
THE REAL BRITAIN SERIES
The Farce Of Class
A Study of Social Class, Social Mobility and Socio-Economic Grouping in the UK

# Introducing the Real Britain Series

The Farce of Class is the fifth volume of The Real Britain Series: OMD UK's proprietary research and thought leadership programme. The programme has three big goals:

**01**

Improve understanding of the lives of marginalised, mis- and under-represented people in the UK.

**02**

Generate insight with applicability: arm ourselves and our clients with actions to take back into their organisations.

**03**

Become better, more active allies and employers.

## Our Burgeoning Research Anthology

**2022**



Designing for Disability Inclusion

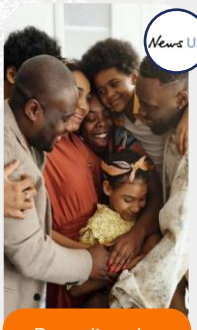


The Truth About Youth

**2023**



Growing Old Disgracefully



Decoding the Diasporas: Africa & The Caribbean

**2024**



The Farce of Class

**2025**



Decoding the Diasporas: East & South East Asia

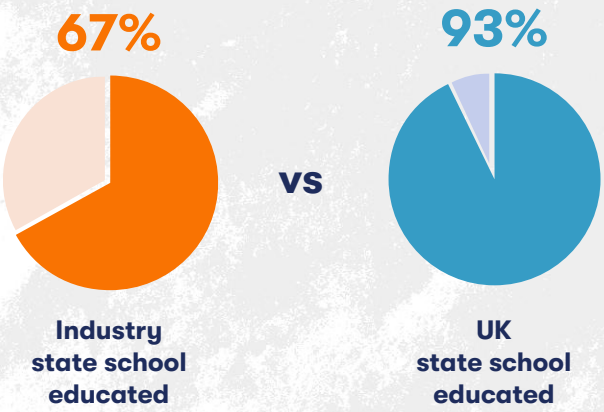
# Why is Class such a Farce?

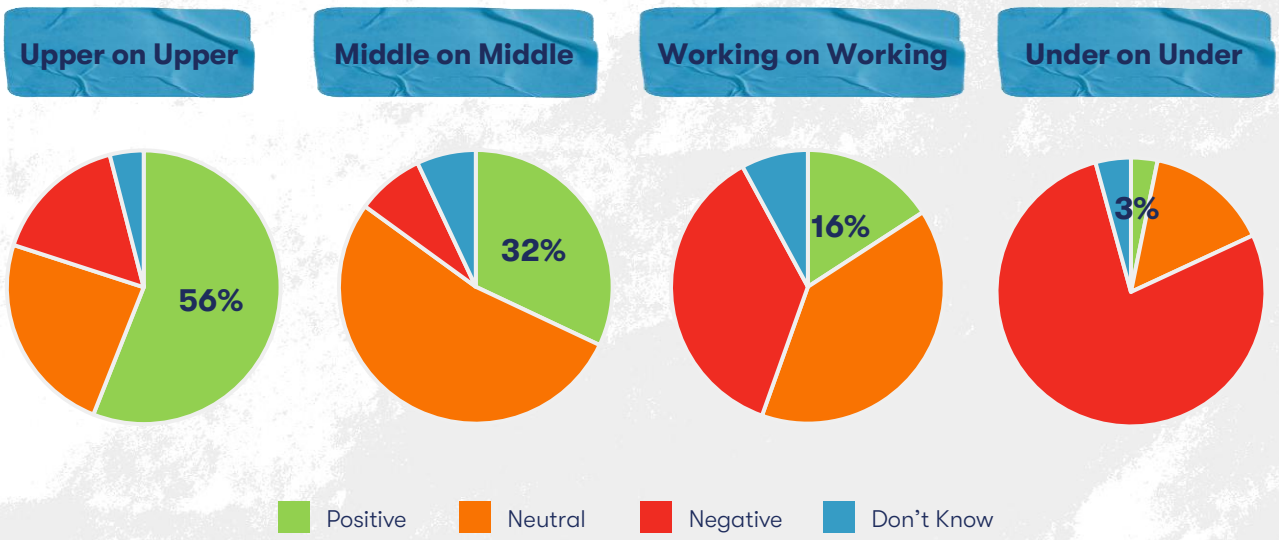
Farce of Class is OMD UK's in-depth research into social class, social mobility and socio-economic grouping.

We chose to investigate these topics because we want to work towards a more representative industry, and the media industry is woeful with regards to proportionate representation of class[1].

[1] All in Census 2023

Our industry is filled to the brim with privilege. Whilst many communications companies are committed to improving the imbalances of protected characteristics, we still have a long way to go within social class. The lack of class representation in companies who are producing content designed to reflect Britain in all its glory is a problem[1]. We found that most classes don't feel as though their social class is represented positively in media[2]. If we want people to buy from brands because they are meeting their needs and reflecting their values, we need to do a better job at showing we know what these are.




## How Things Used to Be

We are told that social mobility – so-called "upwards" mobility – is a good thing, and those of us from the lower rungs of the social ladder should seek to ascend to the dizzying heights of the middle classes and beyond. The focus on ascension reflects a historic reality: one where class was closely correlated to wealth and, usually, the occupation that went alongside that wealth.

