



TREND


# GENERATION SORT-OF: ARE WE LIVING IN THE AGE OF ISH?

You're basically sober except for the odd glass of wine, you've watched an episode and a half of the latest must-see show, and your Insta is peppered with #plasticfree despite not being quite there in practice. Lotte Jeffs equivocates on a very modern cultural phenomenon

Lotte Jeffs | Sunday May 26 2019, 12.01am, The Sunday Times



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“So, are you exclusive?” I asked a friend who has been dating the same guy for two months. “Ish,” she replied, with a slight shrug, meaning, she’s not sleeping with anyone else but she could if she felt like it, and so could he, maybe.

“Any dietary requirements?” I messaged the “Dinner at Mine” WhatsApp group in advance of planning a meal. “I’m vegan-ish,” came one response, meaning (I requested clarification) he orders oat milk lattes and is “mainly plant-based these days”, but if I was going to make a delicious cacio e pepe, he would happily eat it and wouldn’t need a cashew cheese version made in a separate pan.

“Are you watching Game of Thrones?” a man at a drinks party asked me. I said “Ish” because in the same way I’ve sort of read A Little Life, I’ve sort of watched a few episodes, listened to a podcast about it, and I know some characters’ names. I felt like I could just about hold a conversation on the subject, and to have answered “no” might have seemed standoffish.

Never has a three-letter suffix so well defined the zeitgeist. Because dabbling is the new committing, and being a bit of many things is better than being one thing entirely. We’re sober-ish, environmental-ish, Jew-ish, straight-ish — dipping our toes into behaviours and identities rather than jumping totally in.

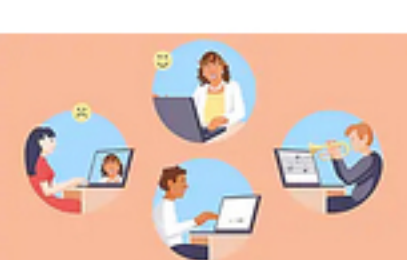
As a teenager in the 1990s, things were more black and white. You either liked Blur or Oasis, Neighbours or Home and Away. And once you picked a side, you were fervently loyal. Millennials today have more catholic tastes. According to my younger cousin: “It’s lame to like anything or anyone too much.” Instagram has replaced fan posters on teenagers’ bedroom walls, and instead of Blu-Tacking your three fave babes above your bed, you scroll through a palimpsest of celebrity, from rappers to royals, liking everyone and no one about equally.

My friend H was an ardent supporter of Jeremy Corbyn, until she realised she was losing friends and alienating people by having such a strong opinion. “When people talk about politics, they expect you’ll be like them, a bit exasperated by it all. I noticed I was making them uncomfortable by passionately believing in someone and not sharing their middle ground.” She’s still “backing Jeremy”, but has learnt to be more ish in the way she expresses herself so as not to offend. “I should have lived in Paris in the 1950s when having an opinion was sexy,” she says.

My colleague S calls herself “Jew-ish”. She was brought up an atheist, but her mum was born into a Jewish family. Although she celebrates Christmas, doesn’t go to a synagogue and isn’t kosher, she says being ish means she still values the cultural aspect of her extended family’s faith. “I have so much respect for what my ancestors went through, and with antisemitism being so prevalent right now, it feels important to hear their stories,” she says. “When I was younger, it wasn’t cool to be anything different — I just wanted to blend in. Now I’m more open to exploring this side of my history and to dip into Jewish traditions. For example, my aunt does Friday night dinner — we don’t do all the Shabbat customs, but we get together as a family once a week.”

Black-ish is a hugely popular US sitcom with spinoffs Grown-ish and the newly announced Mixed-ish, all exploring the intersections of belonging. Its creator, Kenya Barris, said of the original title: “It speaks towards the homogenised society we’re living in today.” The protagonist Dre Johnson, played by Anthony Anderson, is conscious of the differences between his own and his children’s experiences of being black. According to Barris, Johnson sees “a lot of the impact that black culture has had on what America is today, [how it] has spread beyond our particular race”. He sees Kim Kardashian as “black-ish”. “Culture in general has reached this sort of convergence, where it has all become this one thing, and we’ve all merged into this big homogenised pot where we’re [borrowing] from each other.”

