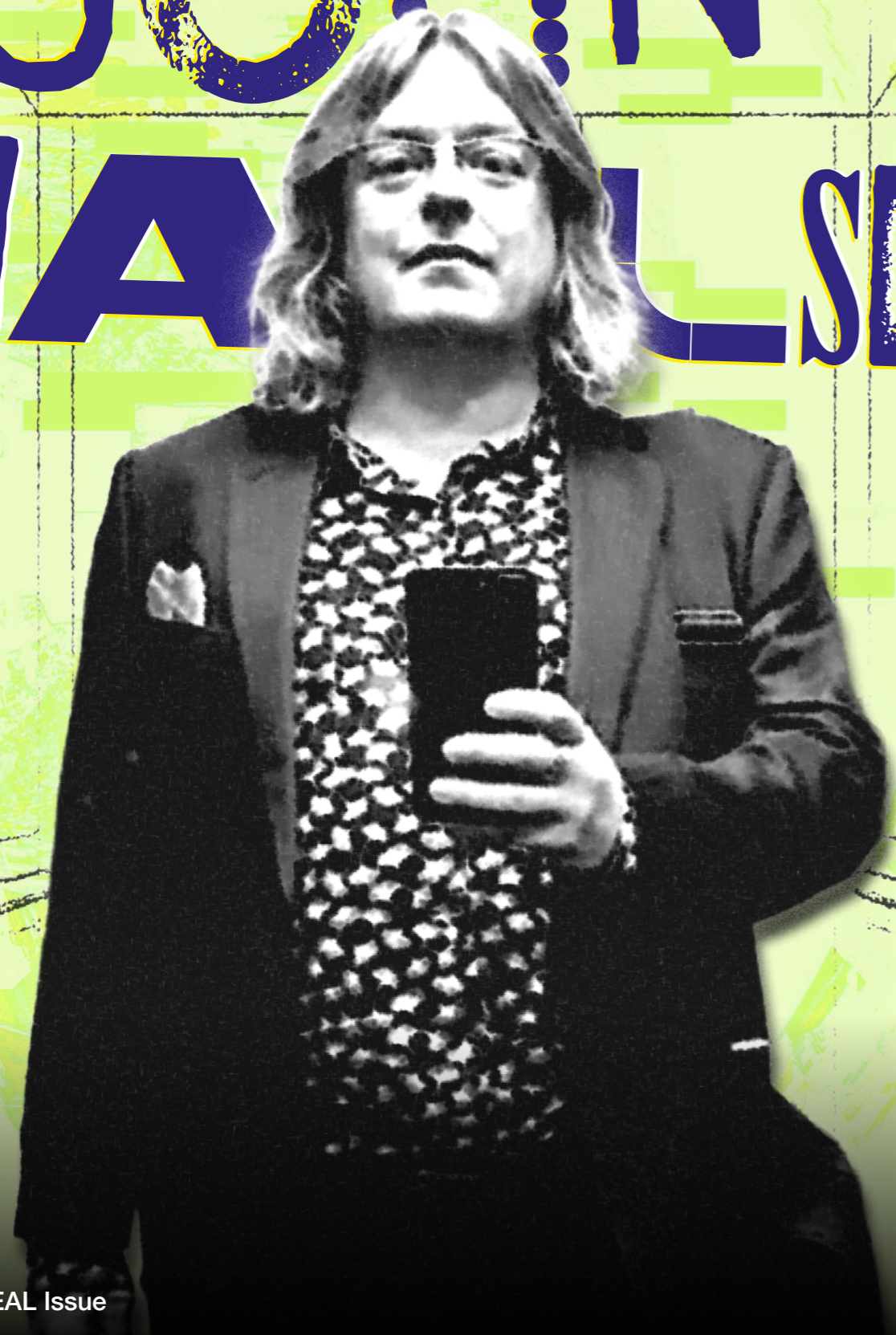
@freshrbic

MAKING GREAT COMMUNITIES INCUBATOR

Manchester Metropolitan University's Making Great Communities Incubator, part of the Rise initiative, offers £10,000 in funding, with up to £800 per bid, to support student-led projects across Greater Manchester. It encourages students to use creativity and social purpose to develop practical ideas that help strengthen and improve local communities.

@manmetrise

HERE'S SOMETHING
ABOUT
**JOHN
WALSH**



**"love for the
unpredictable
and absurd"**

By aAh! and Aleesha Khan
Design Adomas Lukas Petrauskas and Aleesha Khan

amanté

Do the weird and unexpected thing.

Don't hold back. Take it off the screen,

John Walsh's commitment to Manchester Metropolitan University spanned nearly 20 years and his legacy stands as an ever-curious experimental extraordinaire. His passing was a wholly unexpected tragedy and his absence still feels heavy amongst family, friends, peers and students.

Walsh, Subject Leader for the MA/MFA Graphic Design and Art Direction and the MA/MFA Illustration programmes, was best known for his long list of accomplishments in the world of design. From his early work with Manchester's own Factory Records, 808 State, and Band on the Wall to his role as an educator of emerging creatives, Walsh's influence was wide and far-reaching.

Walsh's impact can be felt across campus – even in the very magazine you're holding right now. aAh! wouldn't

be what it is today without him. His reimagining of the publication in 2018, in collaboration with his graphic design cohort and project coordinator Natalie Carragher, transformed what was *Humanity Hallows* to the magazine before you. Setting a new precedent for striking and playful editorial design, 'The UGLY Issue' marked the beginning of a new era for aAh! and Walsh's love for the unpredictable and absurd, which radiated throughout his work, continues to play a key role in aAh!'s visual identity.

"I fondly remember working with John on the magazine," says former aAh! designer and Manchester School of Art graduate Nick Stone, who worked on the first issue following the rebrand. "We

had a room set up for the six of us, or so, where we could work. It felt like a proper editorial design team – good spreads up on the wall and drafts printed out all over the place. He would drop in if we were there and give his thoughts, or give us ways of doing things we'd have never thought of."

Stone continues: "He is 100% the reason I went into editorial design. Without him I wouldn't have had the ideas, knowledge or portfolio to be able to get a job in that world. Since then I've worked on all sorts of books, and in senior positions at *The Telegraph* and *The i Paper* – which I never would have dreamed of. I still try and imagine what feedback he might give if he were looking at spreads I'd designed.

He made it quite clear you didn't have to be an arsehole to be a clever designer."

Walsh had a taste for the weird and wonderful, in both

his teachings and his consumption of art. Always armed with a niche reference to point his students towards, Walsh's quirky expertise poured out of him like a fountain of knowledge. His students recall his conversations opening up completely new and unexpected ideas. "John came into and left my life in no less than a year," says graphic design student Aleesha Khan. "And yet, I now see the world around me through his wonderfully peculiar, sentimental lens. Do the weird and unexpected thing. Don't hold back. Take it off the screen, cut it up and stick it back together."

To someone like Walsh, obsessions were something to be excited about, not shamed for. His past students embraced his advice

that rabbit holes are worth venturing into. It was those quirks and perspective shifts that encouraged his students to authentically explore their passions and interests wholly, just as he did. Walsh's personal obsessions allowed him to honour his own experiences as a creature of habit as well as an inquisitive, spirited explorer. You only have to look at his #ifties – the playful selfies that he took in the School of Art's lifts as he began and finished each day – to get a glimpse into his joyful way of seeing the world. And who could forget his daily lunch order at The Eighth Day on Oxford Road? His eating habits may have remained the same for the last 20-odd years, but John's PhD establishing a framework for the science of graphic communication highlights just how powerfully unique and revolutionary his work could be to his students.

Marcela Sobrinho was one of Walsh's pupils and the first recipient of the John Walsh Prize for Experimental Graphic Design – an award founded in his honour by his life-long partner, Debbie. Sobrinho remembers Walsh's passion for symbols which helped fuel her own symbol-based language, *A Palanvara*. "Walsh really pushed *A Palanvara* forward," she says. "I had no idea that his PhD was dedicated to symbols. In one of my crit sessions

with other coursemates he went to his office and brought back some A4 sheets of Egyptian hieroglyphics that he was trying to translate. He was so excited to see something like what he was studying in my work."

"Being presented with the award was really huge," Sobrinho continues. "I had no idea how little time I would get with John. That crit session was two days before his passing, and I had no idea it would be the last I would see him. He would just stare at my page and try to make sense of it, just like his sheets of symbols. It felt really special, like being passed the torch."

"The last project we worked on under his tutelage was themed around the weight of emotion and self-censorship," says Khan. Such heavy topics and abrupt goodbyes have been an important reminder about endings, especially those that are unexpected and severe. John showed us the importance of living authentically, embracing confusion and ridiculousness but most importantly, to keep experimenting.

Grief is a funny thing.

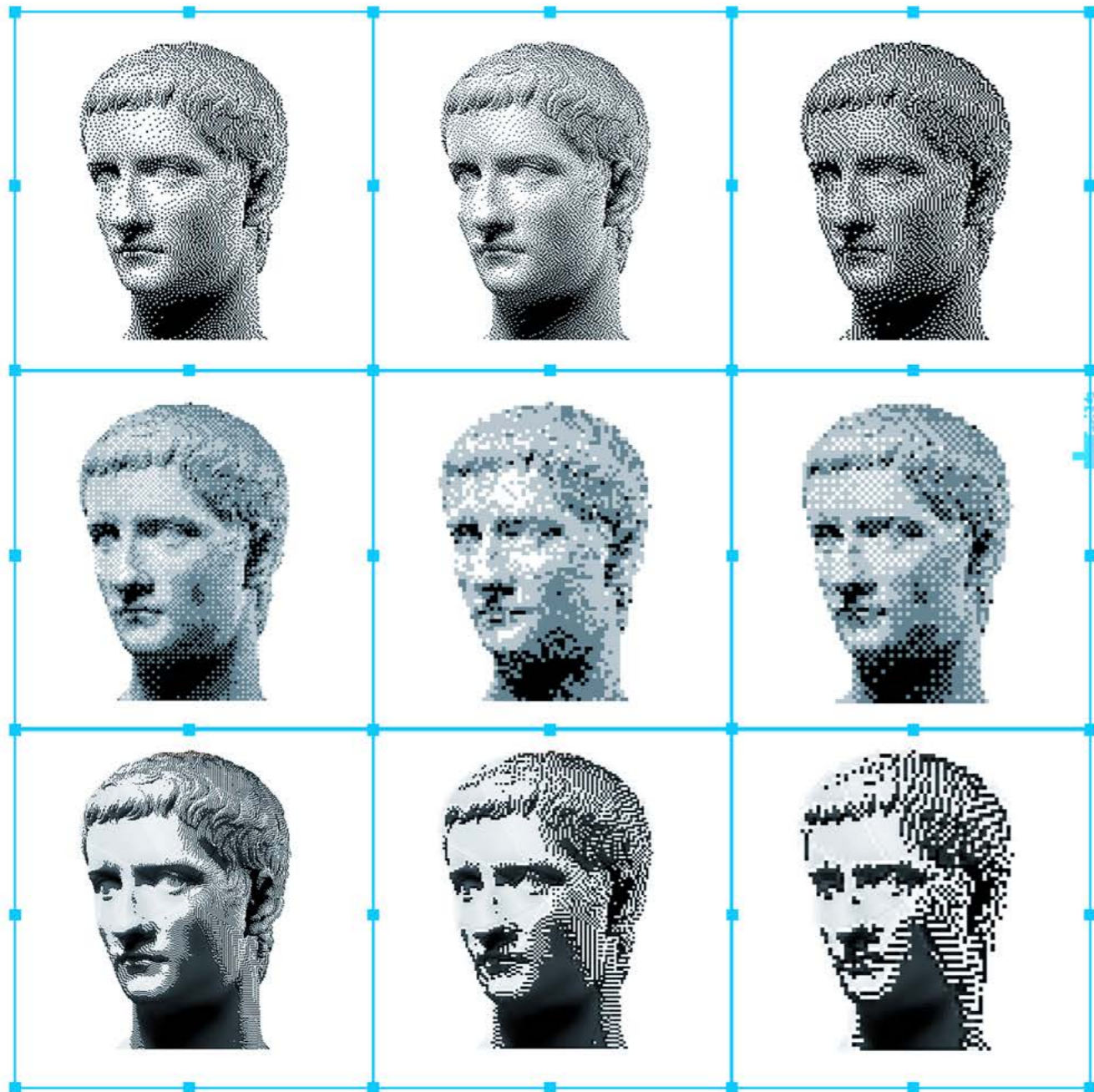
It bears incredible weight, debilitates and sometimes even destabilises us altogether. Everyone has a unique or maybe even transient relationship with it. But most importantly, it reminds us of the presence and impact of a single individual. This piece – this entire magazine – is dedicated to the memory of John Walsh and everything he embodied.



Thank you John

- aAh! Magazine

CAN THE ARTS AND AI REALLY COEXIST?



By Ella Venn
Design Joseph Coke

AI art has entered galleries over the last couple of years, even infiltrating MoMA in their *Unsupervised* exhibition, which used generative technology to interpret modern art and produce new works. Meanwhile, our social media feeds are saturated in this generative content, from AI-generated Instagram reels to TikTok filters – it can feel at times as though we can't escape the digital world.