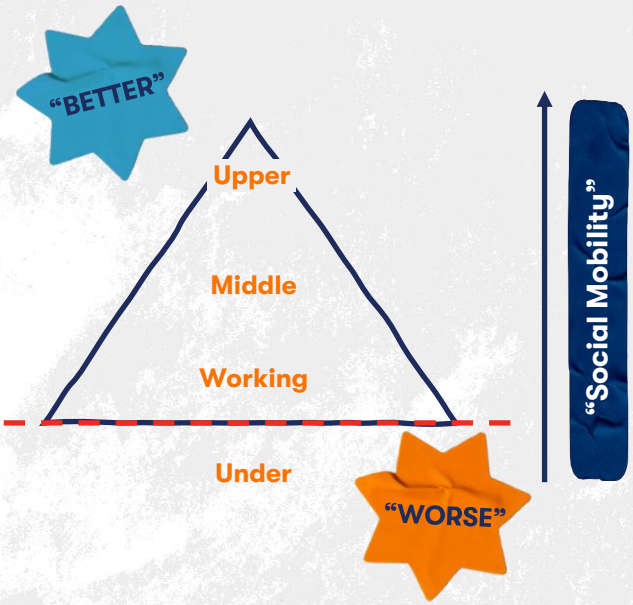
The upper classes were, for example, aristocracy, landed gentry, barristers, surgeons or top lawyers. They earned the most, had the most power, and were very much seen to have the best lot in life. Meanwhile those at the bottom of the ladder – those who were working or, even "worse", under class – had manual jobs at best, may not be working at all, were poor, disenfranchised and struggling. Social mobility supported people in getting away from these conditions.

[1] All in Census 2023

[2] n=7500

The issue with this view today is that there are lots of types of jobs that are more manual in nature – like plumbing, for example – which are highly skilled and well-paid. This notion of aspiring to become upper and middle class also ignores the cultural importance of the under and working class. These parts of society birth artists, commentators, musicians and more. As we'll go on to discuss, most people are very proud of their working class roots. To aspire to leave them behind isn't on people's minds.

**It's time to refresh our thinking.**




## Relatedly...

We remain problematically attached to socio-economic grouping (SEG); blithely talking about "ABC1s" as the by-word for "people who can afford to buy our brand". We still buying entire channels against them, despite SEG quite simply not being fit for purpose anymore.

Channel 4's Mirror on Class and Social Grade study[1], an important resource for our work, also discusses the frequent conflation and substitution of class and SEG and highlight how inappropriate this is in today's social landscape.

A very British thing

**Class**

**a nebulous social construct which originates from hereditary status & power**

**Socio-economic Grouping**

1956

**a hierarchical system which segments individuals into a letter grouping based on the occupation of the chief income earner in HH**



[1]Channel 4: Mirror on Class and Social Grade, 2024.

We explained the notion of SEG to our research participants[1] and their responses to it were similarly bewildered:

**Less than half** of our sample said they understood what **SEG** was

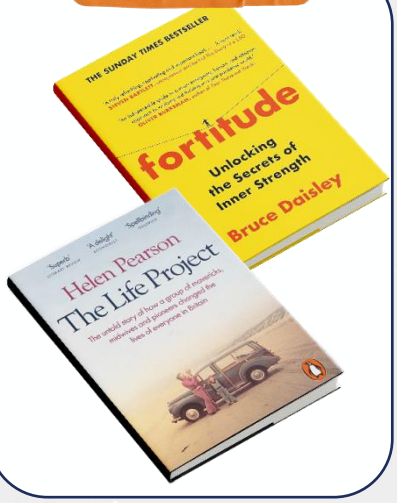
**only 37%** thought it was a useful way to measure someone's class

Lots of the accepted wisdom around social class, social mobility and socio-economic grouping is reductive, obsolete or outright incorrect. What is certainly true, though, is that it's very complicated. What follows is our attempt at untangling some of this complexity.

## Our methodology

In a nation as obsessed with class as our own, there is, unsurprisingly, a fair amount written about it already. We spent some time grappling with these sources before embarking on our own research that shone a light on stories of class within communities where intersectionality threw up additional layers of complexity.

### Lit Review




### Qualitative Stage

THE DIVERSITY STANDARDS COLLECTIVE

| 4 Groups |
|---|
| Middle/upper class |
| Working/underclass - LGBTQ+/disability focus |
| Ethnic minority - working/underclass |
| 45+ - working/underclass |

### Quantitative Stage

STRAT7 researchbods

| 7,500 respondents |
|---|
| 2,925 disabled |
| 1,125 non-white |
| 1,125 LGBTQ+ |
| 5,175 34+ |

[1] n = 7500

## A note on language

Our qualitative and quantitative participants were asked to self-identify their own social class, and we used our qualitative focus group recruitment to determine how to name the group of people who came below working class.

Underclass was the term most frequently used and covers those who were out of work and often on benefits. We acknowledge it's not a perfect term, but those who put themselves within were universally comfortable identifying as such.

