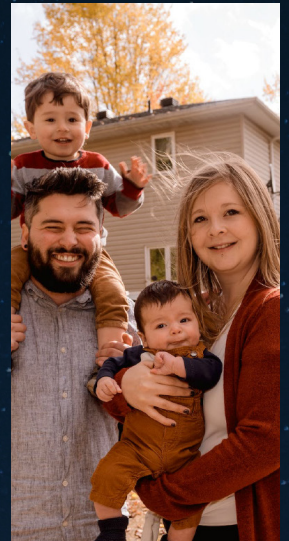


The American Middle Class

Issue # 007

Summer 2023





Chapter 2

Elements of the Myth

“Middle class is more a **promise** than **reality**.”

-Pew Research

Background

Previously on The American Middle Class...

In the first installment, we explored how culture—not income—has been the most useful way to understand the middle class.

1

Defining the Middle Class

Overview

The many ways, both economic and cultural, we define the middle class, and a historical look at where we've landed

Takeaway

Media and marketers have had a leading role in shaping not just who we think the middle class is, but what we think they stand for

We validated this through a 1400-person survey, interviews, social listening and a host of external data sources. The result sheds light on the fact that income can be totally inadequate and even misleading when it comes to targeting people for products and services.

Today on The American Middle Class...

We've built our cultural definition over eighty years of pop culture and media. This definition is made up of several assumptions about the middle class that collectively make up a middle class myth. We assume they're hard-working, moral and the backbone of American culture. In this chapter, we explore:

- The elements that make up this myth
- How pop culture reinforces them
- How these elements have always been less realistic and more aspirational
- How the middle class today stacks up against these elements
- What brands can do to bring media closer to reality

2

Elements of the Myth



Components of how we've culturally defined the middle class through decades of the family sitcom.

3

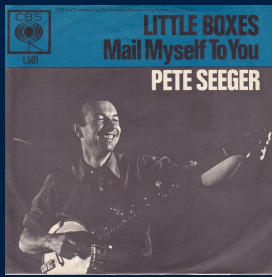
The Shrinking Class

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The Real Middle Class

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Brand Outlook



Soundtrack:
"Little Boxes"
Pete Seeger

Family Ties.
The Partridge Family.
All in the Family.
Family Matters.
The Family Guy.

TV sure loves its middle class families. But what does that mean for how regular Americans think about the middle class as a whole?



Ever since that Typical American Family contest in 1939, we have associated a nuclear family with our image of the middle class. How we show that nuclear family through pop culture thus shapes how we think about the middle class itself.

The family sitcom has been a cultural mainstay since the birth of television. It's also the vehicle through which we've built this myth of the middle class: What it looks like, who it's made up of, what they should believe in and what they should aspire to. We focused on eight in particular over the decades that have been instrumental in developing or reinforcing our collective narrative of what the middle class is.

For the tl;dr version, click [here](#).

Click on each to learn more:

1950s Leave It To Beaver



Homeownership

1960s The Andy Griffith Show



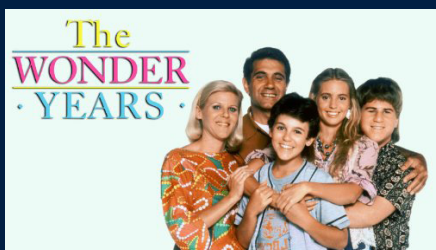
Security

1970s The Jeffersons



Equal Opportunity

1980s The Wonder Years



Nostalgia

1990s Everybody Loves Raymond



Family Values

2000s Reba



Perseverance

2010s Modern Family



Harmony

2020s The Conners



Familiarity

Home Ownership

1950s

Leave It To Beaver

Beaver lives in a world where a middle-income family can live a wholesome, comfortable life in the new American suburbs. The stakes in his life are generally pretty low, ranging from typical childhood shenanigans to witnessing benign marital bickering.

His dad has a pleasant commute to his management job in the city. And equipped with all the modern comforts of her home (an electric mixer!), June Cleaver is empowered to be the perfect housewife. They're basically the post-Fair version of The Middletons. Leave It to Beaver not only made the Cleavers into a lasting image of the middle class family for young Boomers of the time, it made suburban home ownership part of their definition.



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The Myth: One of the most lasting images of the middle class family doesn't even involve the literal family at all: A comfortable (suburban) home where you can safely raise your family and not have to worry about making rent.

Context

“The middle class are mostly suburbanites with their own home.”

-Male, White, Age 51

When Leave It to Beaver debuted in 1957, WWII was barely a decade in the rearview mirror, and America was rapidly changing. An expanding network of new freeways suddenly opened large swaths of the country up for residential expansion. The result: the birth of the American suburb. And post-war American international dominance meant a strong economy that allowed everyday people to move into affordable homes in these pop-up communities.

