



THE MISDEFINED MAJORITY

How media can empower working class values



PURESPECTRUM

INTRODUCTION

Across the country, households are facing a squeeze on purchasing power. The stark contrast in wealth inequality in the UK has grown over the last 30 years with disposable income inequality increasing to 35.7% in the financial year ending 2022, compared to 34.4% in the fiscal year ending 2021. This poses several questions. Firstly, how do we understand the nuance that exists across Britain when it comes to spending power, and willingness to spend? Is the default of social grade the most accurate way to do this? Aside from income, how do our values help align us to specific categories, brands and interests? And crucially, does income level or social status truly define the differences that exist across British communities?

the7stars, in partnership with PureSpectrum, ran a quantitative study of 2000 nationally representative UK adults to understand the relevance of social grade and class identification in modern Britain's propensity to spend. Throughout this paper, we have used this data, alongside other trusted sources, to provide insight into the complexity of class identification, dispelling some of the stereotypes about the misdefined majority of Brits who identify as working class.

There are 5 themes covered in this paper. Each section explores the factors impacting identification, propensity to spend and the opportunity for brands to capture the most valuable customers:

- 1. The impact of labels: Society and media's impact on labelling**
- 2. More in common: Differences & similarities in class identities**
- 3. The power of values: How shared values allow for greater fluidity**
- 4. Beyond demographics: Expanding our horizons for class targeting**
- 5. Widening horizons: The opportunity in the mis-defined majority**



The impact of labels:

SOCIETY AND MEDIA'S IMPACT ON LABELLING

DEFINING SOCIAL GRADE

According to the Government Social Mobility Barometer, “around half of the public (48%) consider themselves to be working class, 36% middle class and 0% upper class.” The British Social Attitudes survey places the working class figure higher, at 52% in 2023, demonstrating the importance for Brits to be able to self-classify. Interestingly, only 9% of the British population state that they don't associate with any class. This identification with a class stems from where we live, how we grew up, who influenced us and where we feel we fit in culture and society.

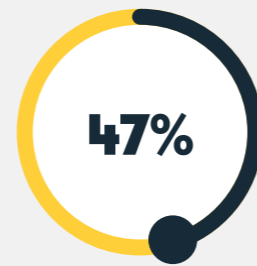
In recent decades, official classifications have avoided explicit reference to class, instead adopting the term ‘social grade’ when referring to an individual's socioeconomic background. Social Grade was first introduced in the UK in the 1950s by the National Readership Survey (NRS) and has since been amended several times. It was designed as a way of classifying people based on the formal education and occupation of the head of the household. This came under the assumption that an individual's education and occupation could strongly indicate their social status and the premise that your overall family wealth and disposable income is based on the chief income earner's occupation.



52% consider themselves working class



39% of UK adults are classified as C2DE today



47% of UK adults were classified as C2DE in 2015



<1 in 10 working-class respondents believe that the media portrayal of their class is accurate

POLES APART: THE GAP BETWEEN SOCIAL GRADE AND CLASS CLASSIFICATION

Recent data from Kantar TGI shows 61% of UK adults are classified as ABC1 (or upper–middle class) and 39% as C2DE (working class). These figures have shown a marked trend in just the last few years: as recently as five years ago, some 45% of British adults were classified as C2DE, whilst in 2015 that figure stood at 47%. As careers in manual industries – traditionally the bedrock of the working class – have eroded, a greater proportion of Brits have sought employment in more administrative, white-collar jobs which, in turn, has widened the gap between the official social grade statistics and the nation's collective class identity.

Highlighting the clear gulf between national social grade and class self-identification, nearly half of those employed in careers classified as managerial or professional consider themselves working class. Indeed, the notion of assigning individuals with a ‘ranking’ based on the ‘desirability’ of their livelihood has long proved controversial. As working-class author and campaigner Darren McGarvey writes, social grade is “a class-based analysis and one so brazen, Karl Marx himself would like have been offended by it [...] People in the lower classification are regarded as culturally unsophisticated and parochial in their concerns.”