## What is Class?

> **I know you can't buy it; I'll say that much**

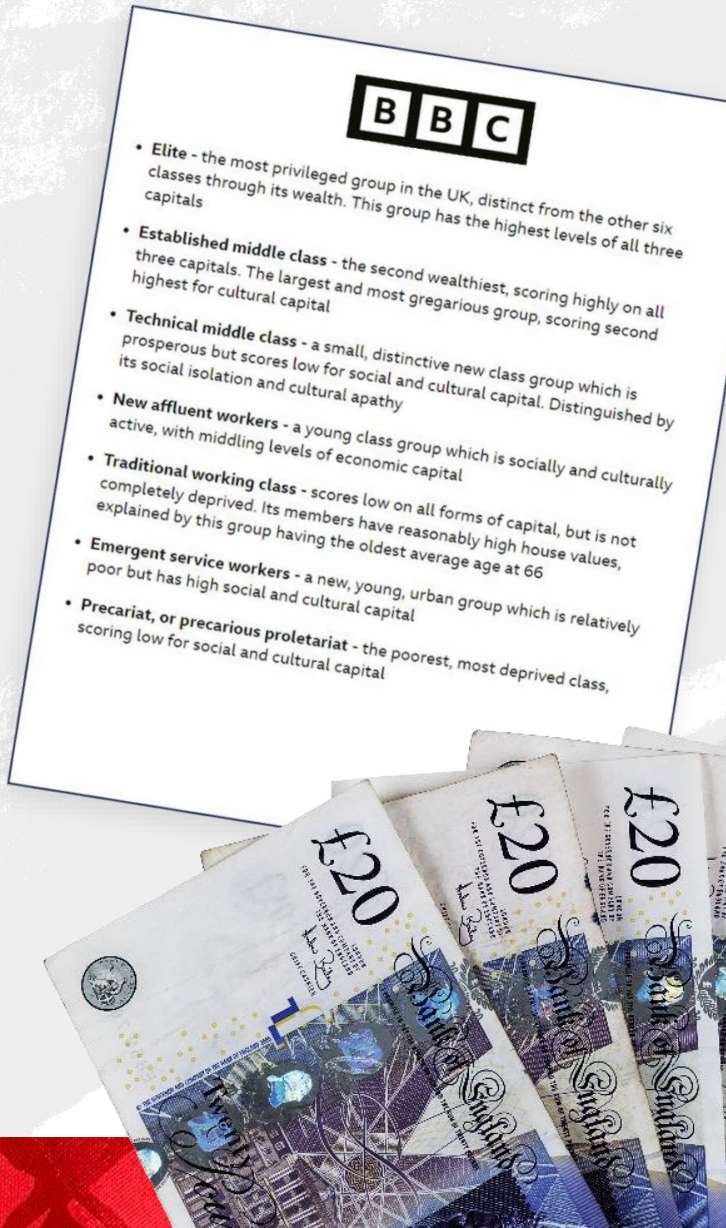


# The Common Shorthand for Class Definition is Uncomfortably Rigid

| Upper | Middle | Working | Under |
|---|---|---|---|
| Generational wealth | "Good" jobs | Less skilled or manual jobs | Unemployed |
| Public or Private School | University educated | Less likely to have attended university | Limited qualifications |
| Influence | "Ordinary" people | "Salt of the Earth" | Disenfranchised |
| Networks | Financial support systems | Financially stretched & limited support | Close to poverty line |

This type of thinking is clearly inaccurate as it doesn't capture the nuance or contributions of people within these groups. Sociologists have spent years attempting to capture class with more granularity by creating updated models of society. Fiona Devine, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester, for example, has textbooks and coverage aplenty about her revised model of society with more nuances built into it.

Whilst there is undoubted merit in these academic pursuits, this model is over ten years old. It has not entered everyday vernacular: the basic 4 groups persist in the way we talk about ourselves, but people's definitions of these are not universal. And often, underclass are entirely disregarded. As the team at Channel 4 insight team put it:




**"The rules of the British class system aren't very clear, but people often feel they have an innate sense of which class they belong to. Although it's hard to explicitly define and explain class in the UK, we're socialised to understand the unwritten rules and where we fit within the system"[3].**

[3] Channel 4: Mirror on Class and Social Grade, 2024.

# The Nuance of Class

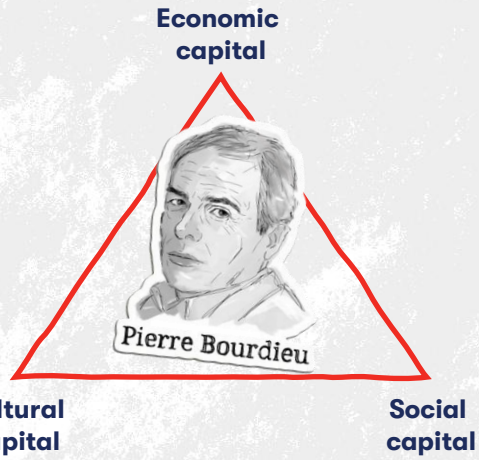
## Class is Multi-Dimensional

Pierre Bourdieu[4], a pre-eminent Sociologist, introduced 'Forms of Capital' in a series of lectures in the 1980s and is a model that endures today as a common way of explaining class – and especially power and influence – in the UK.