If you ask someone in the arts their opinion on AI, more often than not, you will be met with concern shaped by the fear that an artificially intelligent system could replace them in their line of work. However, art curator for FACT Liverpool, Milia Xin Bi, has a different take on our ever-evolving technological world.

The exhibition she curated, *Can Meeple Escape the Neurophoria?*, opened in early February 2026 and runs until the end of April. It includes AI-centred artworks from artists across Europe. The term "Meeple" references traditional board games, inviting visitors to experience the artwork as a player capable of making decisions which affect the outcome of the art itself. The exhibition includes interactive works such as a talking coffee machine that decides whether or not to serve you based on your interaction, and a camera that narrates your movements in a David Attenborough-style manner. There's also a Dungeons and Dragons-style board game; however, instead of a medieval setting, the player navigates a technological utopia. Rather than taking a position for or against AI, the exhibition encourages visitors to reflect on their own relationship with technology.

FACT is a cultural hub in the centre of Liverpool which displays films, art and creative technology. Milia is one of three curators participating in FACT's 'Curatorial Development Programme', a three-year initiative designed to support emerging curators through collaborative research and exhibitions. Originally from Shanghai and now based in Manchester, Milia has worked as a curator and writer since 2017. For Milia, AI raises the question of what constitutes creativity in the contemporary age. Her work explores humans' relationship with technology through interactive art pieces that place the person, or "player," at the centre.

Her research focuses on mythopoetic world-building embedded within intelligent technologies and networked media systems, which explores how technology can create versions of our real lives. This is reflected within her exhibition for FACT, in an effort to get us to creatively embrace technology. In 2022, her work was awarded a Hyundai Blue Prize Art+Tech, which supports emerging Chinese creators working at the intersection between art and technology.

I met with Milia at Manchester Metropolitan University's School of Digital Arts, a day ahead of her participation in *Double Agents: Play and Performance in Digital Worlds*, a series of seminars on digital cultures hosted by Professor Kirsty Fairclough. Across both this exhibition and her wider research, Milia aims to explore how human agency and decision-making is being reshaped by intelligent technologies.

Many artists feel threatened by AI, viewing its rise as taking away creative practices, across disciplines including writing, drawing and visual art. Research by the Global Brain Health Institute shows that this may be negatively impacting our brains, as exercising creativity strengthens neural passages

and helps slow down brain aging, according to a 2025 study. When AI replaces these practices, we lose the benefits while also stripping away the personality from the art form. Many graphic design jobs are also being given to AI systems rather than humans with years of training, the World Economic Forum found, making it understandable that many people are opposed.

Milia, however, questions whether AI is simply another tool for creative use. "When we create art, we have always worked with tools. A painter uses a brush, photographers work with cameras, and musicians work with instruments – you always work with a tool," she explains. "Before these tools may have felt more passive as your creativity was always confined within the ability or agency of the tool. But now, with AI, we are thinking of it more as a co-creator than a tool."

Creativity is one of our great privileges as human beings, and it can feel unsettling to let technology infiltrate it in such an overwhelming way.

Lil Sanderson, a Craft Masters student at Manchester School of Art, has a passion for heritage craft, working with materials such as ceramics and paints to create art forms. "As a ceramicist, my job isn't threatened by AI right now, but I feel like we need to stand against AI for the sake of the other people in the arts industry are at risk," Sanderson explained. She adds that many artists feel they must now compete with AI to get jobs.

As an artist, Sanderson does not believe AI artwork has the same qualities as human-produced pieces. "I don't think AI can mirror human creativity, and I don't think it should even try to," she says. "The imperfections and human error are what give a piece of art work its 'spirit'. It's generations of tactics, knowledge and learnt skill that makes craft what it is today. AI can learn the history of craft but it can never experience craft in itself." She adds: "AI can't replicate the creative questioning that goes into developing a craft, which helps us [as artists] connect with the piece on a profound level."

There is still a lot of uncharted territory when it comes to technology's place in the art world, but Milia urges that we have a responsibility to our audiences to be open. "It's important we make these things transparent – what language models, systems, and devices we're showing them – but at the same time, not affecting their agency in how they consume the media," she says. However, as many jobs in the arts are now being replaced by AI systems, Sanderson adds: "We all have a responsibility to say: yes we can use AI – but should we?"

ANALOGUE APPRECIATION

A-Z

POP

By **Cheyenne Berry**
Design **Callista Low**
Photography **Cheyenne Berry**

You'd be forgiven if you didn't immediately notice what makes the café on the first floor of Afflecks odd. Past the indoor market's foliage of vintage clothes and bohemia, Talking Heads' 'Pulled Up' blasts through an amplifier. An old-fashioned CRT television plays a VHS of some grungy and forgotten music video from the '90s. The smell of black coffee drags you through each era of tapes, pop, rock, blues – the list goes on – across the shelves. And then you notice it: the rows are stocked entirely with cassette tapes. This place is Mars Tapes, 'the last cassette store in the UK.'

Tangible pastimes are on the up in recent years. According to *Music Week*, cassette sales rose by 204.7% in the first quarter of 2025; Google Trends shows 160% more searches for the term "analogue hobbies"; social media feeds are full of "grandma" interests like sewing, knitting and crosswords; and people are ditching streaming platforms for DVDs and Blu-rays. In an age where everything is available at the push of a digital button, Manchester has become something of a home to analogue appreciators with a smattering of physical proprietors in the Northern Quarter alone.

Mars Tapes was recently converted into a tape listening café where its black and white floor leads to Giorgio Carbone, co-director of Sour Grapes Records. He sits behind the counter, searching for more music to supply to his cassette-loving customers, and speaks plainly about the revival of cassettes. "Young people don't really know how to use cassettes, which is very interesting and fascinating. But it's nice to see that they're curious about how they work and they want to collect them," he says.

Rachel, a customer and tourist from the USA, holds a plastic bag of freshly-purchased tapes of Miles Davis, Mariah Carey and The Cure. "My first ever music was on tape because I grew up in the 80s and it's kind of coming back," says the 45-year-old, sharing why she's listening to music through a Walkman in 2026.

Carbone notes that Mars Tapes' clientele has shifted further away from Rachel's age group. "At the start, our main customers were mainly the older generation but now we see way more young people getting into cassettes and buying Walkmans and asking questions about them."

Around the corner on Dale Street, Wren flicks through the pages of a new *Punisher* comic inside the store Travelling Man. "Marvel started a new series this year, and I've been coming in waiting for this next issue," he says. The 23-year-old is an avid comic reader after ditching his tablet for reading. "When my iPad broke I lost all my digital comics and I suddenly realised how easy it is to lose the things you love to read, so I started collecting them physically."

The ceiling of Travelling Man is draped in *Pokémon* bunting, the shelves piled with craft paint for figurine building kits. Bookcase after bookcase is filled with manga. Staff member Matt has noticed how important these niche physical forms of entertainment are for the local community. "You've got to have communities where people feel safe to come, whether it's just to find people who have the same hobbies or whether they're wanting to come and find a place to play *Warhammer*," he says.

Another stone's throw away on Dale Street is the Real Camera Company – a photography shop that opened in 2001. Old lightbox advertisements for Nikon and Leica sit in the window. Inside, the employees Jason, Joe and Jem are hunched over their workstations, inundated with tasks as more business comes in.

"Our film sales are very good," says general manager Chris Hayton. "A few years ago, we struggled to get film. Now there's lots of people coming in."

Hayton estimates there are around 1,000 film cameras in the store, and a wall of them towers behind him as he speaks about the rise of analogue appreciation. "I think a lot of hobbies have become a lot more popular due to things like social media feeding peoples' interests and being able to share and talk about it more." Hayton estimates roughly 80% of his customers are under 30-years-old, and he puts the popularity of film photography down to the same factors that have led the vinyl revival: "There's always a nostalgia aspect. People like tangible items. Cameras feel nicer than just using your phone," says Hayton.

Clearly, the return of analogue hobbies is more than a trend, it reflects the younger generation's desire to slow down and create rather than consume, to reconnect with the physical world and reject digital influences while taking a moment to pause in a world that rarely allows a moment to pass.

Back in the camera shop, Hayton believes that it's the sensorial experience which draws so many people towards tangible hobbies. "There's a manual handling and mechanical aspect," he explains. "You don't have instant gratification because you don't see your pictures. But you might have the gratification of actually using the camera."



DRUMS AS BINS AND ENAMEL PINS: THE 'PUNK-ISH' PASSION OF ALL-FEMALE OPEN FLY

By Ella Venn
Design Nicola Cutts
Photography Ella Venn and Kaitlyn Brockley

Manchester's Open Fly talk new music, performance mishaps and men.

Bassist Lily Rose believes that women have better things to say than men when it comes to song lyrics, especially in the world of indie bands. She says this with a sheepish smile as her bandmate and frontwoman Emily Rose (no relation), nods assertively. "We're far more creative," says Emily.

It's a bold claim from Open Fly, the Manchester-based, self-proclaimed "punk-ish" band, who are preparing to release their debut EP in early 2026.

Formed in 2023, the all-female band, which includes guitarist Tatum Paul and drummer Ellie Morrisroe, have spent the last year writing and recording, all while gigging across Manchester's grassroots venues.

Three quarters of the band arrive at Spirit Studios, Ardwick, on a cold Monday evening for our interview, which I'm told precedes a crucial meeting about the production of the upcoming EP. Their punk style extends beyond their music: the musicians sit coolly, dressed in distressed denim and chunky 1970s-style knitwear decorated with enamel pins.

Open Fly's career kicked off with a performance at THUMP, a live music and poetry event at Withington Public Hall in 2023. During a rendition of their tune 'What's a Girl', the power cut out mid-performance. "Every single amp stopped working," says Tatum. "We made it acapella and then all the amps kicked in just as we were ready to go back into the chorus – and then it was like: 'Woah!' This electrical disruption was inspiring enough that when it came to finally record the song as a single, the band decided to let it shape the composition.

On-stage, Open Fly radiate confidence whereas in person, they're more reserved, giggling nervously. But when the conversation turns to the experiences of women in music, a fire ignites. Before the group began, both Emily and Lily were the only women in their previous bands. "I've played gigs before where you get [singled] out," Emily recounts. "Like one time, the sound tech came up to me and went, 'Are you okay? Do you know how to play that?' He didn't ask anyone else and I was like, 'Yeah mate, I'm in the band I know what I'm doing.' This is why women are put off, because they get disrespected over and over again."

Even within Manchester's thriving music scene all-female bands remain rare. "Putting yourself on stage and asking for things is something that a lot of women aren't taught to do – you have to have a strong enough ego," says Tatum. "We just aren't socialised that way," adds Emily. The band says they draw inspiration from "all-girl bands" with muses spanning from The Saturdays to Tori Amos. But the quartet bemoan that grassroots gigs seem dominated by all-male lineups. "You're just not inspired," says Emily, exhaustedly.

Open Fly's inspiration often comes urgently through improvisation. Most songs are created in long jam sessions, with initial ideas built upon in a jazz-like process, except if jazz musicians rehearsed in their basements at times coordinated with their corporate working neighbour's plans. This flexible nature even extends to their live shows. Ellie Morrisroe speaks proudly about resorting to "playing on bins" at a London venue that didn't have a drum kit. Penning lyrics is also a spontaneous process. "It's just the first thing that comes out, I don't really think about it – make music fun again," Emily declares.

Although the EP is fully recorded, production is taking time. Hesitant to "squash" their sound, the band are attempting to mix the raw, somewhat messy energy of their live shows with high quality production. "That's the hard problem," says Tatum. "You hear it and you're just like, 'That's not right' – which is not helpful to anyone." Whereas Lily believes: "You know it when you hear it."

While they mull over their first release of multiple tracks, Open Fly plan to continue gigging in Manchester – something they can do with unusual freedom, thanks to Tatum and Lily's own 'Cstar' Wave Promotions gig booking and promoters company. All the members have a say in where and with whom they perform.

The band is dreaming big. "I want to play with Kim Gordon," Emily announces. "And she has to do her trap song 'PLAY ME'," Tatum adds. If their dream show does happen to come true, we should all hope that the power goes out.

Follow @openflyband



“WE’RE FAR
MORE
CREATIVE”

THE DUB TECHNO CHESS CLUB



By Adomas Lukas Petrauskas
Design Adomas Lukas Petrauskas
Artwork Madeleine Parford

In the depths of the developing Trafford area of Manchester, Stretford Mall is being reinvented. The ghostly shopping centre is set to be demolished, just one part of Trafford Council's plans to reinvent the area into a new town centre equipped with new houses, flats and a public park. It was amongst these sparse redeveloped units that pop-up bar Rainy Heart, run by local legends Ruf Dug and Dan Hope, found a cheap and cheerful temporary home. The opportunity allowed Rainy Heart to use their make-shift space to host everything from film screenings and puzzle nights to all-nighter parties that brought in hundreds of punters over its short-lived run. Rainy Heart has come to a close for now, but it birthed the Dub Techno Chess Club, which if I do say so myself, is just getting started.

The old ways of socialising are morphing and changing. It is increasingly rare for people to come across third places – comfortable and convenient spaces that sit outside of work and home. The financial pressures on cafés, bars and venues to stay afloat are surging, leading to price increases and tightening opening hours across Manchester and the UK. The ability to mooch around in a bar without spending most of your paypacket feels like it's slowly becoming a thing of the past.