THE MEDIA NARRATIVE OF SOCIAL CLASS

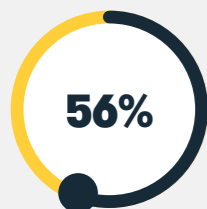
This mismatch is further exemplified in our research, less than 1 in 10 working-class respondents believing that the media portrayal of their class is accurate, and just under 4 in 10 believing it is outdated. And with a sizeable proportion of the working-class community believing that their class is portrayed negatively in the media, it seems that we as an industry are missing the mark in connecting with the working-class community. In fact, many Brits feel better portrayed in TV and film, with British soaps and dramas such as Coronation Street, Eastenders, and Shameless leading the way in making the majority feel seen.

Indeed, when asked to define their most important characteristics, most take an inward-focussed lens. Our health, our age, our upbringing, or some combination thereof, are seen as far more instrumental than employment or class status. It's a similar story when we think of our values: honesty, compassion, and respect for others consistently triumph over leadership or material wealth.

For most of us, such values are instilled from birth. 85% view close family members as instrumental in shaping our worldview, with friends and childhood teachers also holding sway. It's little surprise, then, that we expect our loved ones to hold the same values: 83% believe it is important their partner shares similar values, while 69% demand the same of friends.

More in common:

DIFFERENCES & SIMILARITIES IN CLASS IDENTITIES



56% agree their 'status' does not represent them

AN OVERRELIANCE ON CLASS AS A MEAN SEGMENT

In fact, whilst most of us succumb to at least some degree of self-sorting – be that into a working-class or middle-class identity – we have come to collectively recognise that in addition to social grade not defining us, nor does our class define us. Over two-thirds of adults, including clear majorities of all class groups, say their class has nothing to do with how they feel about themselves and the world, 56% agree their 'status' does not represent them.

Such an admission is striking. Forty years ago, at the height of British social unrest and industrial action, few could have argued against the notion of class identity as a dividing line amongst the British public. Fast forward to the present day and, despite many of those characteristics – high inflation, rising energy bills and intermittent strike action – being present, the population seems unwilling to bind themselves to their class conscience.

BUT SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES DO STILL EXIST BETWEEN CLASSES

Given the size of each group, it's little surprise that many of those who identify as working-class enjoy different pastimes from those who identify as upper- or middle-class. Yet, in the digital age, where entertainment is accessible at the touch of a button, there is simply no catalyst for any great dividing lines to exist in how the nation chooses to spend its time.

What may come as more of a shock is how we view those in the "other" class from ourselves. When those who self-identify as working class are asked to describe the values of a middle-class person, and vice versa, they each, unprompted, reach a similar conclusion – hard work and perseverance. Our view of one another reflects much of the sentiment of the late Jo Cox MP when she famously declared, "we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us".

Our findings reflect the fact that, while most still subscribe to the existence of a distinct class structure, any such differences are often exaggerated by outdated media portrayals. This creates a disconnect between how we think people of our class should act, and how we actively choose to live our lives.

The power of values:

HOW SHARED VALUES ALLOW FOR GREATER FLUIDITY



41% of respondents define success by a person's career



26% said forging a successful career was their personal goal

A shared value ecosystem facilitates movement between classes. While over one-third of Brits associate their upbringing as solidly working class, just 27% feel the same about their current lifestyle. Such movements in class status appear to be directly related to changing material situations, such as living in a nicer area or moving to a bigger house; crucially, most in this group feel they have strengthened their social safety net without compromising on their core, intrinsic values.

While we are led to believe that 'moving upwards' is desirable, most of us don't desire that for ourselves. Though the social grade classification system suggests we should all be striving for social mobility, there is another clear disconnect between what we believe society wants us to achieve, and what we actually want for ourselves. When asked to define what makes a person successful, 41% of respondents chose their career; yet, when prompted on their own goals, just 26% said forging a successful career – with building a solid family unit by far the nation's main ambition.

This apparent lack of motivation to 'move up' the social ladder may seem surprising, but it is rooted in widening economic inequality in the UK today.

A recent report from the the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) found that social mobility is at its lowest level for over 50 years, with a child's home location and ethnicity, along with their parents' income and whether they are eligible for free school meals, all likely determinants of their future prospects. While for generations it was true that most could expect to grow up earning more than their parents, that promise has evaporated today.