**Economic Capital:**
Our financial status.

**Cultural Capital:**
Our values, tastes, hobbies and experiences.

**Social Capital:**
Our influence, friends, family and networks.




When we asked our sample[5] to define class, many of them hit upon elements of this model:

"Income, where you grow up, opportunities as a child"

"The amount of money you have"

"Something to state your social circle in regard to the level of job you have"

"I don't like this word and prefer not to use it. But in general terms I would say it refers to one's educational level, behaviour, and partly profession"

"Type of work, how much you make and your cultural touchstones"

but only one person in the entire study got it completely:



"In society, "class" typically refers to a group of people who share similar socioeconomic status, wealth, education, and/or cultural norms. It often determines access to resources, opportunities, and power within a society"



[4] Pierre Bourdieu, Forms of Capital, 1986
[5] n=7500

**56%** of our responses cited economic capital as a key descriptor of class, which is unsurprising as it clearly relates back to the historic view of class and its tethering to wealth, but it also offers a clearer more rational way of understanding class complexity. This quest for simplicity was perhaps echoed in the viewpoint of SEG from respondents with intersecting marginalised characteristics who were less sceptical of the categorisation:



**49%**
vs. 35%

**Non-white respondents thought it was a good system**

**43%**
vs. 35%

**Exclusively homosexual**
(5 on our LGBTQ+ scale, where 1=hetero)
**thought it was a good system**

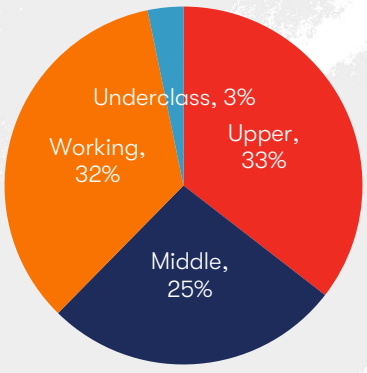
Our deduction here is that SEG is a rational, albeit flawed, way of categorising people. It takes emotion, nuance, bias and prejudice (theoretically) out of the system. If it can be evolved, we think SEG would serve a purpose for our industry still as we seek a way of reaching parts of society that we need for our brand. If affluence, for example, is what our brand seeks, how we can we ensure SEG properly captures this?

In the meantime, we remain mired in social class complexity where economics wins out for some, and for others; people's roots, childhoods and values do.

This nationwide nuance was reflected perfectly when we asked people to classify some well-known people in the UK, specifically Marcus Rashford MBE. He is an elite, international footballer, who earns millions of pounds a year. He is also a Black man from humble roots, who famously campaigned for the continuation of free school meals during the Covid pandemic, and later, into school holidays. Had he been a child at the time of Covid, this would have been a benefit vital to his wellbeing. He is the embodiment of class complexity, and our respondents felt so too. Unsurprisingly, each social class group claimed him as their own.

**Which class would you say the following people belong to?**

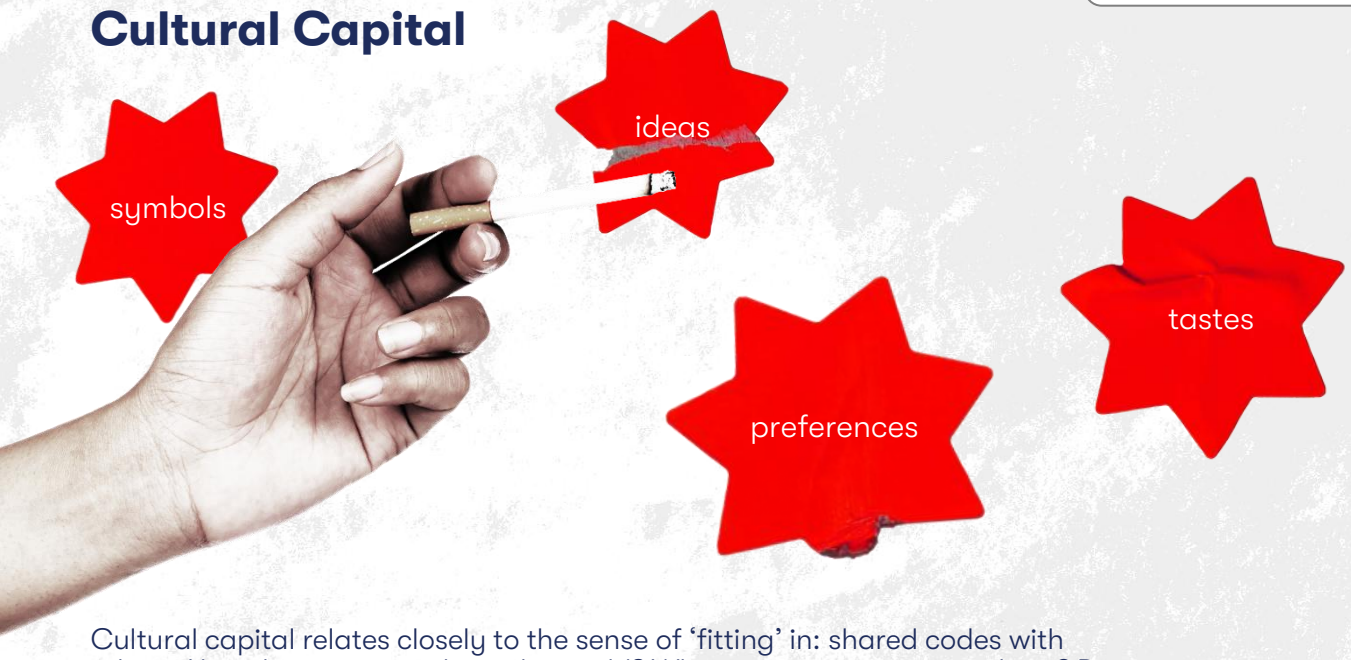





**What Marcus Rashford shows us is that money is not the full picture, reflecting Bourdieu's theory of capital.**

n=7500

# Cultural Capital




Cultural capital relates closely to the sense of 'fitting' in: shared codes with others. How do you move about the world? What are your views on politics? Do you know the right etiquette for the theatre? It's a very easy route into classism and exists everywhere. Shared cultural capital can help you relate to a stranger quickly but a disconnect in this area can alienate someone just as quickly.