"It was a perfect opportunity to risk this weird idea," says Tommy Cross, a DJ, pizza chef and my Dub Techno Chess Club co-conspirator. Tommy and I had discussed putting on a chess club for a while, but as he says: "It all clicked into place after a few long chess games with dub techno records playing." When we heard Rainy Heart was offering up their space in Stretford Mall for weird gigs, we knew exactly where our daft chess club should be released unto the world.

"We knew exactly where our daft chess club should be released unto the world."

Each club night centred around an evening of casual chess games scored by everything dub techno, from the iconic records of the late 90s to all the weird and wonderful contemporary offshoots. These soirees are typically candlelit, with the smell of incense percolating between games soundtrack to pulsating, dubby sub notes. Our chessboards are handmade by us, featuring our screenprinted mascots, drawn-up by the incredible artist and resident DJ Madeleine Parford.

It is special to see electronic dance fans meeting together on a calm weekday – as opposed to the usual hedonistic settings of nightclub smoking areas – and interacting together in a much more slow, sensitive way. Our chessboards have seen all sorts of players, of all ages and backgrounds, who happen to take an interest in either chess or dub techno, or just want a relaxed space to unwind.

Members that were introduced to the genre through this club have reported that it softens the typical intensity of a chess game, catalysing the mind with serene chords and mellow bass notes instead of the typical piercing silence. It is a genre that has been quietly growing since the 1990s, but it struggles to find a place outside of daytime DJ sets in alternative electronic music festivals. There isn't much chance to experience mellow electronic music in the bustling, loud and stimulating venues of Manchester. An echoed sentiment from our chess club selectors. When DJing at bars, it's a struggle to keep

"The old ways of socialising are morphing and changing."

up with ever-shortening attention spans that are mirrored in electronic music. There has been a resurgence in the world of downtempo, dub techno and trip-hop music as a conscious pulling back of the pendulum of Gen-Z's listening habits.

Naeem Desai, a committed attendee of our chess club says his joy for the game "reignited" through attending the events. "It expanded my horizons, socially, as a way to meet new people and spend ages just chatting shit." Many people usually stick about for the full five hours of our events, hanging around to discuss chess, tunes or plans.

The grounding which a game of chess provides pulls us out of the dopamine-chasing, digital world, forcing an awareness of how chess pieces interact with each other. In this time of overwhelming and superficial connections, chess can be an intimate interaction with a stranger, through the humble expressions of nothing but chess moves. We've witnessed that connectivity at work – with a number of couples having their first date at our club.

But of course, not all good things last forever. The loss of Rainy Heart's space in Stretford Mall comes with the loss of the chess club's original home, too. We couldn't have done it without the support of Rainy Heart, Ruf Dug continues to support our different nights as the club traverses around Manchester and beyond.

As sad as it is to leave our home, Desai suggests its brevity was part of the charm: "The temporary nature of the chess club's residency at Rainy Heart made it feel like a special opportunity worth investing in."

And invest we have. This won't be the last you hear of our little chess group. Long live the Dub Techno Chess Club!

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WEAR ABOUTS

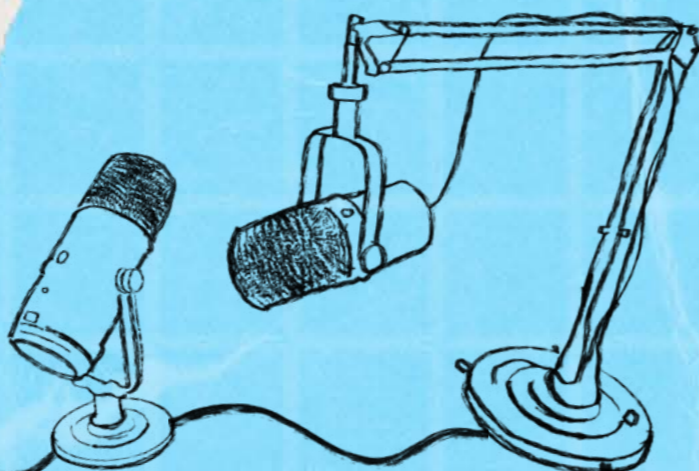
By Emma Eva Foote
Design Nicola Cutts
Illustration Nicola Cutts
Photography Mia Harvey and Alec Dudson

Fashion is never just about the clothes. That's the mantra of May Farooq and Cat Lee, the dynamic hosts behind *Wear Abouts* – a podcast by Manchester Fashion Institute that unravels how fashion impacts all of our lives. From female representation to brands moving up north, *Wear Abouts* covers a gamut of on-trend topics. aAh! caught up with May and Cat to chat about the podcast and how hosting it has shaped their thoughts on fashion.



What current issue in fashion do you think needs more attention?

May: Luxury fashion feels as though it's losing its credibility. I think the most recent example of this would be John Galliano joining Zara. Galliano is, in my humble opinion, one of the greatest designers of all time. For a designer of that esteem, who has worked with brands such as Dior and Margiela, to then return to fashion through a partnership with Zara just feels like a kick in the teeth for luxury fashion. It's meant to be exclusive and good quality yet Zara is the complete antithesis to the fundamental cores of luxury, something which Galliano seemingly stood for his entire career. It's clear that the old luxury we once knew has been stripped of its very essence and fashion seems more money-oriented than ever before.



What does fashion mean to you, personally?

May: Fashion for me is storytelling. It's not entirely just about the clothes – it's everything else that encompasses identity and how it can reflect who we are on both a personal and collective scale. The intentionality of fashion, from the campaigns to the marketing of a brand, is what truly matters to me. The way in which fashion communicates is what I'm most interested in.

How do you think fashion reflects identity and culture?

May: I think fashion is so clearly inherently tied to culture. It reflects society and heritage, acting as a visual language that almost preserves cultural identity.

Cat: They're intertwined, with both influencing the other. Fashion can be used for celebration, to incite change and to build community.



How do you choose topics or guests for the podcast?

May: We choose topics and guests based on the core themes of our podcast: sustainability, diversity and inclusion. These values tend to guide the conversations we have with our guests and their experiences, offering unique perspectives.

Cat: We also aim to spotlight creatives in the north – like our interview with Stockport-based fashion photographer Morgan Barfield – showing the opportunities here and celebrating their successes.

What has been the biggest challenge in making the podcast?

May: For me, the biggest challenge was becoming comfortable speaking on the mic. At first the idea of speaking to someone I've never met before for an hour straight did feel quite intimidating, especially when we can hear our own voices through the headphones. But as the episodes went on I've realised it's really just a conversation. It became more natural and enjoyable once I forgot that the equipment was there.

What have you learned from hosting it?

May: I've learned so many interesting things from our guests. The one that stands out to me the most is the conversation we had with Jess O'Riley from J.O. Studio, who spoke about reusing tent waste for garments and accessories, highlighting the environmental impact of festivals. It opened my eyes to the different creative approaches to sustainability. Beyond that, I also gained a deeper appreciation towards the production of the podcast, working with the team – Imogen Burgess, Evie Atkins, Tilly Snaith, Mia Harvey and Alice Coombs. Seeing their dedication and the time they've put in has been incredibly inspiring. It was very motivating to be surrounded by such talented and hardworking women.

Has working on the podcast changed how you think about fashion or media?

May: It has definitely changed how I think about the future of fashion, especially when it comes to AI. Hearing industry professionals talk about how they use AI in their work has opened my eyes to its potential in fashion. I wasn't particularly interested in AI before, but these conversations have helped me see how for some it can be used in creative ways. It's made me realise that AI will likely become much more integrated into the industry.

Cat: Through speaking to a variety of talented individuals across the industry about their careers, it has shown me that there are so many different pathways you can take. I have found it fascinating to hear each guest's personal experience and the moments that shaped their growth in order to get where they are now and how they found their place in the industry. Like May, I have also gained a greater insight into the work of a podcast team and the different roles involved. It's been an incredible opportunity to be part of the team, and work alongside such passionate and hardworking people.

Follow @wearabouts_pod

"FASHION CAN BE USED FOR CELEBRATION, TO INCITE CHANGE AND TO BUILD COMMUNITY."



DUPE CULTURE

X F E T V P N C T I X U W V I
M A Q Z Q Q O G H L I H N J T
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ADIDAS
CLOUT
COUNTERFEIT
DUPE
FACTORY

FAKE
NIKE
RESALE
SNEAKERS
TRAINER



By Imogen Burgess
Design Joseph Coke

Why isn't anyone wearing real shoes anymore?

Dupes and fakes have become omnipresent in the sneaker sphere. Seemingly inescapable – whether from fresh buys or resellers – fake merchandise has made a silent and insidious entrance and shows no signs of leaving.

“If you were to ask me this question two years ago, I'd say there was a big difference,” says 20-year-old sneaker reseller and streetwear expert Luis Wilson, who runs a second-hand sneaker business called SShucho. “However, now, with the fakes that are coming out, I'd say the difference really isn't big – and it's quite scary to be honest.” The fake shoe phenomenon has evolved from cheap, obvious imitations to near carbon copies that are often indistinguishable from the real thing.

The UK government found that around 24% of UK consumers knowingly purchased counterfeit goods, of which footwear was a sizable portion. Fake footwear made up 37% of counterfeit cases in 2024 and 2025. It's official: fakes have gone mainstream.

Young consumers dominate the counterfeit shoe market, with young men aged 18 and 33 making up the majority of the consumer base. However, regardless of age, men are increasingly encouraged to buy fake shoes by influencers. According to a GOV.UK survey, 24% of men aged 16 to 60 have purchased fake shoes because of online creators. Despite being illegal, and decades of social shame surrounding counterfeit shoes, some sneakerheads are ditching the shame that once came with fakes.

“This group is deeply embedded in sneaker culture – drops, hype, resale, identity,” says Sian Vance, a Lecturer in Fashion Communication at Manchester Metropolitan University. To Vance, there is a direct connection to gender roles and counterfeits. “I think there's a strong link to [young men] purchasing fakes, which links to masculinity, status and competition.”

When many feel obligated to present a falsely positive version of their lives online through social media, real brands are taking a backseat to counterfeit alternatives – ones that offer cultural clout without breaking the bank.

“I think there has been a surge of popularity in not just shoes, but counterfeit clothing across social media,” says 25-year-old shopper Olly Roberts, who says he has witnessed encouragement and acceptance towards buying and owning fake garments.

“I buy fake versions of shoes because I have found that the prices of trainers have generally shot up and up over the last five to ten years,” Roberts explains. “At a time where cost of living is high, it makes financial sense to buy trainers that have little to no sacrifice in quality, but a huge cut on the price tag. It allows me to buy three to four, sometimes more, pairs of shoes I like for the same price as one genuine pair.”

However, the issue with counterfeit goods may not solely lie with consumers. Major footwear brands such as Adidas, Nike and New Balance have faced criticism for declining product quality and ballooning costs at the till. Sneaker prices are reported to have risen by 25% since 2019. For example, a standard Nike Dunk was around £60 in 2000 but now roughly retails for closer to £110 a pop. Meanwhile fans complain of cheaper materials and inconsistent quality.

“There is definitely a difference in quality coming from the big brands nowadays,” says Wilson. “Whether that's with the leather or the colour of the sneaker. Many times I've had a sneaker that has come from the official site and it's either creased or there's some dye running. It's disappointing, especially when I compare them to pairs I own from the early 2000s – it's a big difference.”

Market research company Mintel concluded that consumers prioritise “quality and affordability” when it comes to footwear, meaning rising prices and declining quality run counter to what buyers want. This has driven 78% of UK consumers towards second-hand retailers in search of better value and older, higher quality products of bygone years.

Disillusionment with the industry may also be pushing some customers towards counterfeits, a trend which has increased year on year since 2023. Vance points to sociologist Thorstein Veblen's work on “conspicuous consumption” – the idea that people purchase luxury goods and services to display social status.

“It's an old theory that feels more relevant than ever,” she says. “People buy to be seen and to signal status and that's never really gone out of fashion. Trainers are perfect for this: visible, recognisable and culturally loaded.”

Vance also highlights the ethical concerns surrounding counterfeit production. According to government findings, “poor labour conditions” are the second most common reason people avoid purchasing counterfeit items. While the awareness of poor working conditions for garment manufacturers is rising among young men – with 63% of young people expressing concern – there remains a serious say-do gap, with only one in six being able to name a sustainable alternative.

“Fakes have gone mainstream.”

Wilson, despite being within the core demographic of counterfeit buyers, takes a different approach to shoe consumption. As the owner of a second-hand shoe business of his own, he hopes to change the conversation around sneakers, streetwear and second-hand shopping.

“If you can't afford the real thing – which I know a lot of us can't – look for a different style or brand that's more cost effective. There's nothing wrong with that,” he says.

There are plenty of options, according to Wilson. “You can go outlet shopping, which is often good value, or go to independent brands who are looking to get their name out there.” Above all, he hopes for improvements in quality above all else: “I'd like to see big brands caring more about what they sell to their customers, rather than just profiting from them.”

Vance concludes: “There is space (or at least there is demand) for [dupes] – and brands are well aware of it... It's almost like they're reclaiming the narrative: we'll imitate the imitators, but make it luxury.”



HOMELINESS

By Tilly Snaitth
Design Nicola Cutts
Illustration Abigail Lythgoe

The truth behind the most common issue faced by those at risk of homelessness.

