

HEART LAND

**Giving voice to Britain's
middle class**

WTF IS GOING ON?
by SAATCHI & SAATCHI

**EVERY YEAR IS GETTING SHORTER,
NEVER SEEM TO FIND THE TIME
PLANS THAT EITHER COME TO NAUGHT,
OR HALF A PAGE OF SCRIBBLED LINES
HANGING ON IN QUIET DESPERATION
IS THE ENGLISH WAY
THE TIME IS GONE, THE SONG IS OVER,
THOUGHT I'D SOMETHING MORE TO SAY**

PINK FLOYD

Time

FOREWORD

What the fuck is what
the fuck?

Our journey

Our expert witnesses

INTRODUCTION

A label without a home

PART ONE HOW BIG IS THE MIDDLE

Who are the middle class?

How they earn and how much they earn

A new definition of the middle class

Why you should care about
the middle class?

PART TWO WELCOME TO THE HEARTLAND

1. Grafters to their very core
 2. Aspiration is their superpower
 3. Resilience built in
 4. Contentment is King
 5. Love is all you need
- A glass half full and
half empty

PART THREE THE HEARTLAND IS UNDER ATTACK

1. Work is not enough
2. University Challenged
3. Up to their necks in other people's debt
4. Bitten by the hand that feeds them
5. Why try harder?
6. Whatever happened to society?
7. Money follows the love
8. Hanging on in quiet desperation

PART FOUR BACKING YOUR HEARTLAND

1. Respect your heartland
2. Reinforce their resilience
3. Be their passion
4. Family first, last, and always
5. Make brands aspirational again

SEE WHAT OTHERS CANNOT SEE

THANK YOU

FOREWORD

What the fuck is what the fuck?

In 2023 we published a ground-breaking enquiry into the state of our Nation called *What the fuck is going on?* It attempted to go beyond the vast data sets that show the challenges the UK faced to understand how people were really feeling. It wasn't a pretty read, as it unfolded story after story about people in every part of the UK that were 'worried, tired, and desperate for hope'.

We based our conclusions on Saatchi & Saatchi research that combined ethnography, expert voices, and a nationally

representative quantitative study through polling firm YouGov. This hybrid approach delivered both intimacy and rigour. But it also brought a big dose of reality back into the marketing world.

Last year we showed that those with little money are in real pain. With finances cut to the bone by years of austerity they have no more they can sacrifice. They are one bad decision – whether theirs or someone else's – away from disaster.

But what of those that have a little more? A little more financial resilience. How are they faring and how do they feel? If the poor are in pain and the rich are running the country, what about the people in

the middle? That's what the 2024 edition of *What the fuck is going on?* aims to find out, what is happening of the middle class?

Our journey

The backbone of this study rests on conversations with people and their families that took place in spring 2024. These conversations are limited in number – we spoke to eleven middle-class people and their families – so it's important to understand that this is not a significant sample in a statistical sense. On the other hand, every conversation was real and fully representative of those peoples' own lives, their experiences, and their stories. In a marketing world that is so removed from reality, our conversations are real and raw.

These conversations come from all four Home Nations. While people in Scotland and England are often part of qualitative research samples, those in Wales feature less often. And Northern Ireland is rarely reached with conventional research.

Our journey took us from Leith to rural Sunderland. And then to Antrim, Harrogate, Huddersfield, Alderley Edge, Dudley, Dolau in mid Wales, Hitchin, Arnos Grove

in London and finally St Ives in Cornwall. In total the two editions of *What the fuck is going on?* have told stories from twenty-five people and places across the UK.

We always meet people in their homes, spending half a day with them. This allows us to build a rapport and dig a little deeper into their lives, attitudes and behaviour. And to meet their families and witness their relationships, to see their homes and the way they live.

In addition to the conversations with the middle class, we also talked to a hand-picked group of expert witnesses. These are people able to provide a more holistic perspective in the lives of middle-class people, from those observing and serving them.

For the purpose of this study, we also surveyed a sample of 2,000 people earning £30,000-£125,000 annually, and therefore paying tax at the basic or higher rate.

Foreword

Right now, we suspect you have a million questions running through your mind, so let's get stuck in.

Our expert witnesses

OTEGHA UWAGBA

Otegha is an author and cultural journalist. Her books include *We Need to Talk about Money* – part memoir and part cultural commentary. In 2021 *The Sunday Times* voted her one of the young writers who are changing the literary world.

NICK FERRARI

Nick is most famous for his breakfast show on LBC and has been a regular contributor to *What the Fuck is going on?* As someone that hears the voices and opinions of hundreds of listeners every week, he is an invaluable conduit to public opinion.

HARRY WALLOP

Harry is an award-winning journalist and TV presenter most noted for his work for *Dispatches* on Channel 4. His work focuses on consumerism and he is the author of *Consumed: How We Buy Class in Modern Britain*.

HENRY DIMBLEBY MBE

Henry is the co-founder of Leon and the author of *Ravenous – A Manifesto for Revolutionising Our Food System*. He is the author of the *National Food Strategy* and the founder of Bramble Partners – an investment firm dedicated to funding companies working to improve the global food system.

JOELI BREARLEY

Joeli is the founder of Pregnant Then Screwed offering support to pregnant women and mothers in the workplace and campaigns on issues like parental rights and childcare provision. No one knows more about the financial pressures of having children and the long-term impact on outcomes for women and children than Joeli.

“

University's good if you want to be a doctor or a nurse. I think apprenticeships are much better if it's going to give you an income and you're getting the qualification at the end of it, you're not getting loads of debt in the meantime.

”

STACY, *Hetton-le-Hole*

INTRODUCTION

We rarely see or talk about the middle class. As marketers we are sometimes a bit embarrassed by this group and embarrassed to serve this group. We perceive them to be mediocre, middle of the road and meh, and fear that this will rub off on our brands. But it's not just us, there is a wider cultural cringe about this group. But it's not just us, there is a wider cultural cringe about this group. But it's not just us, there is a wider cultural cringe about this group. To be working class evokes a sense of pride, and the upper class – distant as they are – evoke fascination. Those in the middle are just that – simply the people in the middle. Too well off to deserve our empathy but not rich enough to live a life free from worry.

More than that, the middle class are objects of fun and ridicule. Their concerns are seen as trivial, and their anxieties marked as self-indulgent. We label their challenges #middleclassproblems or #firstworldproblems – we laugh at them rather than respect them. And if society as a whole finds it hard to

empathise with the middle class, they do as well. They are more than aware that, while their lives are getting tougher and tougher, they can't really complain. This is partly the natural stoicism and resilience of the middle class but also because they feel acutely that others are much less well-off than they are.

Yet this is also a group heading for disaster. The middle is suffering as badly as anyone when it comes to declining living standards, it's just that for many these were higher in the first place. In the words of the economist Gary Stevenson: 'The middle class are being hollowed out by a combination of inflation, declining household income, higher interest rates and record levels of taxation.'

The Government knows that it must support those at the poorest end of society – however inadequately – and it will always take care of the richest. But those in the middle are seen as fair game because they have a little more than others and so can be squeezed relentlessly.

We are worried about the middle class, not because of a sense of injustice but because every single business in the UK depends upon this group. They have sufficient money to spend on discretionary as well as essential purchases and to pay a premium for both. And they are numerous enough to deliver significant volume. You can joke about the middle class if you like but they are the heartland of your business, the heartland of your growth and the heartland of the economy. If the middle class fails, our businesses will fail, our economy will fail, and our country will fail.

“The middle class are being hollowed out”
GARY STEVENSON

It's time to take the middle class seriously. And that is what we have done in this study. We have listened to their concerns, their aspirations, their experience of life today and in the past. We have been into their homes, seen their lives and seen their way of life. And we have spent time with people that get the middle class, who study them or serve them.

In Part One we will establish the context of the study. Looking at who the middle class are and creating a new definition. We will quantify this group and then break down its composition as well as explaining why you should care about them.

In Part Two we will establish the five enduring virtues of the middle class – the things that such a huge swathe of society has in common with each other and that make them different to the rest of society.

In Part Three we will unpack how these themes are coming under pressure and changing in seven fundamental ways. This will take you to the heart of contemporary middle-class life and the challenges they face.

And in Part Four we will explore five imperatives for marketers who want to understand, care for, and serve the middle class better.