In the face of economic disparities, working-class communities thrive upon their shared values. For this reason, prioritising trusted relationships over economic gains is not a lack of ambition, but a matter of pride. As former cabinet minister Hazel Blears summarises, "[social mobility] implies you want to get out of somewhere and go somewhere else because you're mobile! And I think there is a great deal to be said for making who you are something to be proud of. And if you're working class [...] that says something about who you are, where you come from."

For media to truly represent the country at large, it must recognise this distinction and celebrate all class communities.

Beyond demographics:

EXPANDING OUR HORIZONS FOR CLASS TARGETING

**SOCIAL GRADE LIMITS OUR
ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND BRITS**

In the mid-1980s, the British Social Attitudes Report found that 48% agreed with the statement “a man’s job is to earn money and a woman’s to look after the home” – whilst the 2023 survey found only 9% agreed with this sentiment. This changing social attitude has been accompanied by a stark rise in the employment rate for 16-64-year-olds, from 54% in 1983 to 72% in 2023. Furthermore, the Working Families report finds that the number of dual career couples – those in which both individuals work – sits at 75% in the UK amongst couples with two children. As a result, to assume that a household’s wealth should be solely determined by one individual is misrepresentative of society today.

Take household expenses, which factor significantly into a family’s financial situation. Research from the IFS in 2022 highlighted that 11% of the population spend at least 20% of their disposable income on their mortgage repayments. Amidst the UK’s current high inflation, this burden may be felt acutely by upper-income households. If mortgage rates were to rise by 2.5ppts, this share would rise from 11% to 19% for those in the top-income fifth of the population (those with a disposable household income of at least £44,000 per year for a childless couple).

Regionality, too, often plays a significant role in determining how much an individual spends on their home. In the private rental sector, the average tenant household now spends more than a third on rent, according to Savills. However, this strain has not been felt evenly across the country. In London, where rents have increased by 31% in the last two years, tenants fork out a hefty 43% of their income on their home.

Taking a wider view on a household’s wealth will provide a more accurate view on society today and therefore Brits’ potential to purchase certain products and services. Factors such as dual career households, a household’s disposable income and occupational growth all hold considerable sway in this respect.

**THE WORLD OF WORK
IS CHANGING**

Looking solely at occupation fails to account for how opportunities to earn have spread over the years. As public sector wages rise at a slower pace compared to other occupations, manual workers skilled in a trade now have opportunities to grow a small business and potentially earn similar income levels to a doctor, headteacher, or other professional sector occupation. This diversification of relatively high earners further renders the antiquated social grade categorisation not fit for purpose.

Looking solely at occupation and financial situation also doesn’t account for the changing priorities of Brits. Research from King’s College London in 2023 across 24 countries found that just 14% of UK Millennials believe work should always come first, compared to 41% in 2009 – highlighting the evolving relationship the nation has with our careers after the Covid pandemic upended traditional working patterns.

**WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES
FOR UNDERSTANDING
SPENDING POWER?**

Household disposable income is a useful barometer for financial opportunity as it gives a clear indication on monthly spending power on ‘non-essential’ products and services. Additionally, understanding the values and perceptions that underpin intentions to spend are highly valuable – a closer connection with lifestyle and ethics is arguably more important than pure affordability.



THE OPPORTUNITY IN THE MISDEFINED MAJORITY

22.9M adults in the UK associate their upbringing with a working-class background

18.7M currently consider themselves to be working class

56%
of working-class households say they spend most of their money on household essentials

vs. 42% of middle-class families

More than half

of working-class households respondents said they planned to spend at least a small amount on technology, clothes and holidays in the coming months

SO, WHO ARE THE WORKING CLASS AND HOW CAN WE SHINE LIGHT ON THEM WITHOUT SUBSCRIBING TO STEREOTYPES?

According to our research, some 22.9 million adults in the UK associate their upbringing with a working-class background, while 18.7 million currently consider themselves to be working class. While these figures are lower than the Government Social Mobility Barometer estimates, they do not account for the more than 6 million people who either did not associate with any class or preferred to keep it to themselves.