National statistics surrounding homelessness in the UK often include details of those who are “rough sleeping” on the streets or living in homeless shelters. What is often not included is the real stories behind those experiencing “hidden homelessness”.

Crisis, a homeless charity, defines “hidden homelessness” as people who may be considered homeless but whose housing situation is not “visible” on the streets or in official statistics. Those facing hidden homelessness may not always be in visible situations, meaning that their circumstances aren’t easily identified.

Research by the charity in 2025 found that ‘208,600 households in Britain are currently facing precarious forms of hidden homelessness, an increase of nearly a third (30%) since 2020.’

National statistics can often lack visibility for those at risk. “If they don’t present themselves to their local authority or to organisations who work with people experiencing



homelessness, it’s possible that we would just never know about their situation to be able to offer support,” says Brontë Schiltz, Northern Correspondent at *Big Issue North* and News Editor at the International Network of Street Papers.

Throughout Greater Manchester, charitable organisations work hard alongside local authorities to provide support and resources to those at-risk. *Big Issue North* works first-hand with people facing the issue of hidden homelessness, providing those without a permanent residence with access to income through their vendor scheme, which allows them to gain an income while receiving support through healthcare and wellbeing services.

“It’s legal to live with someone and not be on the official paperwork,” explains Schiltz. “But that has really quite a few significant disadvantages for you in terms of if you think about how often you have to apply for something and it asks for something with your address on a bill. If you can’t provide that, it creates lots of barriers.”

UK regulation requires that residents provide a proof of address when applying for a bank account or job application. Although this can include registered temporary accommodation rather than a personal registered address, due to the lack of certainty for those facing hidden homelessness this is often not an option when seeking employment.

Big Issue North vendor Steve Chillwell from Manchester has experienced changes in temporary accommodation for those at risk of homelessness in the city first-hand: “The amount of accommodation available to homeless people has decreased massively since the early 90s, and the accommodation that you can get is totally different nowadays. A lot of it is just rented shared houses, whereas years ago there was a lot more council accommodation. Now you see a lot more tents.”

Other definitions of hidden homelessness include overcrowded housing. Across 2021 to 2022, approximately 732,000 households were deemed overcrowded, according to the English Household Survey. Diverse households and cultures can often mean the line is blurred for

“overcrowded” housing as those who live in extensive family homes may not identify their situation in this way. “That might not be how that person identifies because, you know, in other cultures that might be a more common thing for people to live collectively with family,” says Schiltz.

In December 2025, the Labour Government proposed ‘A National Plan to End Homelessness,’ outlining strategies to provide support for those at risk of homelessness and hidden homelessness.

“This Labour Government is committed to tackling all forms of homelessness on a national scale too. It has committed £3.5 billion to tackle homelessness in just the next three years alone, supporting over 300,000 households each year. It has also committed to building 1.5 million new homes, including the biggest boost in social and affordable housing in a generation,” says Labour MP Azfar Khan for Rusholme.

On providing reliable temporary accommodation for those facing homelessness, Khan says, “The mayor’s A Bed Every Night scheme is expanding to have capacity for 650 people and new projects such as the Embassy Village in my constituency are helping homelessness people rebuild their lives.”

Through a collaboration between 130 pro bono businesses, Embassy Village in Castlefield provides temporary accommodation for those at risk of homelessness in Greater Manchester. It features 40 furnished homes, a fully-equipped village hall, multi-use sports centre, and an allotment, alongside catering and other support services.

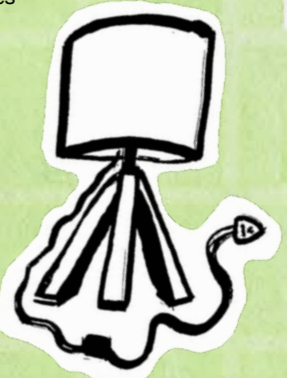
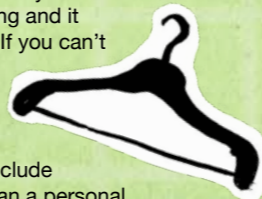
The project won’t only provide accommodation to those in need but also support to rebuild their lives, says contributor Mark Connor, CEO of Vermont Construction Group. “This project isn’t just about building homes, it’s about creating a sustainable community with purpose-built facilities that give residents the support and skills they need to rebuild their lives. Homelessness is a huge issue in Manchester

as the city has some of the highest numbers of rough sleepers in the country, so this project goes far beyond just bricks and mortar.”

The city council is also working to increase accessible housing. “Manchester City Council is also on track to deliver 10,000 affordable homes by 2030,” says Khan.

In 2025, there is a record of 132,410 households – including 172,420 children – residing in temporary accommodation according to Steve Reed, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

However, even with support and resources, there is still a long way to go until hidden homelessness is fully addressed. This has led to calls for local authorities to take further action. “There’s an increasing push in the UK for local authorities to adopt a ‘housing first’ approach, where people are provided with housing before trying to tackle other issues they might be experiencing like unemployment, addiction, poor mental health,” says Schiltz.



GREEN PARTY'S HANNAH SPENCER ON WHY STUDENT LOANS DON'T WORK (AND WHY DRUGS SHOULD BE LEGALISED)

By Ian Burke
Design Nicola Cutts

"We would get rid of tuition fees. We don't think that you should pay to access university," says Hannah Spencer, the plumber and Green Party MP taking a plunge to the political landscape. She does so while battling a ferocious gale in Levenshulme's Greenbank Park, which attempts to swirl her blonde hair into the shape of a Walnut Whip.

The 34-year-old Mancunian isn't a typical politician. She's working class, learnt a traditionally male-dominated trade (and is now working towards qualifying as a plasterer). Spencer says being on the ground with, and in the homes of, everyday people is the perfect preparation for a career in the House of Commons.

"A lot of us do the jobs that keep the country turning and already have skills that are needed in parliament. I know how to work well under pressure, not just on my own but as part of a team," says Spencer. "In my job, I meet so many people from so many different backgrounds, and I have that skill of resilience and just working hard to get the job done. That's what we need more of in politics, not just people who go swanning down this path into parliament. I want to change that."

Spencer bemoans the archaic political systems at council level — "I'm sure they're designed to keep [the working class] out" — and doesn't hold back when it comes to battling for one of the Green Party's more controversial policies: the legalisation of drugs.

"To be honest, a few years ago before I was political, I would've been quite wary about it. I didn't really understand, but I understand now how much the drug laws we've had for nearly 60 years have been failing our communities." She acknowledges that technology has made accessing drugs — even Class A substances — easier than ever.

"We used to talk about being able to get it on a street corner, and you can do that, but actually you can get it in a WhatsApp group without even having to leave the house." Spencer goes on to tell me about the "misery" brought upon local communities as a result of criminal drug networks, and that legalisation is the Green's proposed answer. "We want to regulate it and have an open conversation where it's not underground. But we can only do that by acknowledging that what we have now is so broken that we need to be able to look at doing things differently."

Spencer's unexpected win in Gorton and Denton was hard-fought. A three-way race between Labour, Reform and the Greens emerged in late January after the resignation of previous MP, Andrew Gwynne. He stood down citing "ill health", stemming from his sacking as a health minister in January 2025, when messages leaked from a WhatsApp group called "Trigger Me Timbers". In it, the then-Labour MP said he hoped a 72-year-old woman would "croak it" before the next election, while other local councillors were found to have made a series of racist, sexist and homophobic comments.

**"REAL HOPE,
REAL CHANGE."**

Eager to capitalise on pollster predictions that the Denton part of the constituency was turning its back on left-leaning politics altogether, Reform UK based their campaign there. Party leader Nigel Farage showed up to back his candidate, Matt Goodwin, a GB News presenter who leaned heavily on his family's Salford roots to lend him an air of credibility with the largely working-class electorate. In the end, Reform got 10,578 votes; the Greens claimed victory with 14,980 — a dramatic turnaround for an area that hasn't returned anything other than a Labour MP in almost a century.

Much of Spencer's campaign fervour was fueled by students and graduates energised by a political party that prides itself on zigging while the others are zagging. One such topic is student finance, with Spencer saying tuition fees — set to be £9,790 for the next academic year — are "a huge barrier and always have been".

"A LOT OF US DO THE JOBS THAT KEEP THE COUNTRY TURNING AND ALREADY HAVE SKILLS THAT ARE NEEDED IN PARLIAMENT."

"We're seeing debts that people have after leaving and to me it's a scandal, it's borderline mis-selling. We've got people leaving education with eye-watering amounts that they're never going to pay off, and it's unacceptable to have a price like that attached to education," says Spencer. "I'm so passionate about talking about all routes when you're at school. I didn't go to university, but I've done apprenticeships and I do a manual job, and that should be treated and seen in the same way as any other route of education. But university should be free, you shouldn't have to pay to access it."

There's also the issue of unscrupulous private landlords that have been a thorn in the side of students in Fallowfield, Rusholme and Withington for decades. "We'd look at things like rent control. When you're a student you're paying eye-watering amounts to live somewhere — we want lower bills for everybody, but especially for students, who then won't have to worry about taking on a job or two jobs," says Spencer. "We want you to just be able to focus on your studies and to spend money in our economy in our local, vibrant places, instead of paying off a landlord's buy-to-let mortgage."

The Commons has a bold new voice, but only time will tell if the greenhorn parliamentarian will deliver on her promises. As it stands, however, Hannah Spencer says she wants to smash the idea of what politicians look and sound like. By all estimates she already has.



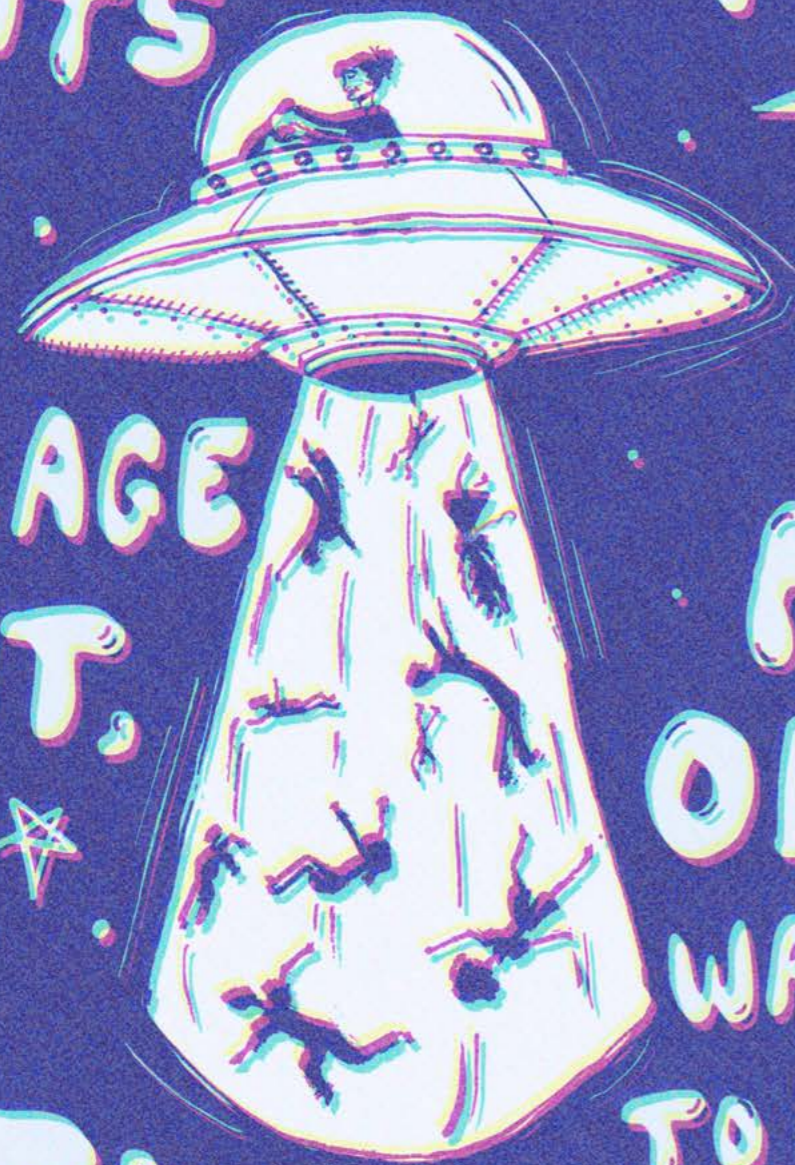
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EVERYONE
WANTS

A
VILLAGE
BUT,

VILLAGER

NO
ONE
WANTS
TO BE A



By Izzy Pitt
Design Abigail Lythgoe
Illustration Abigail Lythgoe

It's 10pm on a Friday night. Plans cancelled. Face mask on. A cup of tea goes cold on the bedside table while TikTok loops – “You don't owe anyone anything”, “protect your energy”, “protect your peace.”

You scroll, then switch to Instagram. Your friends are out, laughing, arms wrapped around each other. You pause, wishing this was also your reality. Then you switch back to a new skincare review on TikTok.

Staying in is easy to justify – productive even. It's a habit many young women recognise, shaped by a steady stream of online advice about boundaries, self-respect and protecting your time. With the ability to stay in touch with friends online at the tap of a screen, going out starts to feel optional.

“Everyone wants a village but no one wants to be a villager” captures this tension. We crave community, yet hesitate to show up for it. In a generation where we've become comfortable with putting ourselves first, are we losing sight of genuine friendship?