## Have you ever hired someone because of cultural fit?

If so, you're using cultural capital and are (probably unintentionally) reinforcing classism.

**I wasn't allowed in the 'managers club' because I didn't drink or look the same. A headscarf = ignorance"**

Shah, Female, 49, Working Class, British Bangladeshi

**There is a heavy emphasis in upper middle classes to teach their children to really value the arts and take them to museums and theatre shows and really appreciate music. I think that's something that was really prominent"**

Lauryn, 23, Female, Chinese British, Hetero



It is in our nature to seek commonalities with those around us, and looking for cultural fit in prospective employees is something we've all likely been a part of in the past. But by seeking those who fit the status quo means a lack of diversity of opinion, background and approaches. It will stifle creativity and make it more difficult for those with working or under-class backgrounds to enter our industry.

We seek these commonalities outside of the workplace too and they form part of your **social capital:** your network, connections, friendships and family.

At the upper echelons of society, we especially saw people 'battening down the hatches': **71%** of our upper class respondents said the main occupations of their friends matched their own. This was a much less strong sentiment amongst working classes: **42%** said most of their friends did similar jobs and **29%** of the underclass said this was the case. **66%** of the middle classes agreed.

This is leading to class echo chambers: where cultural, social and economic capital all work in harmony to reinforce class structures.

The theory of capital, though, isn't the end of the story

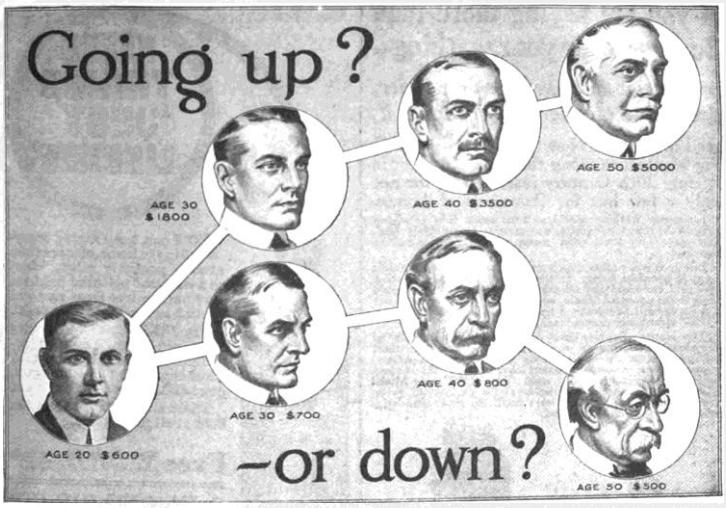
## Class is Fluid

If our friend Marcus Rashford has taught us anything, it is that class isn't necessarily static, and classes can co-exist.

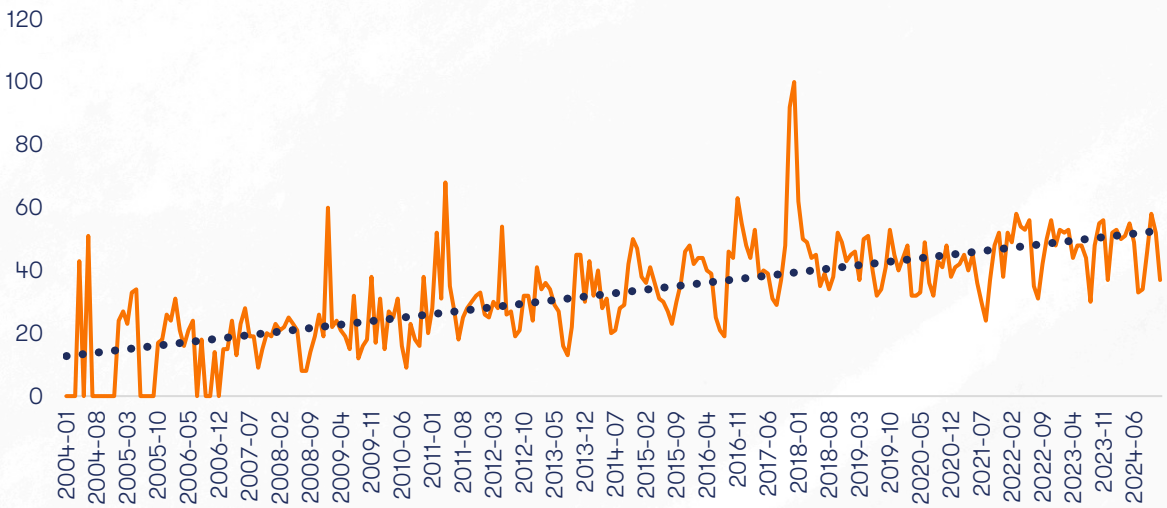


# Is class fluidity the same as social mobility?

Social mobility has become much discussed over the past century and seen as possible and attractive in the face of increased immigration and technological democratisation and advancements.