All in all, the intent of this book is to help you love and respect the middle class, because that is the first job of any marketer in any business, serving any community.

But first a few words about the words 'middle' and 'class'.

A label without a home

We have wrestled endlessly about the term ‘middle class’. In part because our contributors wrestle with it too. Often, they reluctantly conclude that they must be middle class because they are not working class, (or they are no longer working class) and they are clearly not upper class.

They see the upper class as the traditionally rich or those rich because of significant wealth acquisition (like Hedge Fund managers or entrepreneurs). This group is utterly remote from the middle class, and they appear to have no interest in joining their ranks. They are equally clear about people that are working class, in part because of their familiarity with this group. Many were originally working class or have parents that were.

So, are the middle class simply those people that are left over when you remove the very rich and those that live a more day-to-day existence? Is there really such a thing as middle class at all? Or are there so many subdivisions of this large group that lumping the middle together makes little sense? All of these are valid and ongoing questions.

Our research has revealed that there are enough similarities in experience and values to unify the middle and make understanding them as such incredibly powerful for marketers and their businesses. After all, when we asked people through our anonymous quantitative research if they felt proud to be middle class, 60% agreed.

We could have created or used a different name for the middle class – like middle life, centre ground or the middle middle – but it seems pointless to add yet another tricky term to marketer’s vocabulary. So, we have stuck with middle class because we all get it. Much like Diet Coke (which is not for people on diets), middle class is not an ideal term but it’s useful and universally understood.

So, throughout we use the term middle class, but we like to think of this group as the UK’s heartland and you are about to find out why.

**WE TURN THE SPEAKERS UP ‘TIL THEY BREAK
‘CAUSE EVERY TIME YOU SMILE IT’S A FAKE
STOP PRETENDING, YOU’VE GOT
EVERYTHING NOW!**

ARCADE FIRE

Everything Now

HOW BIG IS THE MIDDLE?

Who are the middle class?

The British class system is a curious beast. It seems utterly bizarre to those not brought up in it. But it's also impossible to explain for those that live and breathe it every day. Our class system represents a set of codes and conventions that separate people into identity groups – people that feel more and less comfortable with each other.

This is an extremely anachronistic view of society with its substrata like skilled working class, upper middle class, new money rich and old money rich. Yet it's curiously persistent. Not an election goes by without scores of politicians parading their working-class

credentials. Whether they seek to align themselves with this group or prove how far they have come from it. And the upper class are endlessly fascinating. *The Crown* is not a just a global hit, it's a firm favourite for Brits. And we reserve a little old-school deference for those whose family photos still adorn the grand piano even though their stately homes are now open to the public.

This approach to class doesn't much interest us. We want to find a new definition of middle class that doesn't rely on opaque codes and values and that is closer to the American idea of a group of people

that are financially in the middle. People that are numerous, unlike the rich, and have a degree of financial security and comfort that eludes the poorer and traditionally working class.

Defining this group financially – on how they earn and how much they earn – provides a more useful lens for businesses. This is because they have a reasonable income and there are a lot of them. After all, while people must desire your brand, they also need to have the money to buy it. The middle class can afford the products and services of an economy, they can

make choices between those products and services depending on perceived or actual value, and they contribute to the economy through taxation.

And this approach chimes with how society increasingly thinks about class. When asked what people think is the 'marker of being middle class', income is the primary indicator and profession – the traditional measure of class – has dropped to fourth position. Less than half those self-identifying as middle class are now in traditional middle class jobs.

How they earn and how much they earn

The middle class work for their living and pay income tax at source on all or a vast majority of their income. They are not dependent on unearned income and while they may have some investments and may enjoy some capital gains at points in their lives, these act as modest top-ups to income and wealth derived from their own graft.

So, if you graft but you don't pay tax or the basic tax rate is only applied to half of your income

because your earnings are low, you are by our definition, working class. And if you pay tax but you aren't earning a significant part of of your income and therefore the tax you pay is on your capital gains, then you are upper class. It's a little simplistic but it's a pretty good ready reckoner for where people sit, the lives they lead and attitudes they hold.

Tax is important because it's upon the middle class that the greatest proportion of taxation falls – a tax burden that is at its highest rate

Part One – How big is the middle?

since 1948. Indeed, the top 50% of UK earners – that roughly correlate with the middle class contribute nearly 80% of all tax-revenue.

In the UK, taxation is nominally progressive, with the rate increasing with earnings. In England and Wales (Scotland and Northern Ireland have slightly different income tax bands) the first £12,500 of income you earn is tax free. Then you are taxed at 20% on all income between £12,500 and £50,000 (the basic rate), 40% on all income above £50,000 (the higher rate) and 45% on all income beyond £125,000 (the additional rate).

But here is the catch, the tax-free proportion of middle-class income disappears progressively between £100,000 and £125,000 so by the

end the effective tax rate is not 40% but 60%. To add insult to injury, despite a period of rampant inflation that has left prices 20% higher in 2024 than in 2020, the tax brackets haven't been revised. So many people receiving pay rises to combat inflation are being thrown into a higher tax bracket, though in real terms they are no more well off than they were – often less so.

However, this is only the case for earned income because unearned income is taxed differently. If your income is unearned, beyond the first £3,000 it is taxed at between 20% and 24%. So, the wealthier you are the less tax you pay as a proportion of your income. To be blunt the UK tax system is rigged against the middle class who are being hollowed out to the benefit of the very rich.

A new definition of the middle class

For this study we are defining the middle class as those people that pay as they earn tax at the basic, higher, and additional rates. Where, at the lower end they are paying the basic rate of tax on at least half of their income and at the upper end they are paying income tax on at least 75% of their income. That

upper limit is hard to quantify so we have used an arbitrary cut-off of £200,000. There are plenty of middle-class people earning more than this but as a proportion of the overall population the figure is tiny. This definition also excludes those that are economically unproductive at present but who might have

been middle class, like retirees or who will be, like students.

Rather neatly this coincides with the median UK income of £29,000, with half the population earning less than this – the working class, economically fallow and those in absolute poverty. And 49% earning between £29,000 and £214,000. The final 1% earn more than £214,000 which is what drags up the mean income in the UK to nearer £40,000.

Even though there are middle-class earners in the top 1%, the group do start to look very different. Only 65% of their income is earned and their wealth per capita is £3.6m. This 1% is the upper class.

By our definition the group of people we are looking at and are concerned about represent 49% of the UK adult population, some 16 million people in total (based on an adult working population of 33 million). That's quite a sizeable market to look to for growth.

Why you should care about the middle class?

The middle class make the economy work, they make markets work and they make brands work – it's as simple as that.

In their book *The Gardens of Democracy*, which popularised the idea of middle-out economics embraced by Biden early in his Presidency, Eric Liu and Nick Hanauer declare that a thriving middle class is not the result of a thriving economy; they are a prerequisite for it. Throughout history, economies that lack a prosperous middle class have

seen poor levels of growth and development because societies that consist of only rich and poor lack the engine of earning and spending a healthy economy needs.

This is why wealth inequality is not purely a moral issue, it is economically toxic. A healthy economy requires money to be recycled through the system and put to good use rather than being hoarded by the rich. The middle class are very good at using money for the benefit of the whole economy.

Part One – How big is the middle?

But no one needs a grasp of macroeconomics to understand that all of us in business depend upon a numerous body of people with a little surplus income that can support the price premiums that keep our margins healthy and our businesses profitable. They are the middle class and they are your heartland.

“

**I'm always
pestering the boys
to both be looking
for work. That they'll
need some of
their own money.
Not just because
I think there'll be a
struggle financing
them. I think that's
also something that
they need in
terms of their own
independence.**

”
NIGEL, *Dudley*

WELCOME TO THE HEARTLAND

**EVERYONE AROUND,
LOVE THEM, LOVE THEM
PUT IT IN YOUR HANDS,
TAKE IT, TAKE IT
THERE'S NO TIME TO CRY,
HAPPY, HAPPY
PUT IT IN YOUR HEART WHERE
TOMORROW SHINES**

R.E.M.

Shiny Happy People

Here we explore the defining characteristics of the middle class. Five virtues that are not only shared

by the group, but mark them apart from those that are upper or working class.