“I think the phrase relates to the loneliness epidemic we're in,” says student artist Abigail Lythgoe. “Everyone feels lonely, but no one is willing to put the effort in to change that, or they simply don't know how. I always push myself to have a nice chat with the taxi driver or the cashier.”

Lythgoe explores themes of mental health and connection through visual form in her work. “Real conversations happen in such a variety of settings, and I enjoy seeing how that provides a foundation for my pieces,” she says.

Technology allows friendships to exist through messages, reactions and video calls without leaving home. Pandemic habits – virtual quiz nights and movie sessions – have lingered. Research by Opinionium found 23% of Gen Z prefer socialising online through video calling or gaming, compared to the 11% average. Social media can help us feel connected, but it's also keeping us apart.

Lythgoe sees both sides. “Social media works for keeping up with friendships. You get instant updates, so you might not feel the need

to check in as much. But it depends on what kind of friendships you want,” she says. “Putting too much pressure on yourself to be everyone's best friend, all day, every day – that's just not sustainable. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't put the effort into your friends that really do mean a lot to you.”

At the same time, she believes social media has encouraged more “selfish” behaviour and weakened in-person communities that lack loyalty. “You have a right to self-care and staying home, but that doesn't mean you always should. There's a balance to be achieved. Everyone is worried about the loneliness pandemic, but not many people have the effort to have courage and create and be part of in-person communities.”

Lythgoe's own “village” is rooted in routine. Weekly shopping trips with her mum and playing rounders and badminton. These regular interactions provide consistency and support. She also values reciprocity in close friendships: “When the time comes for the roles to be reversed, it's about being ready to serve and put that person first, because you know they would do the same for you.”

But friendships aren't always straightforward. They can become strained when one person becomes overly reliant on the other without wider support systems in place.

Therapy language can complicate things further. Lythgoe recently ended a friendship where boundaries were repeatedly pushed, with “therapy speak” used to “disguise and distract from bad behaviour”. While she acknowledges this language can help people communicate more thoughtfully, it can also become performative. “It can feel like ‘I'm better than you’ or ‘you're not on my level’,” she says. “I felt I had to live up to their expectations of me, rather than be equals.”

Ultimately, friendship is a choice made repeatedly over time. For Lythgoe, the best friendships are grounded in humour and presence. “I love a friendship that has a lot of comedy,” she says. “You have to be able to laugh, even when times are rough. It's about reading the situation; you may not always know what to say but it's about being there. That's enough.”

FIVE ANALOGUE HOBBIES

TO REFRESH YOUR MIND

By Fabiola Gonzalez Prato
Design Callista Low
Illustration Olivia Taberner

Watching a movie, scrolling through social media and playing video games can be fun, but sometimes, you just want to slow down and disconnect from a screen. Where better to begin than with a magazine that you're holding? Here are five analogue hobbies that will kick off a much needed digital detox. It's time to go analogue and time to get real!

01

Scrapbookin_g and junk journalin_g

Grab an old notebook and fill it with something – anything. Scrapbooks and junk journals don't have rules you need to follow: combine colours, textures and elements you have never seen together before. Write a poem. Dedicate pages to your loved ones. Collect your train tickets for an entire year. The idea is to fill it with anything that captures your attention: shopping lists, receipts, photos, things you find lying around. It does not have to be perfect, it just needs to be expressive and liberating.

02

Creative, hands-on activities

Ever pondered why grandmas are so zen? It could be down to so-called "grandma hobbies", which activate the brain while reducing stress and promoting relaxation. Try crocheting, sewing or knitting. Learning these skills gets you away from the digital world for hours at a time. The materials are fairly inexpensive, and there are plenty of instruction books to get you started. Crafting with your hands helps you disconnect from concerns while exercising your brain. It may seem slow or even tedious at times, but the end result is worth it.

03

Bring out your inner cook

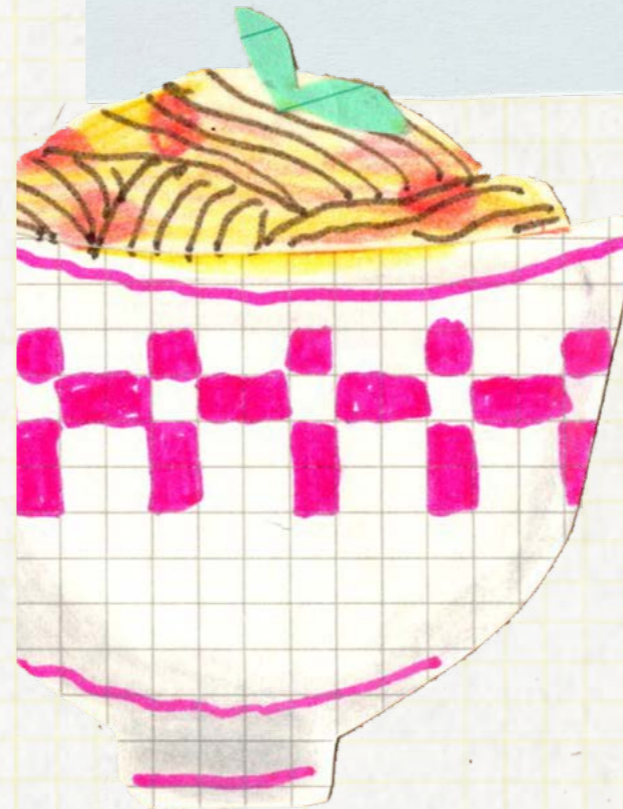
Being in a constant rush can make the food you eat and the time spent making it an afterthought. Don't let that happen. Buy a cookbook, make a meal that reminds you of your childhood, or recreate a dish from your favourite movie. Cooking forces you to concentrate, fuels your problem-solving skills, and you get to eat great food and end up with a nice-smelling flat. Spending time in the kitchen is not a waste of your day – cut the scrolling time and make a good meal.



04

Play brain games

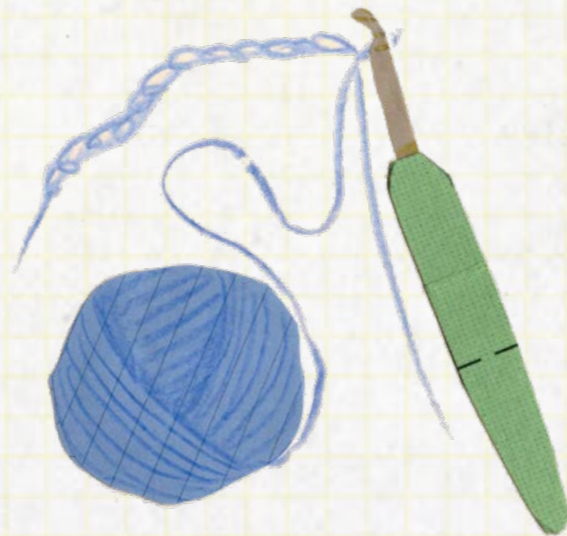
In the spirit of bringing back physical media, take the opportunity to challenge yourself and improve your concentration skills with a brain game. Sudoku, word searches, and puzzles are hobbies that test your intellect, and can be found in lots of non-digital forms. You'll be surprised how well these can help your memory and critical thinking skills. And it's not just a solo hobby: compete with friends to see who ends up being the sudoku champion, start a puzzle night and see who can get the most done under a time limit.



05

Move your body

This is the simplest (and cheapest) way to enjoy the real world. It can be as easy as going on a colour walk, signing up for a yoga class, or simply dancing around your house. After spending hours staring at a screen, your body craves movement. After all, that's what it was made for. It is impressive how going on a hike or for a swim can lift your mood up. Try to be grateful for your body, give yourself some peace of mind and start a habit of moving. Trust us, you'll appreciate it when you're older.



Brick Phone Diary

By Adam Taylor
Design Nicola Cutts

A memorable outpour of rain in Manchester is not to be taken lightly, let alone tackled in running gear. I discovered this first-hand thanks to an unyielding stubbornness that kept me running through a grueling session, as if I were some sort of East Midlands David Goggins. This culminated in a sodden walk to the phone shop, where the man at the till gave me the diagnosis straight: "Severely water-damaged and not worth repairing."

I found myself in a smartphone-less reality for the foreseeable future – or until the next student loan dropped. Void of means to be contacted at all times and unable to procrastinate with hours of screentime, I felt liberated. According to Statista, 100% of 16-24-year-olds in the UK had a smartphone in 2024. OFCOM says the average adult spends four hours and 20 minutes online per day. Dead phone in hand, I thought about how the pre-smartphone era must have been better for us all.

I took the chance to shed my chronically online habits and seek out a new (or old) way of living by simply existing for one week without a smartphone. Or, as we might better deem them, a "dumphone", "brick" or "burner". It felt like a form of time travel, a way of seeing just how much our lives have changed in such a short amount of time. So, here I report my findings for your entertainment: the results of a digitally-native 20-something navigating a week with a brick phone.

Adjusting to a dataless existence

The first thing I noticed was the difficulty in getting started. My vessel for this journey was a Nokia 100. Not a million miles away in terms of features from the legendary Nokia 3310 that most envisage when the term "brick phone" is mentioned, just a lighter and slightly smaller version with a better battery life. I bought it thinking I could dive right in, but no. I had to purchase a new SIM card because mine was too small, a great start if there ever was one.

When it came to hanging out with friends, I relied mostly on verbal arrangements, and if someone didn't show up I'd ring them. I avoided sending texts like the plague – numberpad texting can definitely stay in the past.

I set a date for the seven-day experience and I was off, taking on the world without my usual technological comfort blanket. When I woke up on that first day, I instantly lunged for my phone in need of that half-asleep hit of social media dopamine, only to find a phone for which the internet was a foreign concept. Hands empty, I pulled back and laid face up on my bed. There was nothing to interrupt the morning. I stared up to the ceiling at my Jimi Hendrix poster in a momentary state of limbo hoping for some direction, but the rockstar had no answers for me. Then Stone Free, something miraculous happened: I got up. This is how every morning went in my experiment.

One thing I never got used to was the feeling that I'd lost, misplaced, or someone had taken my phone. On multiple occasions I frantically tapped all my pockets looking for my phone – like a sheathe with no sword, a foot with no shoe. I thought this phantom phone sensation would ease up, but it never did.

Disconnected travels

Taking the bus each day was like having my very own travelling soap opera. With no distractions, I saw how prevalent it is for basically everyone to travel with their headphones on. Of course, this means those of us with naked heads hear all these spilling secrets at a listenable volume. I heard about relationship issues, characters screaming aimlessly, and drunken punters holding the urge to be sick. The whole spectrum of human emotion, or at least the most interesting bits. This inevitably became too much after day two. It felt wrong to involuntarily eavesdrop, so I found a distraction. I brought a book.

Another important consideration of travel was the lack of a maps app for direction. Luckily I wasn't pressed for time, and I found wandering around in a vague direction to find my destination to be an absolute joy. While on one of these aimless trots on day three, I explored the hidden features of my Nokia. I was surprised to find it was kitted out with a number of programmes: flashlight, currency converter, expenses, and the king of all applications, the calculator.

Procrastination is inevitable

The most shocking part of my phone-free week was an unexpected spike in productivity. I was working for longer, no longer interrupted by the alluring ping of a notification. My attention span improved. I thought, 'Wow this must be how the rest of the week will be.' But I was wrong.