Collectively, this group have a lower median monthly household disposable income of £200, vs. £500 for those who consider themselves middle class. This, unsurprisingly, translates into a higher proportion of their spending going towards food, rent, and bills; some 56% of working-class households say they spend most of their money on household essentials, vs. 42% of middle-class families. But to discard the spending power of working-class audiences would be to miss out on an enormous opportunity.

Despite feeling a greater impact of the cost-of-living crisis and resulting squeeze on household budgets, this cohort are still planning to spend in 2024 and beyond. More than half of working-class respondents said they planned to spend at least a small amount on technology, clothes, and holidays in the coming months, with an even greater proportion (61%) planning to spend on entertainment for the home. For brands to connect with this community in a meaningful way, it is important to understand how they view themselves – and what motivates them to spend.

One in three of the population who currently identify as working class would prefer to define themselves based on their mental and physical wellbeing, their backgrounds and upbringing. And contrary to what the media would like us to think about the working class, they are notably successful in achieving what's most important to them. When asked about what matters most, more than 3 in 4 gave importance to having a strong family unit and more than half prioritised wanting to have a close circle of friends, with 73% claiming to be satisfied with what they have achieved regarding their family unit or friend circle. This success in achieving what is important to them suggests why this group embrace their class status and are not seeking a change.

This demonstrates how important it is to look for the nuances that give meaning to class statuses. Our research suggests that these nuances take form of values, attitudes, goals, and aspirations, and tapping into these helps better resonate with one's perception of their self-identification. Where the original definition of class relies solely on the primary income earner's profession, shifting towards a value- and attitude-based definition would better represent the fluid mindset of class perception and better resonate with likeminded individuals and communities. Most importantly, this will help us move away from the broad-brush approach with which we currently label classes which is increasingly losing its relevance in recent times.

WHO ARE THE WORKING CLASS IN BRITAIN TODAY?

22.9M UK adults self-identify as coming from a working class background



51% of whom work full time
(on par with the wider population)



62% plan to spend on entertainment for the home in the coming months



66% say the cost of living crisis has had a sizeable impact on their family
(vs. 50% of middle class individuals)



46% say compassion is one of their most important values
(vs. 40% NatRep)



57% agree they are proud of their class identity
but 58% say it does not determine who they are as a person



39% believe their class is portrayed negatively in the media
(vs. 16% of middle class individuals)



67% still live in or near to the community where they grew up
(vs. 62% NatRep)



52% live in rented accommodation
while 47% own or mortgage their home



51% plan to spend on holidays in the near future



SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Social grade as a means for classification is undoubtedly challenged in modern times. While it provides a way of segmenting the 67-million strong population of the United Kingdom, alone it is not a suitable means for us to understand and connect with people. The methodology itself is based on outdated assumptions, and when compared to the vastly different ways in which individuals choose to self-classify it emphasizes further questions over its validity.

But how do we move beyond a system so intrinsic, so central to everything that we do? To do so should not be as daunting as it sounds. Within most of our industry-wide research tools, we already have the capability to slice and segment the population every which way – we simply need the determination to do so. Further, as the economic situation in the UK changes constantly, to simply assess an audience at a snapshot in time is insufficient – continued, repeated analysis of how the population are adapting to economic developments will help to safeguard consumer understanding.

For efficient media targeting and audience creation, we need to firstly recognise that social grade is a blunt means for segmenting Brits and in fact can distort the true picture of who has the means to spend. Therefore, using demographic metrics such as disposable income and household income get us a lot closer to a means to spend on certain products. But critically, this shouldn't be used in isolation. Combining income levels with a value or attitudinal layer provides the opportunity to get closer to the propensity or intent to spend on particular categories, products or brands.

The future lies in taking a more multi-layered and dynamic approach to audience understanding. Demographic data will continue to play a role in classification and segmentation, but it's the combination of behavioural and attitudinal insight that sheds light on how Brits actually identify, and ultimately spend.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

the7stars, in partnership with PureSpectrum, conducted an online quantitative study into the nation's class association, values and motivations. The project interviewed 2,00+ UK adults 18+ in June 2023. The sample was nationally representative, using Voice4All quotas to ensure representation across age, gender, social grade, region, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability. For questions on the methodology or data, please contact TeamInsight@the7stars.co.uk.