1. Grafters to their very core

The middle class work, and they work hard – they are grafters. Indeed, a belief in hard work is so totemic it borders on a religion for our contributors. Work is how they earn money, since this group simply do not have the private or passive incomes of the rich. And they also access few state benefits – income in lieu of work. At most, benefits are seen as a helpful top-up for their earnings, like Child Benefit that they can access until they earn £80,000. But benefits are never seen as an alternative to work.

There are implications of this primal relationship with work. For one thing they want to instil this work ethic into their children. In fact, the more well-off they are, the more they believe in educating their children to work, fearful that their wealth will have made life 'too easy' for their kids or create the culture of entitlement they hate in the upper class. Work of some form is often a condition of other freedoms and support for older kids.

Nigel in Dudley is particularly aware of this: 'Because of my work

ethic, I think [my sons] haven't necessarily had the need to go and get themselves a job to pay for things that they wanted. Because they have had that given to them. So, I think I've done them a disservice in that way... I'm always pestering them to both be looking for work. That they'll need some of their own money. Not just because I think there'll be a struggle financing them. I think that's also something that they need in terms of their own independence.'

And it leads to a nuanced relationship with those less well-off. They work and they believe that others should work – that working is a moral obligation to society. So, they can be hard and harsh on those that they see as gaming the system or who are 'work shy'. But they are also painfully aware of the perilous situation many people are in. That some lose their jobs because of external forces they cannot control. That others lose their homes for very much the same reason. And the middle class know that they are only a few wrong decisions or

Part Two – Welcome to the heartland

unlucky events away from being in the same position themselves.

As a result, our group have a finely balanced concept of need and greed. They are endlessly generous in word and deed for those seen to be genuinely in need but very critical of those thought to be greedy.

“

We should be looking after people and caring about them

”

CAROLE, Harrogate

This is Lindsey in Dolau: ‘It’s hard on people that are in poverty and a lot of people can’t help where they are... but there’s a few people that just put themselves in that situation’. Stacey in Hetton-le-Hole in the Northeast is a housing manager and so experiences first-hand people in crisis, people in need and people on the take. ‘I don’t mind the genuine people who claim the benefits, but the ones that choose not to work and get everything given to them, it infuriates me. When I do go out to

work, technically, I’m paying for them to live that life.’

The small boats crisis was an inevitable topic of conversation this spring. This is seen as both need and greed for our group. They see refugees as people that are in real need – escaping poverty and persecution at huge personal cost, but also fear that many are also greedy in wanting something from the UK they aren’t seen as having a right to. This is Andrew from St Ives, clearly conflicted about his own opinion. ‘I struggle... when you see the boats coming across the channel that aren’t full of women and children. I struggle when you hear reports, truth or otherwise, that they throw their passports and paperwork out before they are rescued... I would suggest, and I don’t know, I would suggest they are not victims, but more economic migrants.’

Yet Carole in Harrogate says: ‘We should be looking after people and caring about them... it’s all about ‘get rid of the foreigners and the asylum seekers.’ I mean, it’s just the totally wrong values and that’s what they’ve been pushing. And unfortunately, a lot of people have just been brainwashed.’ Few politicians appear to understand the subtlety of these opinions, guided as they are by ideas of fairness not cultural conflict.

Nigel lives with his partner in her Shared Ownership house in Dudley. His passion is motorcycles, and his Harley Davidson is at the forefront of his life, but is parked in his sister’s garage around the corner as he doesn’t have the space for it.



He has two teenage sons from a previous relationship who are starting university over the next couple of years. Where they study is a key issue as he wants them to grow as people and have some independence, but doesn’t want them to be so far away that it’s too expensive or inconvenient to see them often.

He works with the NHS and even though he’s earning more than he has previously, he still uses an ‘emergency’ credit card and Klarna regularly – especially for his Harley.

NIGEL PASS, Dudley

Lindsey lives in the family homestead in Dolau, after relocating there 8 years ago.



Her and her family moved there as they wanted more space, and the land was more important than the house when they were looking.

She's part of a small, tight-knit rural community who regularly trade and swap their goods amongst each other. When we visited, she was distributing hen and duck eggs, and she had a freshly slaughtered pig in the freezer.

Her husband is a haulier and she spends her time running that business and tending to her alpacas and donkeys. She also spends time entering lots of competitions – up to 40 a day – and has won many prizes as a result from trips to Australia to coffee machines to alpaca feed.

LINDSEY GRIFFITH, *Dolau, Wales*

Stacy and Peter live in the ex-mining town of Hetton-le-Hole, south of Sunderland.



Stacy works in social housing, Peter in construction. They have a teenage son who is due to start an apprenticeship soon.

Whilst Stacy admits she has 'rose-tinted glasses' when it comes to difficult subjects like politics, Peter has a clear view on what he thinks needs to change in the UK.

They enjoy their holidays – with Dubai being a favourite destination – and say that one of them losing their jobs is one of their biggest worries over the next five years. Whilst they'd have to make changes, they do say they'd manage if it happened.

STACY & PETER HARMAN, *Hetton-le-Hole*

The middle class have a complicated relationship with work. Financially they must work to live, and yet

deep-down work is also a way of life for them, in which graft has an almost religious significance.

2. Aspiration is their superpower

The middle class exists because of an aspiration to live a better life – a good life. They are a group of people that believe that their station in life is not preordained, and that they can improve their lives through their own hard work. This is because they feel they have a degree of agency in the world and that change is possible and desirable. After all, if they don't like where they live, they move. If they don't enjoy their job, they get another one. If their child isn't faring well in school, they change it. They see the world around them as fluid and responsive to their needs and desires and so they are not prisoners or victims of circumstance.

Sarah in Alderley Edge demonstrates this freedom when she talks about moving to Florida. 'I woke up one morning and it was probably this time, around March, April, and some cheerful bastard on the radio was like, 'Oh, spring has sprung'. And I looked out the window and it's pouring with rain. And I thought, do you know what? And I

put on Facebook as a joke: 'That's it. We're done. We're moving to Florida.' And it really was a joke. And I had friends in Florida who messaged me and said, 'I don't know if you're joking or not, but our friends are selling a hair salon'. And I thought, 'Do you know what? Look, that doesn't need to be a joke'. Anyway, that was in the April and by the July we were living there.'

“

**That's it.
We're done.
We're
moving to
Florida.**

”

SARAH, *Alderley Edge*

They always have the potential to better their position, it's their choice. Banks will lend to them, their skills are transferable, they can move abroad to work relatively

easily, and promotions are open to them. In many ways the supreme privilege of the middle class is this basic belief that the world is a hospitable and positive place.

Education has an instrumental role in the aspiration of the middle class. Historically, secondary education was their route to betterment, particularly after the Education Act of 1944, the expansion of comprehensive schools in the late 1960s and the switch to one secondary qualification in 1988 – the GCSE. All these decisions created a more seamless path to progress for the middle class. While private education, if rarely attained for their own children, remains highly aspirational.

But the game changer has always been tertiary education and the almost mythological position of university for the middle class. The post-war period saw two significant jumps in university participation

amongst the middle and working classes, previously only open to a tiny minority. First the expansion of the new universities in the 1960s and secondly the conversion of former polytechnics into universities in 1992. Like an educational Dr Suess machine, universities take our children, regardless of background, and forge middle-class citizens out of them.

Aspiration is the blood brother of graft; it creates the ever-moving goals that graft then reaches. Whether those goals are in career, family, home ownership or material wealth. And the benefit of this partnership is felt far beyond the families that are the immediate beneficiaries in the productivity of the economy, achievements of culture and progress of society. We all benefit from middle-class aspiration.

The middle class see progress as a meaningful reality.

3. Resilience built in

We spoke to Matt in Otley for the first edition of *What the Fuck is going on?*. He is not middle class, indeed he leads a typical working-class life and so while Matt's life is good to him, it is also incredibly precarious. Matt and

his family are not on the breadline, but he is living day to day. He told us that if he lost his job 'today', he wouldn't know how to put food on the table tomorrow. For the working class the slightest disruption to their lives can cause

Andrew was born in London in the early 1960s, and moved to Cornwall in 1972. He



lives with his wife and his dog in a quiet street a few minutes drive from the coast.

He was in the Armed Forces for 22 years and travelled to Kosovo,

Bosnia and Northern Ireland, but not Iraq.

He's happy he wasn't posted to Iraq.