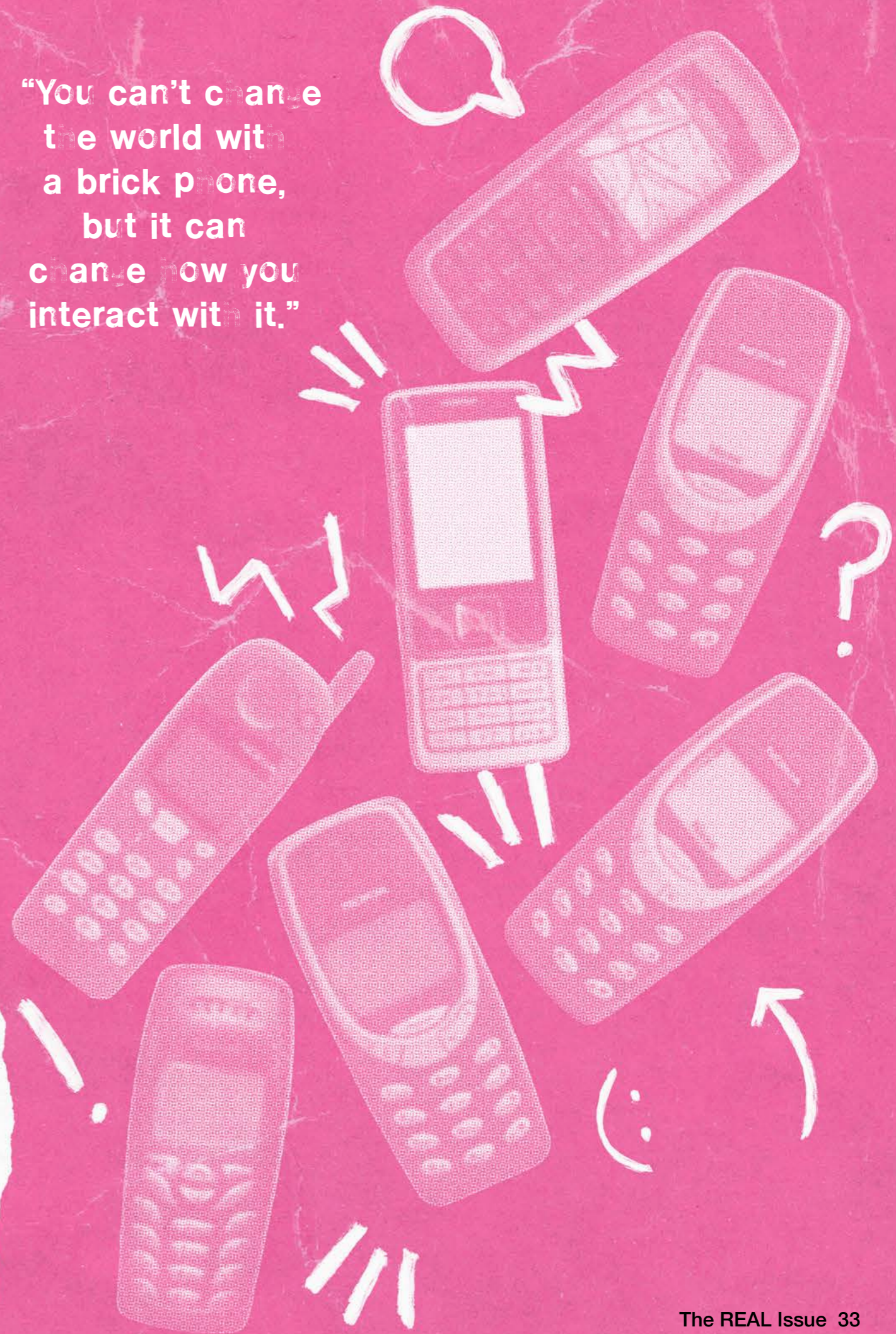
On day four I plateaued. I was still watching YouTube and Netflix on my laptop at night to wind down. I've never been much of a YouTube watcher, but my former smartphone diet made me ravenous for a digital content buffet. I knew things were bad when I found myself watching a video essay about how *Surf's Up*, the animated film about surfing penguins, is a metaphor for existentialism.

The original purpose is now an after thought

I left my seven days with a brickphone with a fresh perspective. Having spent 168 hours with my Nokia, I'd taken quite a liking to it. You can't change the world with a brick phone, but it can change how you interact with it. It forces you to make plans, seek out human interaction and not always have the answers.

Phones were initially just tools that then snowballed into lenses for which to consume life through; it should've never become escapism for the metaphorical wave of life. Maybe we need to give the smart phone a back step and let the waves thrash us about a bit more. As Big Z says in *Surf's Up*: "You don't fight the wave. You can't fight these big waves."

"You can't change the world with a brick phone, but it can change how you interact with it."





By Imogen Lambert-Baker
Design Adomas Lukas Petrauskas

Content warning: this article contains discussion of suicide

Tommy is sitting in his room, his laptop propped up onto his chest. 13 tabs are open, his hands are cramping and a headache is brewing. He's no closer to finishing his essay than he was four hours ago and the dread is setting in. He scrolls up through a tab, re-reading the grammatical advice and sources an AI chatbot has given him. Slowly, he types a prompt: 'Why is this not making sense?'

Tommy says he uses ChatGPT frequently, using it daily to help him come up with ideas for assignments, entertainment and even meals prepping to a budget. "It works because I don't take it too seriously," he says. "It's good, but I don't think I trust it 100% over someone who is qualified. If I was actively trying to lose or gain weight I'd much rather talk to a real person."

His experience is far from unique. Across everyday life, chatbots are increasingly becoming a go-to source of support, advice and even companionship.

According to the World Health Organisation, loneliness has become an epidemic, with one in six people affected. It's the reason we get pets, use dating apps and doomscroll on social media. However, between working, writing that essay, making sure your laundry basket isn't overflowing and feeding yourself, it is getting harder and harder to make and maintain meaningful connections. Relationships take time and effort. But what if there was another way? Rather than catching up with friends, comparing calendars and wondering whether they even like you in the first place, what if all the connections – pals, partners, therapists, doctors, dieticians – could fit snugly in your pocket? What if all you need is a chatbot?

The loneliness crisis has dovetailed with the proliferation of AI chatbots. A survey by the Higher Education Policy Institute found that 15% of university students use AI for their wellbeing needs. In a 2025 report by Common Sense Media, researchers found that nearly one third of teenagers find AI conversations more satisfying than human conversations.

For some users, the appeal lies in control and emotional safety. Alice – whose name has been anonymised – says the lack of confrontation from her chatbot trumps the disapproval that often comes with human relationships. "It won't judge me. I don't have to worry about gossip or my problems getting around. It stays in my phone," she says. Daniel, another anonymous chatbot user, says that he uses it for his ADHD. "I discuss the tasks I need to do or the thoughts I'm having and it will help prioritise things for me, which feels better than talking to a person because [AI] feels unbiased."

This is a shared sentiment for many users: however, there is also recognition that chatbots are not always reliable. Late last year, UK consumers were warned by *Which?* that chatbots can give misleading advice on tax and money-saving advice after researchers found that Microsoft's Copilot and ChatGPT recommended, among other things, breaching HMRC investment limits on ISAs. There are emotional and health risks, too. In late 2024, American mother Megan Garcia filed a lawsuit against chatbot service Character.ai after her 14-year-old son died by suicide after becoming obsessed with the app.

Humans have been seeking companionship through artificial means for decades. The first chatbot was created in 1966 by

Joseph Weizenbaum. Named "Eliza", it was meant to mimic a psychotherapist by using scripts to recognise words, detect patterns and to reflect the users' responses back at them. Weizenbaum was adamant that Eliza was not intelligent and his goal was to "demonstrate that the communication between man and machine was superficial". However, this backfired as many users interpreted Eliza's interest in them as real... So began the "Eliza Effect" – the tendency to project human traits onto a computer programme.

Chatbots have changed dramatically since then. With ChatGPT being the most widely used, AI now appears to possess a level of intelligence Weizenbaum believed was impossible for machines. While still based on pattern recognition, it now has access to the internet and is trained by humans, for humans. It responds instantly, agrees with everything, and most importantly, it is accessible. With three million people on NHS England waiting lists for a first specialist appointment or diagnostic test, some are turning to AI for instantaneous advice instead.

A large risk in these chatbot doctors is AI's tendency to sycophantically toe the line to users' prompts. This isn't helped by our tendency to anthropomorphise, says Keeley Crockett, a professor in computational intelligence at Manchester Metropolitan University. "Users attribute human-like understanding, empathy, or authority to chatbots, which can lead to misplaced trust and reduced critical evaluation of responses by humans." This can lead to "over reliance", according to Crockett. "Individuals increasingly defer decision-making to automated systems, potentially weakening independent judgment and problem-solving skills," she

explains. Crockett notes that there are also major privacy concerns when chatbots store, process or share users' sensitive data.

There's certainly no way to put the AI genie back in the bottle – but what can users like Alice and Daniel do to protect themselves? "Read the terms and conditions, don't include any personal data and check if you can opt out of any model training," Crockett advises. "We should source-check information that is provided by chatbots – ask it to explain and justify its decision and provide links to evidence in the prompt." With this newfound accessibility, it is now more important than ever to be aware and informed about artificial intelligence and the chatbots we have become so familiar with.

If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this article, support is available. You can contact the university's Counselling, Mental Health and Wellbeing team, a GP, or another trusted professional. Contact 0161 247 3493 or counselling@mmu.ac.uk.

“A REAL FOOTBALL CLUB”

THE RISE OF WEST DIDSBURY AND CHORLTON FC

By **Kit Deem-Stone**
Design **Connie McMullen**
Illustration **Abigail Lythgoe**

“What are you doing Saturday, baby? Would you like to come see West Didsbury?” are two lines from one of the most viral local football chants in recent years. With one particular rendition racking up thousands of views across social media platforms, the atmosphere at Manchester’s West Didsbury & Chorlton A.F.C has helped the club make a name for itself in English football and beyond. Not bad, considering they sit in the ninth league. The men’s team – affectionately known as West – are one of the most prolifically supported teams at their level.

In a city home to two of the biggest clubs in the world – Manchester United and Manchester City – there is no shortage of love for football. Yet global reach increasingly blurs the line between prioritising local supporters and financial gain, according to West “ultra” and Chorlton-based artist Fin Tupper. “Premier League football has gone so international. It feels like you support a franchise,” he says. “It’s hard to feel part of a big team. I grew up supporting United, yet I feel way more part of West. I’m actually supporting West, the players and what the club represents. The big clubs, you could argue they’ve lost touch. But with West, when they succeed, it’s an action. Something for everyone.”

West have firmly cemented themselves into Tupper’s weekends. The low-cost of attending makes it affordable, compared to big league games. “You still have this culture that you get when you support any team, but it’s different because you can actually afford to go. It’s a tangible thing instead of sitting in the highest seats for £66.” It’s socialising, along with cheaper matchdays – typically around £6 – that make fans feel part of the game instead of distant spectators.

The rise of West’s supporters is no coincidence. The club invests in a welcoming ethos and a culture of unique chants, from vegetarian themes to local in-jokes, setting them apart from typical non-league crowds. Not too shy to address Didsbury and Chorlton’s association with yuppie hipsterism, match attendees can often hear the self-aware chant of “West, West / wherever you may be, we eat hummus and celery / We don’t eat meat, we love broccoli / We are Chorlton and West Didsbury” ringing around Brookburn Road, home of the club since 1996. The club is politically outspoken, and many of West’s fans carry flags promoting antifascist, pro-refugee and LGBTQ+ messages. The team’s supporter group, Union 1908, supports local charities such as food bank drives and refugee attendance initiatives.

Steve Eckersley, Chair of West Didsbury and Chorlton FC, knows the importance of West’s ethos. “The identity of the club, it’s something that

we’ve worked on for ages,” he explains. “When I first joined the club, it was amateur. The task was to divert it to a semi-pro club. Never for one minute did I think that we would attain what we’ve achieved in such a short time with a great fan base behind us. Looking back, you can see how we became attractive. Our identity, our brand, being inclusive – it’s something we’re proud of.”

Despite attention from the FA, Eckersley is still focused on the team’s grassroots identity. “We haven’t got a rich benefactor,” he says proudly. “What we’ve got is a board of directors, all unpaid volunteers who are committed and experienced in football but also business, to make sure the club operates within the values that we set out. There was a perception that we were a rich club – we’re not. We’re ethical and true to our values and vision.”

Fans speak of West as a team where homophobia, transphobia, racism, and sexism are actively discouraged, making matchdays a safe space. This alone has made them stand out from the increasingly commercialised world of top-flight football, where financial pressures can sometimes appear to outweigh supporter experience and community values.

It’s this authenticity, politically and financially, that has drawn in fans like Tupper. “If you disagree with West’s ethos, you’re going to stay far away. People find so much solace in West because it’s genuine. The community that it’s pushing allows people to be creative and have something that they’re really passionate about. It’s real football.”

For a club that once had fewer than 30 fans, the current numbers are “incredible” Eckersley says. “A good example of what we bring was a couple of weeks ago when we played Padiham FC. Just walking around amongst the fans, noticing a lot of new faces, that’s what it’s like. We’ve got families going, watching the match. We’ve got groups of people who are obviously socially connected and maybe professionally but a lot of them are not watching the game. It’s fascinating, the different sorts of people who follow our matches,” he says.

Eckersley believes the most powerful effect is seeing support manifest off the pitch. “It could be any day of the week but particularly on match day, you’ll see someone in a West kit. You know, it could be somebody walking the street, it might be kids. That’s that connectivity again, in them feeling proud and comfortable in wearing a West shirt in a social setting, rather than the likes of United or City.”

What West illustrates is that non-league football can cater to fans left wanting from the Premier League – from those seeking traditional football culture to those yearning for a community-minded connection. As elite football continues to expand financially, often at the expense of supporter engagement, grassroots clubs like West may offer the answer many fans are searching for: a real football club.



WHY I'M LUCKY-ISH

A real-life story of luck, laparoscopies and looking on the bright side

By Alice Coombs
Design Ayesha Shahab

At the end of last year, I was lucky-ish to have a laparoscopy excision surgery for endometriosis, a keyhole procedure where a surgeon either cuts or burns endometrial tissue off of the organs that it's growing on. Doesn't sound too lucky, does it?

I've suffered from extremely bad periods and general pain since I was nine. I was in and out of school due to back pain. After years of thinking these conditions were normal, I finally went to the doctors when my auntie pointed out – respectfully – that the amount I was bleeding didn't seem right.

Over the years I've been told various things by the doctors for why my periods were so bad and started so young. They ranged from deeming it a "trauma response", due to losing my mom around the same time my period started, to "Some girls just have heavier periods, have you tried the pill?" To which I'd answer, "Yes, and the implant, injection and every other form of contraception offered."

In November, during my second year of university, I was working at my part-time job at the local pub. I'd been bleeding heavier than normal, and after complaining to my manager, I passed out in the glass wash from pain and the amount of blood I was losing. After seven hours in A&E I left with little to no answers about what the issue was. However, one lovely nurse said that she thought it could be endometriosis and pushed my doctor into giving me a gynaecology referral which – spoiler – never got sent.