**Google Searches 2004 – 2024 for 'social mobility'**








We found some mobility in our sample: but movement goes in both directions and as this self-stated movement, despite changes in some people's economic, social or cultural statuses, they may continue to identify with the class they were born into:

**9%**

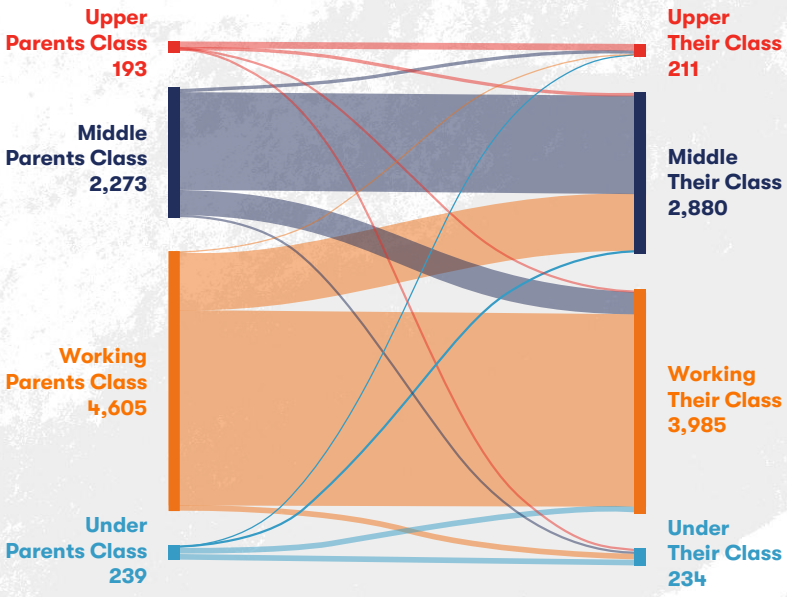
of respondents say they're a lower class than their parents (6% are middle to working)

**17%**

of respondents say they're a higher class than their parents (14% are working to middle, with some under to working)

**72%**

of respondents say they're the same class as their parents




**"You are always and always will be the class that you were born into..."**

Male, 55-76





Whilst there was some movement in our sample, when asked about the feasibility of upwards mobility people's responses were overwhelmingly clear in that it feels either out of reach (58% of our sample said they didn't think it was possible) and or they didn't know (19%).

**Middle class feels so out of reach"**

Kal, 39, White British, Non-Binary M, Trans, Working Class

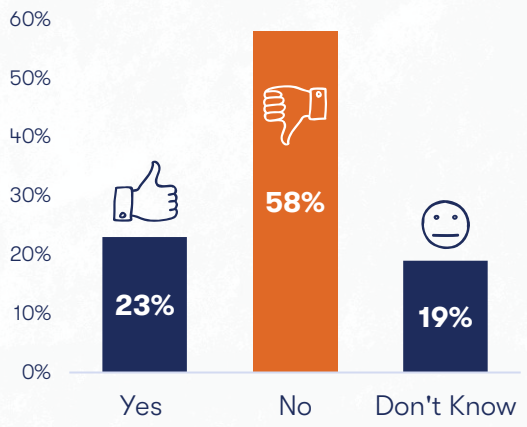
**Because schools do not have enough funding and the background of [your] family doesn't change"**

Female, 33, East Asian, C2DE, Disabled

**Because studies show it isn't. Schools to job opportunities are heavily based on class"**

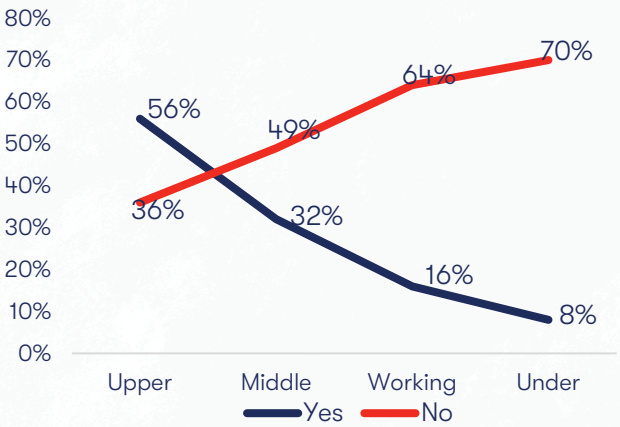
Male, 13-34, Black African, ABC1 (£35-40k income)

**Do you think upwards social mobility (e.g. moving from working class to middle class etc.) is easy for people to achieve in the UK?**




An even starker finding was breaking down these responses by class groups:

**Do you think upwards social mobility (e.g. moving from working class to middle class etc.) is easy for people to achieve in the UK?**




**22%** of underclass didn't know

**61%** of disabled respondents said no

**68%** of trans respondents said no

**Only 1/3 of working and underclass agreed we should aspire to go up a class**

There is a 48ppt difference between upper class and under class perceptions of whether social mobility is possible. That is, those who are supposed to 'benefit' from social mobility don't see it is as possible. We know that very few of our upper class respondents have mobilised upwards, so they are forming opinions outside of their lived experiences. Adding in intersectionality reinforces the negative perspective of the possibility of social mobility within society.

n=7500

# Class is affected by intersectionality

**“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."** Audre Lorde



Up until this point we haven’t overly focussed on how other protected characteristics intersect with class to add yet another layer of complexity.