He entered civvy street which was a shock to him at first, and eventually found his feet working in the education sector – a role he first aimed for before joining the Armed Forces.

He's financially savvy, thoughtful and balanced with his thinking, and a gamer.

He's recently turned his hot tub off at the mains due to rising energy prices.

ANDREW DUNN, *St Ives*

Sarah lives in the Alderley Edge area of Manchester with her husband and two



daughters. James, their son, lives there during university holidays as he comes home to work.

Their home is adorned with works of art, and the interior decoration is

on point – a passion of Sarah's. Sarah works from home – her hair salon is in the garden

and their daughters attend a local Jewish school. They're worried about their daughters walking home given what's going on in Gaza.

This year is a 'fuck it year' for the Rivkin family, as they recently lost some family in Israel to a terrorist attack. That has encouraged them to live a little and they're going on a trip to L.A. and Vegas to honour the memories of the family they lost.

SARAH & JAMES RIVKIN, *Alderley Edge*

disaster. That is not the case for the middle class.

Middle-class Britain is far more resilient, and this resilience is a defining virtue of the group. Indeed, to be middle class is to be resilient in the face of disruption and misfortune. Much of this is simply because there is a bit more money in their lives and money gets them out of scrapes and difficulties. It gives them modest amounts of savings, perhaps in an ISA. It means that they can insure their property, their pets,

their health and potentially their life. It gives them access to credit and debt. These relatively small provisions have a transformative effect on their confidence, sense of certainty and psychological state. It breeds a sense of being 'able to manage if the worst happens', even though this might mean cutting back, eating into savings or taking out a loan.

The middle class have both resources and resourcefulness and the resilience that comes with this.

4. Contentment is King

It sounds like such a passive word but to investigate the lives of the middle class is to see people that are content and who are broadly happy with their lives. These are lives of material comfort but also satisfaction in other ways: in their ability to master life, protect their family and feel a sense of purpose and worth. The middle class really like their lives; things could be a little better but overall, they are pretty good. Indeed, they are 20% more likely than the UK population to say that they are happy with their standard of living.

For some, the proximity of a more hand-to-mouth existence breeds contentment. Natasha in Hitchin talks about volunteering in a local homeless shelter with a mixture of concern and fear. 'At Christmas time I went down to the homeless shelter because I thought I would rather fill my time doing something worthwhile... it was horrible... I've been very close to that situation myself in the past...

Contentment is in tension with aspiration – aspiration being an accelerator of achievement and contentment being a break. But this misinterprets the nature of

“

**It's always
at the back of
my mind that
you're really only
one decision
away from that.**

”

NATASHA, Hitchin

*talking about her
volunteering work in a
local homeless shelter*

Part Two – Welcome to the heartland

middle class aspiration which is moderate and modest. Few show an interest in leading the lives or having the wealth of the upper class, believing the sacrifices they would have to make are unpalatable and the entry criteria unattainable. So, when we talk about aspiration it's far more about being able to have a 'trip of a lifetime' holiday this year, lease an EV to replace their petrol car, invest in their passion or retire sooner – maybe at a push send their kids to private school.

As a result, their aspirations are attainable. There are no 'moonshots' or 'big hairy goals'. And that breeds a culture of contentment. Perhaps the biggest dream is running their own business and escaping the confines of corporate life. Even here we are not talking about creating unicorns or the world of Series A funding. We are talking about simply being your own boss.

It's easy to scoff at middle-class contentment but it's a wonderful thing, because the middle class are fundamentally satisfied. As Asad in Huddersfield says, 'When I came back from visiting Pakistan, I said it's a blessing that we've got a roof over our head...'

Asad reflected on being able to afford treats for his family, including a Nintendo Switch for his niece, 'we're all stuck for money but when I'm giving, this is what makes me feel like a millionaire.'

“

When I'm giving, this is what makes me feel like a millionaire.

”

ASAD, Huddersfield

We'll leave this section with the words of Karl from Antrim. 'I have a great job that provides very well for me. That's very well paid. But somebody once said to me, It always stuck with me too, 'Don't aim for happiness in life, aim for contentment'. And I am very content. Very content.'

“

Don't aim for happiness in life, aim for contentment.

”

KARL, Antrim

Natasha, who works in sales, is a single mum of two young girls living in Hitchin.



Her daughters are her life, and she works hard to provide everything she can to give them a good life. This means a 'constant battle' of enjoying life now versus planning

for the future – something she grapples with every day.

She's a keen planner, and by her own admission would plan every day for the next two years if she could. Her and her daughters love to travel to spend quality time together – with Mallorca being a favourite destination.

At the moment she's living a 'rental life' – enjoying life now but she knows she's not building much of an inheritance for them. She says she'll be eating lots of baked beans when she retires. She likes baked beans.

NATASHA WOODMAN, *Hitchin*

Asad lives in a quiet cul-de-sac in Huddersfield with his wife and son.



They've lived there for about 10 years, and recently thought about moving. When the neighbours found out, their reaction persuaded him to stay. He's a very giving

person, and treats his elderly neighbours as his own family.

His views are shaped by his faith – he's a Muslim – and from visiting his family in Pakistan. Seeing how people live there delivers a sense of perspective on his life and his family's life at home in Huddersfield. That makes him feel incredibly blessed.

He enjoys going to the gym, and spending time with his wife and son – cycling, playing football and going to the cinema.

ASAD NASIR, *Huddersfield*

5. Love is all you need

It is a mistake to think of the middle class as in some way less focused on family and community than those in the working class. Family is central to the identity and concerns of the middle class. After all, aspiration and progress have always been about improving the standing and standards of the whole family and not simply about personal ambition. And community matters enormously to the middle class, partly because they depend on their relationship with the world around them. They need the NHS, as do their parents and children, they need state education, they need public services and depending on their location, they need public transport.

The upper class can absent themselves from the systems around us all, especially public services, and education. That is not the case for the middle class. They are in it together, alongside the rest of us. To contradict Margaret Thatcher, who famously said ‘there is no such thing as society,’ for the middle class, society is a vital and everpresent reality.

Family is still the support group of first recourse, family always comes first. Neighbours, even if you don’t know them well frame your daily experience of living, community

and geography and are still a source of support, experience, pride, and identity. People and place matter to the middle class.

Asad said to us about the importance of community to him: ‘I’m a community person. So, all these people that live around on this cul-de-sac, they’re all in their 80s. They’re retired. And you know, hand on heart, I treat them like my own grandparents.’ He goes further ‘I was thinking about moving. And my neighbours said to me, ‘if you go, who’s going to look after us?’ It made me upset. They’re like a family to me. So, I backed off moving.’

The middle class may be more mobile than the working class because their income, horizons, aspirations, and employment mean they can live more fluid lives around the country and across the world. But they still live in the world and not above it as the upper class are able to do. If they move it’s for a period of years not for the summer. This is different to the lives of global fluidity that the upper class enjoys.

Family and community are central to middle class existence and the reason to strive for something better in life.

Karl lives in his self-described ‘bachelor pad’ – a small apartment in Antrim. The walls of his flat are adorned with two things: sporting memorabilia (which is one of his passions) and photos of his mum, who he lost when he was a young boy.



He’s worked in roughly the same role in rehabilitation for about 15 years, and would only be tempted to move ‘up’ if he met a partner and needed the money. He is extremely content with his life at the minute – he isn’t rich but has money for the things he wants and counts himself lucky. He exercises several times a week, is into his coffee and enjoys an occasional flutter.

KARL SCOTT, *Antrim*

A glass half full and half empty

Inevitably the middle class is a hugely diverse group of people, grouped in our case by their economic importance. But there is common ground when you have some money, but you are still striving to fund the lifestyle you enjoy rather than living off surplus wealth. And there is common ground when you have forged that life for yourself rather than having been gifted it.

The virtues that bond the middle class together regardless of differences, are deep and eternal. Virtues of grafting, where work has a religious and moral dimension. Of aspiration that acts as an internal gyroscope, constantly whirring and whizzing to keep them focused. Of resilience that protects them from the inevitable shocks and crises, whether of their own making or from outside. Of contentment that frames their quality of life and love that connects them to the world around them, the world that they are dependent on and contribute to.

It is this suite of virtues that should help marketers love and respect the middle class. To stop them being the butt of our jokes and start the journey towards recognising how

vitaly important they are to our businesses and our economy and towards serving them better.