Following what felt like hundreds of blood tests, internal and external ultrasound scans and different pain medications, I decided to go on the hormonal coil – the last option before surgery. A few months on the coil and there wasn't much change and no one knew why.

So, why am I "lucky-ish"? Around nine months ago, I had an MRI scan which showed clear signs of endometriosis on my right back pelvic ligaments and my ovaries. Finally, I was offered a laparoscopy. After two cancelled operations due to staff shortages and being on standby twice, I had surgery two months later.

It took hours. After I came round, they said they only did the left side of my body. I immediately winced as my right side was far worse. I cried, partly from the realisation that I'd have to live with this chronic illness my whole life, but partly from the relief that none of this was in my head. I was adamant on staying positive.

In these past three months, my periods have finally stopped (massive win). I'm still exhausted all of the time, my back pain is awful, but on the period front there's only spotting. So, in some ways, I'm either very lucky or lucky-ish.

I wanted to write this article to open up the conversation about laparoscopy surgeries, and to hopefully make someone who may be experiencing the same confusion feel a tad less alone. It's still early days to see whether the surgery will change anything permanently but fingers crossed that I can drop the "-ish" some day soon.



I HAD TO BE REAL WITH MYSELF AFTER DROPPING OUT OF UNI

By Esmæ Simmonds-Short
Design Ayesha Shahab

If you asked me where home is, I'd tell you it's Manchester. Strange, considering I'd never stepped foot into the city until just over three years ago.

Dropping out of university was never part of the plan. It wasn't something I'd even considered until I found myself in a meeting, telling my course leader how unhappy I was. Now, as I approach the end of my degree in English and Multimedia Journalism at Manchester Met – a course entirely different from the one I once swore was my only path – I've found myself reflecting on what that unexpected twist has taught me.

For as long as I can remember, I was determined to move to the big city and thrive. Visiting London while growing up, it felt like the place where all my dreams could come true. When I'd secured a place at my dream university, doing the degree I'd always fantasised about, I thought "This is where I'd find myself." Perhaps a little unrealistic, a little naive, sure, but it was all I thought I needed.

For some, moving to university fresh out of college works out perfectly. For others, not so much. Looking back, I wish I'd given myself more time to think, to see what else was out there before I centred everything around fashion school. London was far too big of a place for young me to be in, swallowed up by the city and alone amongst a multitude of unfamiliar faces. The fashion course I once dreamed of felt impossible to me, the wrong size, the wrong shape. I constantly questioned how I had managed to be accepted onto the degree in the first place.

I dropped out after Christmas in my first year. I felt low and then even lower coming back to my hometown in Dorset. It was pretty desolate; the majority of people I knew

stayed at their respective universities dotted around the country. I spent a lot of time thinking, but I was determined to make university work for me, not me for it. I felt drawn to the allure of Manchester, the thought of studying journalism and literature surrounded by red brick and history. I saw an opportunity in a unique degree where I could incorporate both a subject I'd seen myself already excel in, English, combined with an outlet where I could still go into fashion, just through writing.

I'm now a firm believer that, more often than not, everything happens for a reason. The past three years have been some of the best of my life. I've met amazing people. I'm thriving doing my degree. I've even rekindled my love for fashion by stepping into the shoes of aAh!'s fashion editor – a full circle back to the dreams that teenage me always had. My 17-year-old self, enthused about the life she was going to have in London to study fashion straight after finishing her A-Levels, would be shocked.

Don't get me wrong, there have been plenty of ups and downs. But if my experience has taught me anything, it's that this is what life is made up of. The downs are not a sign of failure – they're growth. It's often braver to admit that something's not working than pretending you can't see the iceberg ahead.

My advice? Don't plan out your life so rigidly there's no room for change. The mistakes, the detours... they often lead you to exactly where you need to be. Just not always in the way you first imagined.

EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON



ASK aAh!

By Fabiola Gonzalez Prato
Design Nicola Cutts

Do you have a dilemma that's bothering you? A problem that just won't budge? Student life can throw all kinds of curveballs. But don't worry, we're here to help.

One of our greatest losses to artificial intelligence is the grand old tradition of finding and giving advice, personally. For a considerable number of people, the first place to go for some wise words isn't a friend or loved one, but an AI chatbot. In keeping with 'The REAL Issue,' we put our brains together to help two Manchester Met students in need with the best kind of advice: the real, human kind.

Q: IT'S MY FIRST TIME LIVING ALONE. WHAT ARE SOME TIPS FOR BUDGETING WHILE ALSO ENJOYING UNI LIFE?

— Fernanda, 23

A: Worrying about budgeting your expenses is reasonable. Suddenly, you've got "adult money" and are responsible for covering bills and buying necessities. Everything seems to be triple the price of what you remember things costing while living at home. Suddenly, the thought of spending money on fun outings makes you wish you had a trust fund to pull from.

However, a budget can be your best friend, but first you need to understand your spending. The best way to do that is to record all your outgoings for a couple of weeks. That means food, utilities, subscriptions, you name it. To make it easier, the Student Union Advice Centre has booklets for your termly budgeting.

Once you start the habit of recording your spendings – whether through a spreadsheet, a dedicated app or just writing it down – you can start to set aside the funds you know you'll have available each month.

When it comes to enjoying uni life while taking the reins of your spending, it's a balancing act. Remember, a budget means you can enjoy your time without the worry you're breaking the bank – you'll know which activities your budget can cover, you can foresee special events that need extra savings, and even keep an emergency stash for spontaneous plans.

If you want to take it a step further and become a budgeting master, make sure to check out the Advice Centre at the Student Union. Tell them that aAh! Magazine sent you!

Q: WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO FIND OTHER UNI STUDENTS AND SOCIALISE?

— Toby, 20

A: We've all been there. Starting at a university like Manchester Met can be exciting, but making friends anywhere can be intimidating. With such a big student campus, it can be hard to know where to start meeting people.

The first (and likely the easiest) places to start are lectures and seminars. You are going to be attending your classes, so why not take the opportunity to get to know your peers? Socialising with people from your course is a fantastic way to build new relationships. You're all walking the same path, learning from the same reading lists, taking the same exams and assignments, waking up on the same early mornings, meaning you all have something in common, whatever your backgrounds might be. Amy, a former Manchester Met student and Student Hub worker, shares her experience: "I mainly made my friends through my course. I had coursemates and we would usually help each other out."

If interacting in a lecture or seminar seems like a nightmare, then societies are the place for you. Joining a society is a great way to meet students with similar interests. Reach out to groups that sound interesting and make some time for a tryout session. Drama, sport, animation – you name it, there's a society for it. This way you get to know people at different ages and from different courses, and you already have something in common to start a conversation!

In full honesty, during your time at uni you will meet people almost constantly. The important thing is to be yourself and get out of your comfort zone. Strike up that conversation with a stranger. Join that society that piqued your interest. You never know where it might lead you.

Amy adds: "Don't be scared because everyone is in the same situation, everyone is having a new experience." So, go ahead: be the real you.

BRAINROT VOCABULARY

By Evie Atkins
Design Nicola Cutts

Memes replacing meaning: is the adoption of 'brainrot' narrowing our language?

Did you lowkenuinely rizz up a new huzz just in time for the great 2026 lock in? Or were you too busy auramaxxing your friends by glazing someone while griddying to 6-7?

Oxford University Press chose "brain rot" as its word of 2024, defined as a "perceived loss of intelligence or critical thinking skills... as attributed to the overconsumption of unchallenging or inane content". The term has become so self-aware it is almost ironic: something we critique the culture of, but we also feel so very immersed into.

The start of a new year is a time for everyone to ruminate on the past, bringing in an abundance of new resolutions. For myself, it felt inevitable that my one resolution would be one relatable for so many others too: to quit using so much online slang.

Retaining an effortless glossary of nonsense phrases felt like it was becoming detrimental to how I genuinely communicated with the people in my life. My default script had become absurd instead of actually articulating my feelings. Speaking normally feels alien and poses the possibility of losing my true lexicon.

I'm hardly the only person to feel this way. Some of the more career-ready members of Gen-Z are self-conscious about how their language makes them come across in the workplace and wider society. "I don't really feel professional anymore. It's probably obvious, but I think it makes us look 'dumb' because all we do is replace real words with slang, it even takes me longer now to think of an actual word," says Gia Patel, a second-year Fashion Design student at Manchester Metropolitan University.

It begs the question: if my language becomes increasingly mediated by uniform, trend-driven cycles, then does my brain power suffer? "No one's language will be ruined by online media," assures Rob Drummond, a Professor of Sociolinguistics at Manchester Met. "It might be altered slightly, and I can see how it might be linked to attention spans in some context but, no, I don't think it's ruining active language by itself."

"People look down on the language of young people online and say that they can't understand it – but surely that means it is working at a level of sophistication that is beyond those judgemental adults," Drummond adds. "Slang can be very sophisticated. Young people are using language in very sophisticated ways: it might not match a 'standard' or traditional view of linguistic sophistication, but it is still sophisticated."

So if there is a level of sophistication is our language still making us worse at articulating ourselves? Or is this simply a recycled panic, not unlike my grandparents' warnings about my eyes "going square" from sitting too close to the telly? "I don't buy into the idea of languages declining at all," Drummond

says. "Languages change, all the time. It's just that these changes are perhaps taking place a bit more quickly than they traditionally do due to the speed of social media."

While some young people are despairing at the state of their vexing vocabulary, others are taking Drummond's stance and simply enjoying the linguistic variety. "It isn't a new concept to have strange, nonsensical phrases, it's only amplified because of how many of us are online nowadays," says Alfie Barkas, another Manchester Met student studying English. "Let the kids be kids, I say. We even grew up with a slightly altered meme culture in Vine. Shakespeare was doing this a long time ago. It is fun to play with the English language."

Of course, Shakespeare didn't have access to Italian brainrot and "Skibidi toilet", (if he did, *The Merchant of Venice* would've been much different). The most unique factor in our generation's particular brand of slang is that it has been largely shaped by social media and short video content. One 2025 study by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising revealed that Brits now spend more time watching their phones rather than TV, with 15 to 24-year-olds spending roughly five hours a day on their phones. That's a lot of time to pick up a new word or two.

For Drummond, none of this is surprising. "Language has always served this purpose. It's not just about literal communication. It's about identity, social meaning, belonging, inclusion, exclusion," he says. So, if online spaces are the modern way for young people to connect and create identities, then it only makes sense that the language of the internet would become their regular lexicon. "Young people use language in a way that brings them together, but also that sets them apart from older people," Drummond explains.

Perhaps, then, we shouldn't worry after all. Language has always changed, and it will always continue to. What won't change is how important it is for us to feel like we belong. We'll always ask for validation, we might just use different words to say it. We live to scroll another day!





MEANINGFUL CONVERSATION CULTIVATED THROUGH CINEMA AND A FIRST-TIMER'S PERSPECTIVE

By Adam Taylor
Design Connie McMullen
Illustration Abigail Lythgoe

In the moody foyer of Cultplex in Manchester, a swarm of cinema savants sit patiently sipping their beers. They're not waiting for a screening to start – in fact they won't watch anything all night. No, these cinema-goers aren't there for a movie, but for a chat, a disagreement, and maybe even a debate.

Nothing gets us talking quite like a film. *Marty Supreme*, *Wuthering Heights* and the Barbenheimer phenomenon whipped the internet into a frenzy as a result of masterful marketing strategies, which caused an influx of rich conversation spanning all corners of the internet. We are more vocal about cinema than ever, yet paradoxically these conversations are more like monologues. According to the Office for National Statistics, 23% of Brits feel lonely often, always or some of the time – with younger generations most affected. So, how can movie lovers get their fix for filmic rapport beyond the digital confines of Letterboxd reviews and subreddits threads?

Post Credit Club could be the answer. The new Manchester-based film group, founded by Phoebe Schofield and Amy Crone, brings people together once a month to encourage lively debate about cinema and the opportunity to meet fellow film buffs in the flesh. "We are always looking to see if people are engaged and talking," says Schofield. "I've never seen anyone on the outside of the conversation – people tend to get involved. Films are an easy way to get into a conversation."

The club was brought to life in November 2025, when the two film-obsessed friends had the desire to find new ears to hear their takes. "We thought it would be cool to have a community in Manchester to explore this," Schofield explains. She admits the concept isn't anything revolutionary. "We got the idea from a book club format. There are loads of book clubs in Manchester. We thought there really isn't an equivalent for film."

Schofield and Crone choose the film of discussion together, keeping a close eye on upcoming releases that would appropriately fit the bill, with attendees watching the film beforehand so they can discuss in-person. The popularity of the group surprised Schofield and Crone after their TikTok account (@post.creditclub) received a surge of followers and their attendance quickly doubled.

Post Credit Club prides itself on shining a spotlight on female and queer filmmakers, a focus they were initially cautious about, worrying it would alienate a wider demographic. Yet the opposite has proven true. "I feel like a lot of the groups in Manchester are very targeted towards women," says Schofield, adding that the majority of the city's book clubs are female-led and female-run. "Social groups are often the same. I feel like we've achieved something quite unique in the sense that it's a real mix of genders." This diversity of film fanatics has in turn created a non-judgemental space for discussion, allowing attendees to speak freely in a non-pretentious manner.

"You don't have to be some sort of expert to come to the club because we're definitely not – we just love watching films," says Schofield.