## Class is deeply racialised in the UK

Portrayal of marginalised communities in mainstream media is often stereotypical, one-note and reductive. We’ve been fed stories that paint communities in a single light that don’t reflect the nuances within them, and this is especially true for social classes. In a systemically racist society that is only now starting to work towards a more equitable reality, people are type-cast or shut out. If people emigrate to the UK, the often find that their class status is ‘downgraded’: struggling to find work at the level they access in their home nation.



**“People were shocked we were a black family living in a house”**

Ana, 42, Female, LGBTQ+, (currently)underclass

**“I wasn’t allowed in the ‘managers club’ because I didn’t drink or look the same. A headscarf = ignorance”**

Shah, Female, 49, Working Class, British Bangladeshi

**“Normally I tend to belong to the upper class, but due to my ethnicity, I'm kind of limited and have more uncertainties”**

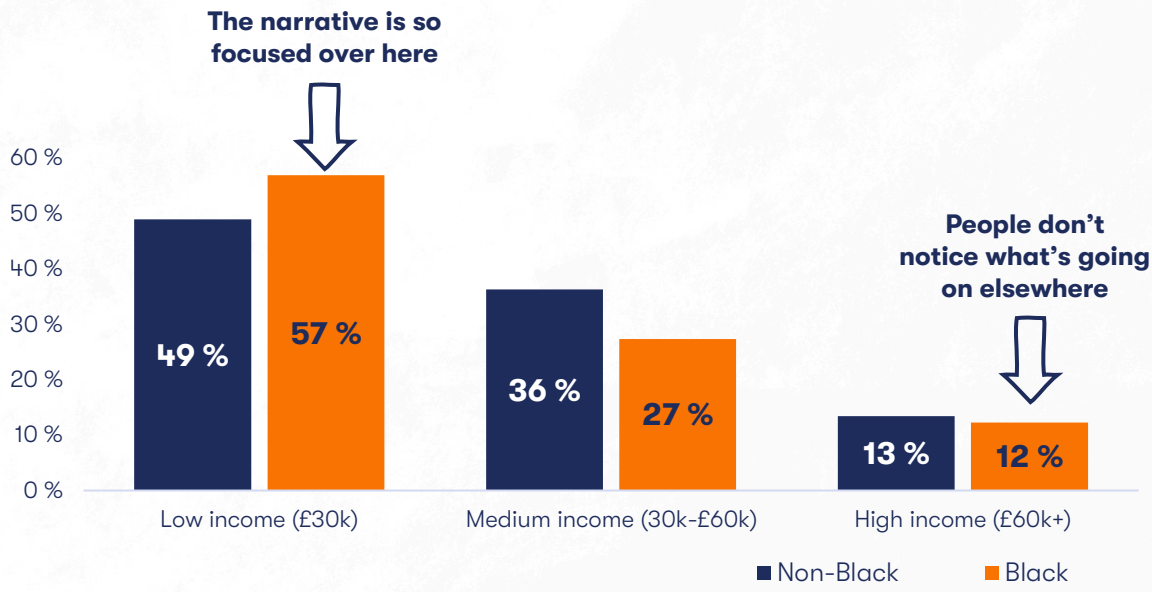
Matt, Male, 33, Middle/Upper Class, Nigerian

**“I had worked for 11 years, but was forced to stop when I moved here. Thus, I'm currently unemployed but looking for a job”.**

Phillipines, Working Class, 34, Female

Despite these barriers, there are millions of high-income non-white families in the UK, but these stories are rarely told in mainstream media.

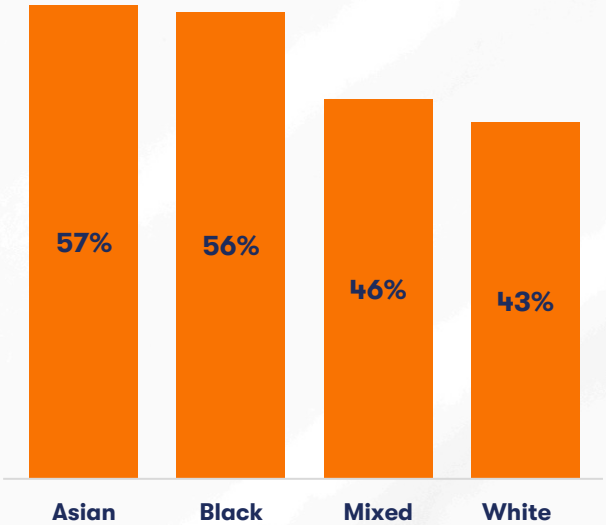
**Income levels for Black HHs in the UK[6]**




It is unsurprising that the non-white / global majority perspective surfaced through our research was that this narrative needs to change. After all, many people move to the UK for the opportunities perceived to be available here.



**Britain is a country that offers children from any background an equal chance of doing well in life (agree/disagree)**




n=7500

[6] Black Pound Report 2022

As a result, the importance of class and achieving upwards mobility was deemed to be higher amongst the global majority.