For all their resilience, the middle class have not been immune to the experiences of the last 16 years – the period since the global banking crisis.

While the virtues that we have described are eternal, the result of these body blows, has been to pick them apart, to corrode some of the graft, aspiration, resilience, contentment, and love. And that is worrying because the erosion of middle class life will have profound impacts on our culture, society, politics, and economics. And for every business that depends upon them.

And that's what we will unpack in the next section – how the middle class are changing and the problems this presents for all of us.

**IT'S TIME TO RELAX
NOW YOU'VE WORKED YOUR ARSE OFF
BUT THE ONLY ONE SMILING
IS THE SUN-TANNED BOSS
WORK AND WORK AND WORK AND WORK
'TIL YOU DIE
THERE'S PLENTY MORE FISH IN THE SEA TO FRY**

THE JAM

Smithers-Jones

'I don't have somebody else's income to rely it's just mine. I do try to make it stretch, I have a pension but it's not looking great.' – **NATASHA** senses her precariousness



The Vinted rack in **SARAH'S** basement is helping teach her daughter the value of money.



ANDREW didn't mention gaming until we walked around his house with him. He loves Virtual Reality but expressed concerns about playing in online spaces.



An idyllic landscape hangs in **CAROLE'S** home in Harrogate – a opposing visual to what she describes her local area being strewn with litter.



KARL'S mum died when he was young and this shaped his outlook on life. Everything from his daily routine, to his fitness and his contentment have been impacted.



'If I ever met the Queen, I would never bow, there's only two people I bow to – God and Mohammed Ali.' – **DANNY** believes in meritocracy.



NIGEL'S passion is his Harley, though to buy his kit for it, he has to use Klarna.



LINDSEY collecting eggs to trade with neighbours in her community.



THE HEARTLAND IS UNDER ATTACK

**SO IF YOU'RE STABBED IN THE BACK SAY
'TA QUE SERA SERA'
'CAUSE YOU CAN THANK YOUR LUCKY STAR
THERE'S SOMEONE, SOMEWHERE
MUCH WORSE OFF THAN YOU ARE**

LABI SIFFRE

Thank Your Lucky Star

1. Work is not enough

In the decades immediately post-war, a middle-class lifestyle was achievable with a single income. It goes without saying that this was likely to be a male income and that opportunities and progression for women were severely and deliberately limited. There is no circumstance in which any of us would wish a return to this position. However, it is important to understand that at the time, one full-time job in the family created the lifestyle we have described in part one.

For a period of perhaps forty or fifty years, that lifestyle was still obtainable, but only from two incomes. Female participation in the workforce transformed dramatically from the 1970s onwards, in part because of changed expectations and ambitions and the glacial erosion of the patriarchy, but also because it became an economic necessity for both people in a relationship to work – especially if they were parents.

However, our research suggests that even two partners in a household working for salaries that meet our middle-class criteria no longer earn enough to afford the lifestyle that our contributors have

been led to expect. And that this lifestyle deficit has happened relatively recently.

At its heart has been the post-COVID explosion in inflation that has added an average of 20% to the price of the things a family wants and needs since the beginning of 2020 – life is a fifth more expensive than it was. Of course, many people have had pay rises during this period, but these almost certainly have not kept pace with inflation. They are also on their own in their relationships with employers (outside doctors and civil servants); the middle class are rarely unionised. Indeed, their culture of resilience and their aspiration to transition from employee to boss over time has made them averse to collective organisation and therefore extremely vulnerable.

But the real threat to the middle-class lifestyle is children. Children are expensive, eye-wateringly expensive. Expensive in a way that few predict, and few could have predicted. And they are expensive in three important ways: childcare, children's lifestyle expectations, and university debt, the cost of which is out of control.

Part Three – The heartland is under attack

Joeli Brearley talked to us about the escalating cost of childcare in the UK and the simultaneous decline in quality and quantity of provision. She wants the whole system 'scrapped and to start again from scratch', putting both mothers and children at the heart of future policy.

Little surprise that thrift has reached the middle class. They have always been careful with money, mindful of outgoings, keen on re-mortgaging and devotees of Martin Lewis. Nevertheless, thriftiness and money hacks have reached new heights amongst the people we spoke to – regardless of income. According to our quantitative research, 58% of middle class people are engaged in money-making activities beyond their day jobs, like side hustles, reselling or using vouchers or coupons.

Lindsey is a devotee of competitions and has travelled the world on her wins. She has also found ways to manage spiralling food costs 'I do a bit with 'Too Good To Go' locally. Because we're not that bothered about dates. So that works quite well. We picked one up last night and it had six quiches in there.'

Adrian, a management consultant from Harrogate talked to us about working a Sunday shift as a delivery driver for Morrisons. He has worked out that the combination of

a part-time wage, a 15% discount at Morrisons and not needing a gym membership any longer is worth an additional £28,000 to his family over the year – it's like having a third earner.

Sarah showed us the Vinted rack in her converted basement, a source of additional income but also a learning opportunity for her kids. 'I'm selling stuff that I don't want anymore and I've got my oldest daughter selling on Vinted as well, learning the value of money. She actually does better than I do and she uses that money to buy herself other stuff, actually on Vinted.'

“

I've got my oldest daughter selling on Vinted as well, learning the value of money.

”

SARAH, *Alderley Edge*

While Andrew explained the most elaborate middle-class credit hack. 'A certain credit card company were offering a deal where you could pay off your credit card for 0% transfer fee and 0% spending fee. I took £10,000 from them. I said thank you very much. The £10,000 I then put into a savings account, which was paying me 5.5% interest. I set up

“

I enter quite a few. Some days I'll enter none, another day, maybe 30 or 40.

”

LINDSEY, *Dolau*

talking about the competitions she enters

the minimum repayment required to pay back the £10,000. After three months, I'd repaid them the fee for setting it up to transfer the money. So, for the next 15 months, I was in profit.' Work is still defining for

the middle class, but two jobs are often not enough today to meet their lifestyle expectations especially if they must find childcare from their taxed income.

2. University Challenged

In Part One, we talked about the totemic value of university for the middle class. Since the Second World War, university has been the means for both progression into the middle class and maintenance of middle class status. Not going to university has been reasonably unthinkable for those in this group and being the first in your family to do so, a marker of progress.

“

I wish I'd had the option to do apprenticeships for the career I want.

”

RUTVI, *Leith*

More recently, this almost unbreakable bond has come under sustained attack. Because the middle class is increasingly asking whether a university degree is worth the paper it is written on.

University degrees do not guarantee a job that can sustain a middle-class lifestyle anymore. Indeed, they do not guarantee a job at all. And the means of funding those degrees now saddle young people and their families with excruciating levels of debt. The debt incurred by the student loans were once nominal and due for repayment only when the degree yielded a minimum salary. This has ceased to be the case as the cost of delivering that education has fallen increasingly on the student and interest rates have rendered loans more and more onerous to repay.

Rutvi has a Masters in Bio-Medical research, £92,000 of debt and no job. She told us, 'I wish I'd had the option to do apprenticeships for the careers I want. I would have definitely done better in those, but unfortunately, they still need that piece of paper.'

No wonder the middle class is reconsidering whether

Carole and Adrian currently live in Harrogate, but are looking to downsize.



They want to move to a house with a drive so they can park their cars on their property, due to the tension they feel when they currently park in the cul-de-sac around the back.

Carole works in a local school, and Adrian has a PhD and is a self-employed Consultant. Beyond his main role, he also works as a Morrison's delivery driver once a week as it means they get 15% off their shopping and he doesn't need to pay for gym membership. He's worked out that the role contributes £28,000 to the household.

They have adult children – some have left university and some are still studying. They estimate it cost them £30,000 to help their son through university, and they're currently helping their daughter with rent deposits, travel and weekly shopping.

ADRIAN & CAROLE HOPE, *Harrogate*

apprenticeships for skilled jobs and in-work experience for those jobs that need few official qualifications, both of which offer young people a headstart in the job market, might be more worthwhile. And certainly, better value for money. According to our research, 30% of the middle class now disagree with the idea that university will lead to better prospects than apprenticeships or other vocational training while only 41% agree. Today, you are just as likely to believe that you will be the last in your family to go to university as you are to have experienced being the first.