The Post Credit Club co-founder adds that their success is partly down to Manchester's venues. "Everyone has been super nice. Cultplex has been super welcoming. Their venue is obviously very community focused – it's a really easy connection, they have been so enthusiastic and given us a discount on drinks."

Post Credit Club has already embarked on many of the other local haunts in the city such as To Be Frank, Trof, Bar NQ, as well as indie cinema HOME. The social events take a speed dating approach, in which members (especially new ones) hop between tables, introducing themselves and breaking the ice with a take about film.

At one of these events, Post Credit Club regular Leon Selby has convinced a group of his friends to attend for the first time. The energy is eclectic and the chatter among the different tables changes as quickly as people's chosen seats: hot takes on the latest films; people's plans for their own documentaries; the making of prosthetic legs. Tammie, a theme park engineer and other club regular, divulges how important the club has been to her. "I've gone to these events since the first one, I'm quite new to the city and travel a lot with my work so it's good to have a group like this, it's become more than just meeting here though – a few of us often go to the cinema together."

Despite the informal atmosphere, the group maintains a clear ethos: discussion should be open and free from pretension. While attendees may have strong opinions, this is a space for respectful discussion. "Definitely no arguments," Schofield laughs. "Some people are very opinionated, me included, but everyone understands and respects each others' views. Everyone likes what they like, and we're not judging. That's something we're very proud of."

The purpose of Post Credit Club, ironically, has little to do with the actual film being discussed. Its members are seeking what many lack in this digital age: a warm and open atmosphere for conversation, opportunities to make strangers into friends. "I think a lot of our generation were affected post-Covid," Schofield says, solemnly. "It's hard to make friends as an adult, you really have to make an effort. I feel like [Post Credit Club] is something people crave, even if they aren't saying it."



CATHERINE WILCOX'S 'SCRIPTORIUM'

By Samuel Blackshaw
Design Nicola Cutts

They say everyone has at least one book in them. But with preference to punch prompts into large language models becoming favoured over hours of wrangling with Word documents, Catherine Wilcox is trying to fix that. The author and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University has been running Scriptorium – a welcoming space to help new (and seasoned) writers to put pen to page. We caught up with Catherine to learn more about the space for scriveners and what it means to make your writing “real”.

TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF AND WHAT SCRIPTORIUM IS.

Catherine Wilcox: I've taught on the Creative Writing BA and the MA programmes at Manchester Met for about 15 years. I'm also a novelist. In recent years, it seemed to me that it would be good to have a permanently running drop-in or mini writing retreat and that a lot of students and colleagues might really enjoy that. I think it works especially well for anyone who finds it difficult to be organised and disciplined and then beats themselves up because they're not actually getting the work done. It's a dedicated afternoon every Wednesday in Manchester Poetry Library, and on Teams as well.

HOW DO YOU THINK SCRIPTORIUM'S GROUP FORMAT HELPS WRITERS CREATE MORE DEVELOPED, AUTHENTIC STORIES?

It's through informal conversations. People can slightly crowdsource their ideas if they're stuck on something. People who attend are very happy to offer suggestions. I think it's mostly just that sense of being a community and that we're all in this together.



HOW IMPORTANT IS A REALISTIC CHARACTER TO THE QUALITY OF A GOOD STORY?

To me, it's hugely important. What really pleases me is when people are convinced I'm basing my characters on real people, because they think these people are so real that I must be kind of cheating. So that's satisfying. It's really important to me. In the books I've enjoyed most it's the characters that have held my attention. And even in heavily plot-driven genres like crime fiction, there's still an added layer of enjoyment if the characters are really plausible and authentic.

WHAT TECHNIQUES AND SKILLS DO YOU RECOMMEND FOR NEW WRITERS TRYING TO COME UP WITH MORE REALISTIC CHARACTERS?

People-watching is a great one. We talk about this in Scriptorium a lot. Some of the group write on the bus or the tram, or they sit in coffee shops observing the people around them and making notes. Sometimes, if you hear an interesting conversation in, say, the supermarket, you might push your trolley around trying to hear more of it. The other way is thinking about personal motives in your own life. You can reflect on them and they can potentially become the raw material for a new character.

HOW DO YOU THINK AI IS GOING TO AFFECT HOW WRITERS GO ABOUT MAKING CHARACTERS?

What AI won't be doing is creating characters. It won't be able to create my characters – the ones that arise out of a strange combination of my childhood, all the books I've ever read, all the people I've ever met, all the places I've been in, all my dreams, everything about me that is unique to me.



REAL

(NOT IMITATION. NOT ARTIFICIAL. NOT FALSE.)

By Jane Ashworth
Design Ayesha Shahab

Working out who you are not helps form who you are. Early on, I learnt I can't walk in high heels. My wide feet can't be stuffed into stilettos and if they are, it hurts. Living in Doc Martens and clumpy boots has become part of who I am. In the 1980s, I fantasised about being one of Robert Palmer's backing singers in the music video for 'Addicted to Love'. A little black dress, playing bass and wearing red lipstick in ridiculously high heels. Was this really what I wanted, or just an unformed version of me trying to fit in?

One of the ways I've consolidated the real me is through completing my Master's degree in Creative Writing. That led to writing a novel which required me to work out what the characters want and need. In turn, I began to re-analyse my own motivations and ambitions. In my story, *Ages of Woman*, Martha, the protagonist, is divorced with kids, the same as me. As her life as a wife and mother expanded, her dream of being an artist disappeared. She became stuck making stained glass panels for unimaginative clients. By winning a competition to design three windows for Manchester Town Hall's refurbishment, she gained confidence that spilled into other areas of her life. Martha is as proud of achieving artist status as I am of calling myself a writer. (If you write, you are a writer.)

Studying and achieving long-held ambitions in my fifties was immensely satisfying. Different from bringing up four children, I was finally seen as more than just a mum. The real me was a student again. I agree with Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, that “the only way for a woman, as for a man, to know herself as a person, is by creative

work of her own. There is no other way.” With the boost of success, both of us felt able to tackle difficult situations in our lives. Martha deals with unexpectedly falling in love with another woman. She works this out, expecting the worst from her friends and family, but no one really bats an eyelid. She must cut one person out of her life but that raises the question of whether their friendship was genuine in the first place. I also drew on my own experience of aging and change when describing Martha coming round to her role as a grandma (although I haven't reached that milestone yet).

Aging is a slow process, one that can go unnoticed on a daily basis. Loss of muscle tone and wrinkling feel imperceptible until you compare yourself to a photo from only five years ago. When I was a teenager, I'd refuse to go to school if I had a spot on my forehead. These days I dismiss the unreal expectations that are churned out for women. I am finally happy in my own skin. No one and nothing is perfect. Yes I get older everyday (who doesn't?) but I wouldn't have it any other way. No facelift, no botox, no fillers.

Jane Ashworth is a writer and MA Creative Writing graduate. Her debut novel, *Ages of Women*, was long-listed for the Mslexia Debut Novel Competition in 2023 and is currently seeking publication.



WHAT'S ON?

By Evie Atkins and Imogen Burgess
Design Adomas Lukas Petrauskas

HERE IS WHAT'S REALLY WORTH ATTENDING THIS SPRING TO SUMMER SEASON - FROM MUSIC GIGS TO CREATIVE FESTIVALS AND REAL LIFE EVENTS. WE'VE SHORTLISTED THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST FOR THIS SUMMER IN MANCHESTER.

APRIL

VINTAGE FOLK SALE
20/04/2026
@ The Union

Visiting multiple universities around the county, Vintage Folk are back in Manchester giving university students the best affordable second-hand clothing around the city. Located right on your doorstep, Vintage Folk will be set up in the Student Union's main hall from 10am to 5pm.

OLIVIA DEAN
25-26/04/2026
@ Co-op Live

It's so easy to fall in love with Olivia Dean! The obsession is far from over and after her triumph at the Grammys this February, the queen of romanticising your life is gracing the Co-op Arena to kick off the summertime.

CREPE CITY MANCHESTER
26/04/2026
@ Bowlers Exhibition Centre

Europe's leading sneaker exhibition returns to the city this April. With a variety of vendors and limited edition drops, streetwear-lovers' won't want to miss this. Opening its doors from 12:30pm, Crepe City tickets are starting from £14 for a day full of beats and sneaks.

MAY

OUTWARDS
02/05/2026
@ Progress

If you're into all things electronic then Outwards is for you. With an all-day party in the heart of Manchester and a multigenerational mantra, the festival celebrates break-through talent and creates a hub for fans to carry the culture into the future.

TAME IMPALA
08/05/2026
@ Co-op Live

Kevin Parker will be bringing his psychedelic, introspective performance to the Co-op Live for the release of his fifth studio album, *Deadbeat*. His ability to create an immersive experience for fans is why this is one of the most anticipated gigs of May in Manchester.

ENGLISH NATIONAL OPERA:
ANGEL'S BONE
12-16/05/2026
@ Aviva Studios

Pulitzer prize-winning opera *Angel's Bone* by Du Yun and Royce Vavrek is a cross-cultural masterpiece, fusing spoken word, musical numbers and immersive staging to tell a powerful story. Spoil yourself with this special UK premiere.

GOYLE, CHERT, MIRE BOOK LAUNCH WITH JEAN SPRACKLAND
28/05/2026
@ Manchester Poetry Library

Jean Sprackland celebrates the release of her latest collection, *Goyle, Chert, Mire*, at Manchester Poetry Library. She will be in conversation and sharing readings from the new work, making this a must-see event for poetry lovers in Manchester this May.

A LOVELY WEEKEND
29-31/05/2026
@ Fairfield Social Club

Expect plenty of laughs at this three-day comedy festival. *Last One Laughing* runner-up Sam Campbell and *SNL UK*'s Paddy Young bring their brand new show *FLOGGERZ*, alongside a line-up of standout acts from across the UK comedy scene.

JUNE

AFRO FASHION SHOW
06/06/2026
@ The Manchester Deansgate Hotel

Experience an unforgettable evening of style and creativity at the Afro Fashion Show. Discover breath-taking collections showcasing the latest trends in Afro-centric fashion. Perfect for fashion enthusiasts and creatives alike, the event also offers great opportunities to connect and network within the industry.

DEGREE SHOW 2026
06-19/06/2026
@ Manchester Metropolitan University

A highlight of the creative calendar, Manchester Metropolitan University's Degree Show returns with an exciting showcase of work from this year's graduating students. Spanning art, design, fashion, digital arts, performance, and architecture, the exhibition offers a first look at the next generation of talent.

JULY

MANCHESTER BRICK FESTIVAL
11/07/2026
@ Sugden Sports Centre

Perfect for any Lego enthusiasts, Manchester Met's very own Sugden Sports Centre is hosting the annual Brick Festival, a day filled with speed builds, new sets and innovation in the Lego world. Get your early bird tickets now to receive a free gift upon entry!

PARKLIFE FESTIVAL
20-21/06/2026
@ Heaton Park

A staple part of not only Manchester summers, but Manchester culture as a whole. Park Life returns for another year of music with arguably one of the best line ups of recent years. There's something for everyone, with buzzy artists like Josh Baker all the way to Zara Larsson in the star studded lineup.

KAYTRANADA
23/06/2026
@ Co-op Live

The two-time Grammy winning producer, Louis Kevin Celestin returns to Manchester's Co-op Live for the perfect summer's night. The R&B/Soul producer is undoubtedly going to have us all feeling electric on the dancefloor with his one night only show.

BUNKER TALK #168: TANZTHEATER ADRIAN LOOK
14/07/2026
@ The Salutation Pub (upstairs)

In this Bunker Talk, hosted by Manchester School of Theatre's Andrea Maciel, Adrian Look - director of Tanztheater London - will offer an in-depth reflection on his creative processes and artistic trajectory.

QUENTIN BLAKE AND ME
19/07/2026
@ Lowry

A vibrant family exhibition celebrating the work of one of the UK's most beloved illustrators, Quentin Blake. Showcasing his distinctive style and much-loved characters, *Quentin Blake and Me* offers a joyful and imaginative experience for all ages.

AUGUST

LIVE FROM WYTHENSHAW PARK
21-30/08/26
@ Wythenshawe Park

Live from Wythenshawe is back for another year! And for summer 2026, Pulp, The Cure, and Courteeners are just a few of the bands taking the stage this August with support ranging from Loyle Carner to The Vaccines. With a continuously growing crowd heading to the park each year, this is not one to miss.

MANCHESTER VILLAGE PRIDE
28-31/08/2026
@ Manchester City Centre

Pride returns this August Bank Holiday as a community-led celebration in the heart of the Gay Village. Manchester Village Pride 2026 features a community showcase, a main stage spotlighting the city's LGBTQ+ talent, and a Pride Party running throughout the Bank Holiday weekend.

SEPTEMBER

FRESHERS WEEK 2026
20-27/09/2026
@ Various

Freshers Week kicks off with two huge moving-in parties, taking over Ark, Popworld, and the O2 Ritz. Across the week, events span 11+ Manchester venues including Deaf Institute, Gorilla, and Factory. The Official Manchester Met Freshers 2026 wristband is exclusively available through The Union.

OTHELLO
29/09-10/10/2026
@ HOME

Support an independent cinema and watch a Shakespearean classic at HOME this September. This new production of *Othello* promises to defy expectations and not shy away from Shakespeare's original themes, which seem more relevant now than ever.

Scan for more events throughout the year so you never miss out



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