**74%**

**of Black respondents say class matters**

**66%**

**of non-white respondents say it matters**

**vs**

**55%**

**White respondents**

## The Black Perspective on Class and Social Mobility

**26%**

**more likely to say that upwards mobility is possible vs. non-Black respondents**

**65%**

**(vs. 34% white) said we should aspire to move up a class**

**89%**

**young Black people felt pressure to succeed**

> **My dad reminded me: don't ever forget the ethics and the way you were raised"**
>
> Female, 34, 1st Generation, Nigerian

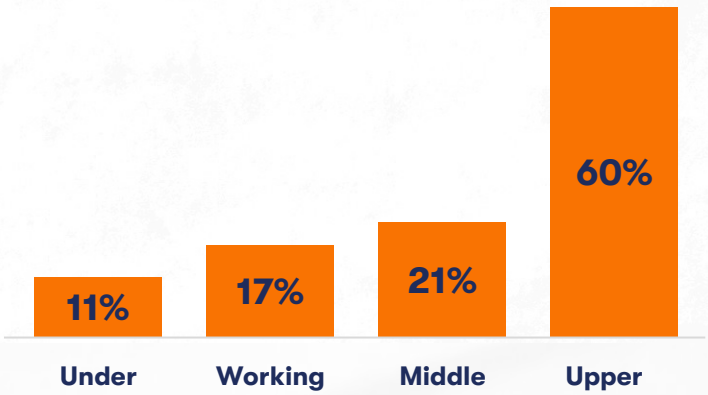
> **The most important thing to improve my situation is education and hard work"**
>
> Male, 25, 1st Generation, Nigerian

The power of education and traditional beliefs amongst the African diasporas especially reiterate this perspective. The enduring focus on betterment was more pervasive for our Black respondents, though rather than this goal being driven by status per sé, it was to achieve a happier and easier life.

We also saw this echoed, interestingly, within the upper class LGBTQ+ community.

The upper classes were much more likely to say that class was an important part of their identity in the round:

**Class is an important part of my identity (agree / disagree)**




Within the upper class cohort, though, those who identified as completely homosexual (we asked about sexuality on a scale, where 5 was completely homosexual and 1 was completely heterosexual), had a 10ppt difference in their agreement with this statement. There is some research that suggest that wealth and status allows prejudice around sexuality to be circumnavigated. It's certainly a topic of debate in online forums[7].




## In summary

Class is especially nuanced in the UK. It is made this complex by the changing nature of work; immigration; globalisation and education. We are representing class in a reductive, problematic way in our industry, and it is hobbling us creatively as well as within our media strategies.



[7] https://www.quora.com/Are-gay-people-generally-better-off-and-mostly-wealthy-or-do-they-just-dress-look-better

n=7500

# Key Findings

## The Limitations of Traditional Class Definitions:

- Existing models of social class are outdated, overly simplistic, and fail to capture the nuances of modern British society.
- The concept of social mobility is not universally applicable or achievable in contemporary society. Many find upward mobility unattainable.
- Our research highlights the inadequacy of SEG in reflecting the diversity of class experiences and the complexity of intersectionality (how various social identities, such as race and sexual orientation, interact with class).

## A Multi-Dimensional View of Class:

- Our research incorporates Bourdieu's concept of capital, encompassing economic, cultural, and social capital, to offer a more comprehensive understanding of class dynamics.
- Economic capital (financial status) remains a significant factor, but cultural capital (values, tastes, experiences) and social capital (networks, connections) also play crucial roles in shaping class identity and experience.
- Cultural capital can unintentionally reinforce classism through practices like prioritising "cultural fit" in hiring, which often favours those from privileged backgrounds.

## Social Mobility and Class Fluidity:

- Our sample showed limited social mobility, with many participants believing upward mobility to be improbable. This perception varies significantly across class groups, with a substantial disparity between the upper and under classes.
- While some class fluidity exists, individuals may retain a strong identification with their class of origin even after changes in economic or social status.

## Intersectionality and Class:

- Our research emphasizes the intersection of class with other protected characteristics, particularly race and sexual orientation.
- Class is deeply racialised in the UK, with stereotypical media portrayals often neglecting to showcase class diversity within marginalized communities. Immigration can lead to a perceived "downgrading" of class status for an individual.
- Despite economic success among many non-white families, these narratives remain underrepresented in mainstream media. The desire for upward mobility is stronger among global majority groups, often motivated by a desire for a better life rather than solely status.
- Within the upper class, LGBTQ+ individuals who identify as completely homosexual show a different perspective on the importance of class as part of their identity compared to heterosexual individuals in the same class.



## What do we do now?

Our main action is to task ourselves as industry to better represent class in our targeting, portrayal and representation.

## 5 things to take away

1. Consider whether a 'social mobility' ERG is the right way of representing working and under-class backgrounds.
2. Push to include all types of class background in content, with clear intersections and accents.
3. Ensure the stories told of these class backgrounds are varied and not rooted in lazy stereotype.
4. Don't hire for cultural fit, and ensure hiring managers are trained to identify and limit class & cultural bias.
5. Ask why you are using SEG in your targeting. If it's for affluence, then stop doing it, re-clarify and work smarter to hit those people.



## Introducing reCLASSified

As a result of our findings, we are launching a cross-industry working group, which aims to:

1. Bring together minds across media to come to a joint industry solution that evolves beyond SEG
2. Leaves competitive agency mentality to one side and aims to create genuine momentum for the betterment of our industry
3. Brings together agencies and commercial partners.




**If you would like to join, please contact**
**laura.rowe@omd.com**