3. Up to their necks in other people's debt

The middle class have always been borrowers. Mortgages and car financing plans are nothing if not a means for the middle class to acquire goods over time which the rich are able to buy with cash. After all they have relatively easy access to affordable borrowing that poorer people simply do not have. And they have the means and motivation to pay down credit; more than that, they have the resilience to make the sacrifices that ensure that it is paid down and their credit history protected.

It would be hard to overstate the gut punch to the middle-class belief system which losing the bond between aspiration, progression, and university entails. Henry Dimbleby talked about the 'failed social contract' between the nation and its young people over both 'university and housing'.

For the middle class, the love affair with the university ideal – which in many ways created them all – is fractured and falling apart.

This has most often been a highly rational relationship, or at least has had the semblance of one. Using debt to finance a home that appreciates in value reduces the proportional value of the debt. It leaves you with the means to pay for later life care or perhaps an inheritance for your children and a glimpse of the upper-class system at work. Debt and saving are simply two sides of the same coin for the middle class.

A financial rule has begun to emerge for the middle classes. In midlife, middle-class families acquire property and bring up children. But as those kids grow older, their parents transfer them inherited wealth and their mortgages become smaller or are paid off. Eventually, they reach a sweet spot of reduced outgoings and reasonable income. All financial planning for the middle class is based on this model.

This perfect balance is now under considerable threat because of the toxicity of student debt. Time after time we have come across families wrestling with that debt, often in ways that undermines their relationship with each other. Supporting kids while at university was one thing, dealing with their debt in later life is quite another. This is creating enormous tension within families, which is fuelled by resentment towards each other.

Closing the door so their kids can't hear, Adrian in Harrogate reflects on the tension when he says, 'I'd estimate it cost us £30,000 to support my son through university... and his loan now stands at £70,000... He's quite resentful. He calls us baby boomers. That's his favourite thing. He's got a real chip on his shoulder about boomers. He thinks that we had it all and they've got nothing. He's very angry. He is

quite bitter about it.' His wife Carol adds 'I feel quite hurt, because we supported him a lot and he's angry and bitter that he's got all that debt. And I think he's forgotten that we did support him a lot and how much we actually did support him.'

“

He's got a real chip on his shoulder about boomers. He thinks that we had it all and they've got nothing.

”

ADRIAN, Harrogate

There is much debate at the moment about funding higher education. Universities are asking for additional support as tuition fees have hardly risen in 12 years, and the Government tries to reduce the number of foreign students. But to place that burden onto students and their families is creating huge pent-up resentment and anger.

We must question the whole funding model of higher education given that we now have £206 billion in outstanding student debt in the UK. Some of it will eventually be paid back, but in the meantime, it is attracting interest that was unforeseeable when much of the debt was written. More than that we have turned two generations of

students into what *The Guardian* recently described as ‘cash cows while they are studying and incredibly lucrative taxpayers when they’ve finished’. While Harry Wallop lamented that we have

turned ‘students into consumers’. Gone is the idea that education exists to advance the individual and progress the nation. No wonder University is no longer put on a pedestal by the middle class.

4. Bitten by the hand that feeds them

The Establishment may not have been built by or for the middle class, but they have overwhelmingly benefitted from it. Until recently the idea that the Establishment is at odds with the grafters that provide the wealth of the nation would have seemed fanciful – they need each other.

The middle class bought into the aspirational baubles that the Establishment have hung in front of them for decades. They have allowed the inequality between state and private school systems to go unchecked because a private education for their children has always seemed attractive if unattainable. They have gone easy on the inequity of unearned income being taxed lower than earned income because they aspire to inherit something, someday. As homeowners they have enjoyed the explosion in property values over the past fifty years because it has

directly benefitted them, even though it means that their children cannot afford to acquire a property of their own. And with even renting now exorbitant, they experience a constant boomerang-ing of grown-up children in and out of their homes.

“

She's still living with me. You know what it's like, they've got no money, they can't move out.

”

DANNY

Nigel, Carole, Adrian and Danny all talked about their grown-up kids being dependent on them for somewhere to live. Danny says of his 25-year-old daughter, ‘I have been raising her on my own since she was four. She’s still living with me. You

**PRIVILEGE WON'T SAVE YOU. ETON WON'T SAVE YOU.
PEOPLE WHO SPEAK LATIN WILL NOT SAVE YOU.
THAT STIFF UPPER LIP WILL CRUMBLE, THAT SILVER
SPOON WILL BE SOLD, YOU'LL BE FORGOTTEN
YOU'RE NOTHING TO THEM, NOTHING**

BENEFIT

Flag

Part Three – The heartland is under attack

know what it's like, they've got no money, they can't move out. I mean, she wants to, and at the moment she's trying to get another job. For some of the middle class, the Establishment has always been something to be suspicious of, Danny in Arnos Grove talked about the racism he has experienced at the hands of the Establishment, 'I could get quite heavy about it. I've never trusted the Police, never. Beat me and my mates up... I've no time for them at all... I don't think they have changed that much, they are still institutionally racist, know what I mean?' But, for him, mistrust of the Establishment goes way deeper: 'I used to always say to my daughter growing up, police, vicars, scout leaders, teachers, they're the people you trust the least'.

For many others there is a more recent realisation that there is one rule for them and another for everyone else. Especially when they see companies that are free to dump sewage in our rivers and on our beaches, leaders that partied when other people's Christmases were cancelled, bosses that falsely prosecuted hundreds of sub-postmasters for a corporate cock-up, or Ministers that covered up the risks of infected blood. It doesn't matter that some of these things happened decades ago – they are unpicking trust among the middle class.

Sir Brian Langstaff, who led the infected blood enquiry, described the default behaviour of the Establishment as 'denial, disbelief, dismissiveness and delay'.

“

Can you please take your tie off? Put it in the bin. Leave it in the bin. Can you then come to the table and sort the country out? Thank you.

”

ANDREW

Here is Andrew, frustrated about the inaction of politicians: 'It doesn't matter whether you wear a red tie, a blue tie, a yellow tie, a green tie, a pride tie. It doesn't matter... Can you please take your tie off? Put it in the bin. Leave it in the bin. Can you then come to the table and sort the country out? Thank you.'

The Establishment has prospered on the compliance and gullibility of the middle class for decades. But this contract is breaking down and the failure of the Establishment to deliver for the middle class is being brutally exposed.

Rutvi is an MA graduate of Biomedical Sciences who is carrying £92,000 of student debt. She's struggling to get a job in her field and is currently looking for anything and everything to bring some financial stability in her life.



She may have to move back to England due to lack of roles in Scotland. Whilst she could be working to try and cure cancer, she's tempted by the Aldi Graduate Scheme as that'll bring more money and more stability to her life. As would driving a bus or being a train conductor – two roles she's looked into and would be open to, even if her parents wouldn't approve. She nearly moved to the USA with a previous boyfriend and has mixed feelings about whether she'll end up there one day, saying there are more opportunities for her.

RUTVI HERATH, *Leith*

5. Why try harder?

We have discussed the profound belief in graft amongst the middle class. Graft and aspiration go hand in hand; the former delivers the latter, and the latter spurs on the former. They are locked together.

But as aspiration dulls, the relationship with graft ebbs. Work continues to be totemic and for many rewarding, but it loses its imperative and its intensity. Especially as it is increasingly unable to secure the lifestyle that was promised in the first place. And given the power of contentment, many people we talked to are easing off the accelerator a little when it comes to their work ethic.

Of course there is something hugely positive about this. The couple that both go down to a four-day week to afford childcare for the remaining three days are going to experience a more rewarding relationship with their children, share the burden of childcare more equally and promote equity in their relationship. In many respects, this represents progress.

But let's be clear – the driving force in the decision-making is the onerous cost of childcare combined with contentment to earn less, and perhaps progress less because the once clear goal of the 'rat race'

is now obscure. People realise that it's a long life and this needs to be sustainable. Our research shows that three-quarters of the middle class believe that being middle class is less comfortable and enjoyable than it was ten years ago.

Rutvi has a masters, she should be doing a PhD and undertaking medical research to save people's lives but with nearly £100,000 of debt she would rather just earn some money. 'The [Aldi] graduate programme offers £40,000 in salary... I've got physical limitations that would stop me doing that... If I could drive and I could apply to be a bus conductor or a train conductor and get £60,000, I would do that tomorrow. Immediately'. Aldi is a fantastic company but is it really where the science graduates that could be shaping the future of medicine should be working?