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Indeed, young people are not keen on labels. A YouGov survey found that one in three doesn’t call themselves either gay or straight, instead falling somewhere in the “fluid” middle. If I was two decades younger, I might identify as vegan-ish and queer-ish rather than a boring old vegetarian lesbian. In fact, I can’t help feel a bit irritated by born-again non-meat eaters, as I’ve been vegetarian all my life and never strayed (apart from the one time I mistook a pork scratching for a pitta chip), particularly when most of my newly plant-based friends still eat meat, fish and dairy when they feel like it. But Daniel Vennard of the World Resources Institute says it’s better to be “vaugetarian” than nothing. “We know that by 2050 there are going to be 10bn people in the world and diets will have to change to meet environmental targets. Our research shows that what will make a difference is eating less meat, particularly less beef and lamb, not necessarily abstinence. Being ‘vegan- or vegetarian-ish’ is a realistic way of safeguarding the future of our planet.”

Likewise, being “sober-ish” is a way of safeguarding our health. Research shows that an extra glass of wine a day can shorten your life by 30 minutes. And with nogronis on the menu of the most fashionable restaurants, it has never been easier to practise mindful drinking and stay on the wagon most of the time. Identifying as “sober”, though, is a statement and a lot to live up to. Choosing to drink less, being teetotal-ish, means you can still have an ice-cold glass of rosé on a summer’s evening if you fancy it, without feeling you’re letting down your tribe or yourself. Meanwhile, sales of decaff coffee are on the rise, proving we are reluctant to admit to being prosaic tea drinkers and want to maintain the continental pretence of being a coffee drinker, dabbling in the idea of flat white rather than saying a flat no.

But there is much to be said for choosing to be something and sticking to it. Short attention spans coupled with the plethora of choice we have at our fingertips in this hyper-connected world makes commitment hard to come by — Exhibit A: marriage rates for opposite sex couples are on the decline. And Brexit is the ultimate example of what happens when being ish rather than definitive prevents progress. We’re Leaving-ish ... or are we?

Like most of us, I’m environmental-ish, meaning I care about climate change, recycle and even posted an Insta Story of some Extinction Rebellion activists dancing on Waterloo Bridge, but as guilty-ish as I feel about it, I like my holidays too much to stop flying.


We might now be so “woke” that we have rejected the binary limitations of labels, but I’m more inclined to think we have reached Peak Me and forgotten the benefits of identifying with a community — something bigger than ourselves — and loudly and proudly declaring our allegiance. The 16-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg has a clarity of vision and commitment you rarely see these days. As she leads a movement that might actually effect some real change, perhaps Thunberg will herald a return to passionately believing in something and staying the course. It’s time to put a stake in the ground and figure out what we stand for again. The age of ish will soon be over. I’m certain(ish).

*How to Be a Gentlewoman: The Art of Soft Power in Hard Times* by Lotte Jeffs will be released on September 5 and is available for pre-order now, £15; [waterstones.com](https://www.waterstones.com)



**WHERE ARE YOU ON THE SCALE OF ISH?**

**COMMITTED**  
“This is the hill I will die on and I won’t be deterred from my devotion.”



**INTO IT**  
“I will argue about this with you on Twitter and IRL. If I’ve had two glasses of wine or more.”




**INTERESTED**  
“If I wasn’t so busy being me, I’d love to be more involved.”



**ISH**  
Less “been there, done that, bought the T-shirt”, more “did a reccce on Google Earth, considered doing it and borrowed the T-shirt”.




**ANTI IT**  
“No way, uh-uh, not on my watch, mister (but open to persuasion).”



**ACTIVELY AGAINST**  
“Would rather Céline Dion poked my eyes out with the pointy end of her Met Gala feathers than concede.”

Jeremy Corbyn

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