As the aspirational goals of the middle class slip away, so does their impetus to try hard. As a result, we all lose the drive that powers society. With already declining productivity across the UK, can we afford to lose the engine of our society?

Danny is a born and bred Londoner, the son of his French mum and Jamaican dad who met during the Second World War. Spending much of his teenage years and early twenties on the 'wrong side of the tracks', he turned his life around when he realised he couldn't afford to buy a 20p bag of crisps. He lives with his 25 year-old daughter in Arnos Grove, who he has looked after since she was a young girl. He's a private driver for an old school friend, and enjoys boxing and football in his free time. He has vivid and bitter memories of the police from his younger years, and believes institutional racism still exists within the force.



DANNY SHAW, *Arnos Grove*

6. Whatever happened to society?

The middle class do not stand aside from society, they are fully immersed in it. They are dependent on their locality – its public services, its environment, and its amenities. They may be better off than many but not well enough to absent themselves from the world around them.

As Otegha Uwagba said to us, 'It's not enough for me to be OK, everyone has to be OK'.

“

It's just shocking. The anger and the intolerance, and the rubbish, there's just rubbish everywhere.

”

CAROLE

And that's an issue because people feel society is breaking down. At one level this is structural, as with our failing health service which people are finding impossible to navigate and frequently describe as 'no longer on its knees but on its face'. Or schools where aerated concrete

classrooms are crumbling. But it's also about the quality of life that people enjoy as we get angrier and less kind towards each other.

Last year, Angela in Bristol told us, 'This is a dog-eat-dog world, but the dogs have now been let out of the kennels.' – speaking to a feeling that people are less generous, less thoughtful and less community-spirited. That people are becoming more selfish and anti-social. We used to think about anti-social behaviour as the consistent actions of specific individuals or families. Now it more about the periodic behaviour of everyone – from fly tipping to recreational drug use, food drivers riding on pavements, dumped e-bikes blocking access for people using wheelchairs or buggies, people watching online videos without headphones, people abusing public servants – the list may seem petty, but it is endless. And people think that is getting worse.

Carole said, 'It's just shocking. The anger and the intolerance, and the rubbish, there's just rubbish

everywhere. And I just think, have you been brought up to think it's acceptable to just chuck rubbish all over the floor?' Adrian, her husband chips in, 'I think it goes all the way back to Margaret Thatcher. I think that's where the roots of this lay. Thatcher and her values'. Adding sadly, 'When we first moved here, there was a real sense of community. I tell you what, we used to have street parties, didn't we, every year. That was how strong it was. And then some of those people left and different people moved in. And it started to change. And we just don't get on with some of them, and it's a shame'.

We also saw evidence of how conflicts in other parts of the world are impacting people's lives in their own communities. Sarah in Alderley Edge raised this, 'It's not safe for [my daughters] to walk on their own in a uniform that's got the Jewish emblem because of what might happen. That's very worrying. We've never had that before'.

For the middle class, quality of life is often about the nature of their community and there is a real sense that this is falling apart.

7. Money follows the love

There is a well-established orthodoxy about how people prioritise spending in a downturn first popularised by the *Harvard Business Review*. It suggests that consumers are experts at dividing their outgoings into those that are essential, those that are treats, those that can be postponed and those that are expendable. The job of any business, especially the marketers in it is to get their brands as close to the first two as possible.

The evidence in this study is that for the middle class, there is another category, and it transcends all of these. That is people's passions. For their passions our contributors are prepared to sacrifice virtually anything else, occasionally even essentials. Their passions are more than treats; they are part of the fundamental contentment that they seek, for they offer pleasure, accomplishment, belonging, and pride.

Danny has been struggling financially since his divorce; he is paying for both his sons in a deal he did with his ex-wife so she wouldn't take them to Australia. But does Danny find the money for his bike? Of course he does, one way or another. 'I bought myself a new helmet for the bike, relatively expensive. Something you would notice if you paid for in one hit. I paid for that over three months with Klarna'.

Analysing the social media of the middle class suggests that the first among all passions is food (well apart from politics). Eating out, eating in, cooking, making and sharing food. Despite the horrific level of food inflation that has set

a new normal for the cost of fresh food, eating in and out are both in rude health. Henry Dimbleby reported the bounce back in the hospitality sector: 'Hospitality is taking off again, people are coming out and they are willing to spend money and spend it on good food'. Not necessarily 'fine dining' but good authentic food. What you eat, where you shop, what you know and whether cooking is a chore or a joy has rapidly become part of the middle class's identity in the UK.

Middle class passions are a place of sanctuary for any brand and especially embattled brands struggling with the cost of living.

8. Hanging on in quiet desperation

You might think that this sustained assault on the lives and lifestyle of the middle class would have caused outrage amongst its members. Outrage at the level of taxation they are under in comparison with those much richer than they are. Outrage at crumbling public services their taxation has paid for. Outrage that their concerns are dismissed with a joke, for these are #middeclassproblems and

hardly the stuff of a genuine protest movement.

But it doesn't, not in a consistent and concerted way. Perhaps the middle class are like the proverbial frog that never jumps out of an ever-hotter pot because they have got used to it. When, if they were thrown into it right now, they would leap out immediately. Perhaps it's because their resilience

“

**One of us
losing our job is
one of our
biggest fears
over the next
few years.**

”

STACY, *Hetton-le-Hole*

Part Three – The heartland is under attack

means that they have options as things get tighter, to take on another job, to downsize, to dig into savings and to borrow. They don't face immediate disaster – Stacey talked about this.

'I wouldn't be able to spend, we'd have to totally cut back. No holidays, we'd probably have to get rid of the car, wouldn't we? Get a cheaper car.' Peter: 'We'd manage though.' Stacey: 'We'd manage though.' But what people also say is that no matter how bad things are for them, others are much less well-off. The middle class, exposed to the rest of society in a way that the rich aren't, know that others are having a worse time. Indeed, for many, it is memories of a working-class past – for them or their parents – that stirs up an empathy for those less well-off and a sense that their current problems are nothing like as extreme.

“

We'd manage though.

”

STACEY

Complaining simply isn't the middle class way. Danny said, 'I'm a positive person. You've got to believe in hope and change. People moan but it's not that bad, Britain, is it?

You know, lots go wrong, but you go live in Iran, Russia, or China and tell me.'

That does not mean that they are not hurting; it is simply that they suffer in stoic silence. Nick Ferrari put it this way: 'They're under attack everywhere – under attack from tax, under attack from their mortgage, under attack from law and order, they can't get dad into a hospital, so he needs a care home, they're under attack from universities. It's like they're under siege. The only thing they've got is Netflix and Amazon Prime so they can spend their nights watching Jeremy Clarkson – that's all they've got now.'

If the middle class are hanging on in quiet desperation, who will come to their aid? Who will support and help them? Who will stand up for them? And if the government won't, then perhaps it falls to the businesses and organisations that depend on the patronage of the middle class to step up.

That is what we will look at in Part Four: how marketers can act in the interest of the middle class upon whom they depend.

“

My concern is obviously with World War Three breaking out. I mean, it kinda has, it just hasn't gone kind of full worldwide yet.

”

PETER, Hetton-le-Hole

BACKING YOUR HEARTLAND

As marketing pivots towards championing people to sell products rather than championing products to sell to people, it demands that we are capable of greater empathy as an industry. Not empty empathy but a real understanding of people's lives. Through that understanding, we can better serve our customers, connect with them, and become more relevant to their lives.

There are so many implications that come from this study about how brands and businesses need to show up, many that won't have come to ourselves but will occur to you. However, in this section we want to share five immediate imperatives for anyone wanting to better connect with this audience.

1. Respect your heartland

To paraphrase David Ogilvy, the middle class are not a joke; they are your most valuable customers. Just because their pain and their challenges are not those of the neediest in society doesn't mean they are not hurting. So, stop taking the piss, with your middle class hashtags and embarrassment in being seen to serve them and start to embrace this group with your whole heart.

Every one of their virtues is dearly held and important to the middle class, but they are rarely represented or respected by marketing. And we often fail to see the reality of their contribution.

While we embrace working-class toil we recoil from middle-class graft, endeavour, and productivity,

despite the unique way that work is seen by this group. We are oblivious to the contribution that they make to society through the taxation they pay – a basic badge of citizenship – and their direct involvement in the community. Please respect that not one of them has a generic 'office job'; they have careers in real businesses and public services doing real things that are important to that organisation and often fulfilling to them.

Ford may have seen the drivers of their Transit vans as the backbone of Britain, but this group is the heartland – the heart of our society, the heart of our economy, the heart of our country.

Respect the heartland.

2. Reinforce their resilience

The middle class have an innate resilience to challenges and shocks. This is because they have options when the shit hits the fan. From savings to insurance, expendable outgoings to employment mobility.

However, the middle class are having to be more and more imaginative in the way they maintain their lifestyle and protect their families. This provides a real role for brands. Think of pursuing good value as a strategy people

use to reinforce their resilience, not simply to acquire stuff more cheaply.

Buying well is a resilience strategy as much as a way of satisfying their aspiration. For the middle class buying well works a bit like insurance as it minimises the likelihood of having to buy again if the product fails. The more you can help people make the right purchase first time, and not just any purchase, the more you satisfy their desire for true value – the right thing at a decent price.

Extended warranties and money-back guarantees work in similar ways; they are about reassurance that people won't have to fork out again anytime soon. And in backing themselves, brands are telegraphing that they are the right choice – indeed, John Lewis warranties hold an almost mythological significance for the middle class. Creating a resale or buy-back platform like Vinted for your brand is also an interesting way to extend the resilience of your customers and their lives, with the incentive that the spoils are spent with you.

Bringing purchasing together into one outgoing also makes their monthly finances more resilient. But stop thinking of this as cross-selling or convergence; think of it as consolidation. Consolidation

is a critical resilience strategy learned through their experience of managing credit card debt. It is time to bring this strategy to any contract or subscription-based business.

Member pricing is more hotly debated. Clearly it is a way of managing outgoings on big regular purchases like groceries and many benefit from doing that. But member pricing is attracting more and more criticism, and if they think for a moment that you have been taking the piss, it is unlikely they will forgive you.

Resilience should be the home ground for financial services – insurance, savings, investing, and borrowing are all used by the middle class to build greater resilience into their lives. But this is rarely acknowledged beyond the 'rainy day' cliché and vague promises of protection. In contrast our work over the last decade for Direct Line has emphasised the problem-solving nature of their insurance – providing fast solutions to reinforce resilience not just financial restitution. While in co-creating the savings app Communion, Uncommon has literally taken the idea of a 'fuck you' fund to the market – this is pure resilience.

3. Be their passion

For all the constraints on spending and the increasing adoption of thrifty behaviour, there is one category of activity that can circumvent the spending crackdown. These are their passions, the things that the middle class enjoy for enjoyment's sake. Passions transcend the rational approach to trimming spending in a downturn and offer brands sanctuary. From the storm there are two ways to do this and the first is to recognise the passion that you represent in their lives and use it to your advantage.

If you are anywhere near the food and hospitality category, it would be wise to realise how much food has moved from an essential and a treat to an absolute passion for the middle class. Food isn't just about quality, service and price but about so much more. This is the number

one passion for our group. But if your category is no one's idea of passion, then you would do well to ally your brand to something that is. That your brand answers or serves a passion. After all, who was passionate about gym clothes until Nike came along.

Broadband may not get the juices flowing for many people but gaming does. That's why EE launched the EE Game Store and EE Game Mode, which dedicates your bandwidth to your console or PC while you game. EE is now one of the largest retailers of consoles in the UK.

Not every brand can be a passion, but many can position themselves as feeding one.

4. Family first, last, and always

Family is at the heart of everything that is important to the middle class. All that graft, all that aspiration, all that resilience, for what? For the family that they love and the family

that they will leave when they pass away.

In marketing it is fashionable to hate the family. To see it as

a twee and old-fashioned idea. To talk of families, you must at least preface the word with ‘modern’ to acknowledge the fluidity of family structures and even the idea that friendship groups can work as ‘families’.

While there may be more and more blended families, single-parent families, adoptive families, and single-sex families in the middle class, they are all just families. In the end, families are families, they make look different but they feel the same. Desire for the family is remarkably traditional in modern Britain. It's time for marketers to recognise the primacy of families.

It's time for marketers to recognise the centrality of the family in the lives of their most important audience. Build propositions for the family, create value for the family, accommodate different needs across the family, and accommodate different needs between families. EE's new device, Wi-Fi Controls enables you to switch off connection to individual gadgets from your app. It is a smart bit of tech, but they position and communicate it as a tool to help families across Britain to wind down and get kids off to sleep.

Stop being weird about the importance of family and start serving them better.

5. Make brands aspirational again

This really shouldn't need saying but the whole point of brands is to create desirability that supports volume and value. Desirability that people aspire to. There are two ways in which brands support aspiration – as facilitators or as totems.

The middle class love Aldi and Lidl. But not because they are value brands, they love them because

they enable them to support an aspirational lifestyle with a little less money. In other words, they see those discounters as offering more to them for less money, not less for less money. This is why discounters like Iceland or B&M don't work in the same way as Aldi and Lidl for the middle class. In the UK, Ikea transcends class because it supports an aspirational middle-class lifestyle particularly at

specific moments in their lives. These brands are facilitators of aspiration.

At the other end of the spectrum, both Waitrose and M&S are categorically aspirational brands for the middle class – brands that they aspire to shop with and see as markers of their progress. For our audience it means something to think of themselves as Waitrose shoppers, while M&S effectively communicates ‘this is not just food this is middle-class food’. These brands are totems of aspiration.

This distinction between facilitators and totems can be seen in the way the car category works for the middle class. While there are traditional aspirational brands like BMW, Audi and Land Rover, there are also facilitators. South Korean brands Kia and Hyundai may not have the same aspirational quality but they give middle-class people access to EV ownership without the price tag of a Tesla.

We have forgotten the aspirational role of brands, and its time we woke up to their role in delivering the lifestyle people crave either as a destination for their aspiration or as stepping stones to getting there.

SEE WHAT OTHERS CANNOT SEE

One of the most striking experiences of this study has been the response of the marketing community. If we thought that marketers were allergic to the middle class before we began, we now believe that a self-defeating loathing of this group permeates the industry. The moment we started to talk about this study, we were met by a barrage of incredulity that we would be interested in the middle class.

But sometimes it's criticism that gives you strength and determination. Because it suggests, you can see something that others cannot and will not see. And if they don't realise what is happening or refuse to countenance it, you have a clear competitive advantage.

So here is our advice. There is a significant group in the UK with a little more money than others and this combination of volume and value make them very attractive to businesses. This group embodies a series of important virtues, but which are under attack. More than that, this group is being systematically hollowed out by the taxation system, inflation and interest rates, and is becoming progressively poorer. As a marketer and a business, you have the option to wake up, smell the Nespresso and serve them better than your competitors.

In doing so, you will be rare. You may even attract criticism yourself within your organisation or from

the market. But here is the real advantage to you. To see the world as others won't or can't and act accordingly – building products, propositions and services that support the middle class. This new perspective can become a sustainable competitive advantage because the middle class believe you understand and serve them better than others.

Great marketing is fuelled by great insights which are fresh and unseen by others. And that is what this tour of Britain's heartland is here to do.

THANK YOU

We would like to acknowledge and thank all our contributors for sharing their stories, lives and homes with us. As well as the expert witnesses who brought perspective and nuance to our findings.

What the fuck is going on? would be impossible without the inspiration, guidance, support and graft of Mark Hadfield, founder of our research partners Meet the 85%. And the empathy and brilliance of Phoebe Lyons, Planner at Saatchi & Saatchi. They are the beating heart of this project.

Finally, a massive thanks to the Saatchi & Saatchi crew, both inside the planning discipline led by the wonderful Emily Lewis-Keane, and outside, especially Louisa

Kugeniek. Kathryn Jell and Ruis Walton wrangled the whole project. Data smarts came from James Addlestone. Design was the brainchild of Mandy Sou and production was down to Emma Whiting.

ISBN 978-1-3999-8848-3

Published by Saatchi & Saatchi

Copyright © by Saatchi & Saatchi UK. All Rights Reserved

Designed by: Mandy Sou

Richard Huntington
SAATCHI & SAATCHI