But these suburban homes weren't as achievable as they were made out to be. Many contained racial covenants preventing them from being sold to people of color, and millions of blue-collar workers in the city still found them financially out of reach.

Current Reality

Young adult homeownership has dropped 10% between Beaver's era and now (Source: U.S. Census Bureau). The easiest explanation for why is that the median house price in 1954 was \$203,612 (adjusted for inflation). In 2023, it's \$375,310, almost 2x more.

Furthermore, younger consumers now have very different preferences when it comes to their ideal home. A combination of fiscal, environmental and cultural preferences have led many to prefer a very different style of house. And millions of Boomers are finding their suburban McMansions are almost unsellable.

Even if more challenging these days, homeownership remains a huge part of not just what people associate with the middle class, but what is important in their life as well: In response to what defines “middle class,” one respondent simply wrote, “owning a home.”



A combination of economics and socio-cultural forces persuade the main character of 2020's Nomadland to have no fixed home at all.

BRAND TAKEAWAYS

It's time to update our imagery when it comes to the typical American home.



THE AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS



While consumer preferences (and financial ability) regarding home ownership change, advertisers' visuals haven't. We continue to use the large, suburban traditional home.

ELEMENTS OF THE MYTH | 7

Security

1960s

The Andy Griffith Show

Single dad Andy Taylor is a small-town sheriff in Mayberry, North Carolina. With the help of his aunt and a bevy of zany-but-benign townsfolk, he is raising his son, Opie. But in sleepy Mayberry, there isn't much danger around, and the biggest threat Opie faces is a particularly tough day fishing.

While the 1960s might be remembered for being politically volatile, things in Mayberry are instead quaint and old-fashioned, deliberately reminiscent of a bygone era, even at the time it was being made. All the crime Andy deals with is low-stakes, and he spends his time mediating neighborly disputes rather than tackling hardened criminals.



The Myth: A middle class salary affords you not just the financial breathing room to avoid living paycheck to paycheck, but also the ability to live in a neighborhood free of crime, work a job with work-life balance, and know your kids are protected from the ills of the world.

Context

The Andy Griffith Show came out during the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement, but life in Mayberry was pretty much entirely white and devoid of racial discord. And despite the fact that its titular character is a cop, crime is never a real threat in the show. At a time when “middle class” was reserved for white families, it depicted a world that was safe and free of the racial tension and civil unrest white families feared about the big cities.

Current Reality

Most of our survey respondents are deeply concerned about safety for their families:

“[The middle class] is a quiet home but insecure with the future.”

-Male, White, Age 35

64%

of people said they worry about gun violence often or very often.

58%

said they worried about local crime often or very often.

These worries were second only to inflation and the economy when it comes to taking up people’s brain space. Furthermore, the racial tensions that characterized the early part of the 1960s are still present. While the fervor of Summer 2020 isn’t there, protests are still happening, and some Americans associate the violence they’re afraid of with these efforts. Compared to Opie’s carefree days in Mayberry, American children now endure active shooter drills, a mental health crisis and climate uncertainty. 44% of K-12 parents now say they worry about their kids’ safety at school, up from 10% just eight years ago (Source: Gallup).

BRAND TAKEAWAYS



Many people feel let down by traditional institutions for not preserving basic security in their communities. Can brands fill the emotional gap?

Affordable fashion brand ASOS has joined many others in the Safe Space Alliance to encourage the safety of marginalized people, particularly the LGBTQ+ community.

Equal Opportunity

1970s

The Jeffersons

Well we're movin' on up
To the east side
To a deluxe apartment in the sky
Movin' on up
To the east side
We finally got a piece of the pie

From its opening seconds, *The Jeffersons* was always explicit about its premise. Its titular family had finally made it and was getting a fancy apartment in the city. The lead character had worked his way from nothing up to owning a dry cleaning business successful enough to allow him to move away from Archie Bunker and into Manhattan. The implications are two-fold and equally clear: (1) Upward mobility is possible if you work hard, and (2) Black Americans have equal opportunity to be successful.



The Myth: Anything is possible in America, and the middle class epitomizes that. No matter where you start, you can get yourself to the middle class. And once you're there, there's nothing stopping you from making the most of every opportunity to rise even higher.

Context

In 1975, troops were finally returning home from Vietnam, suburban white flight was decimating urban communities and the United States was at the rock bottom of a recession in which 2.3M Americans lost their job (Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics). Three years prior, the Equal Employment Opportunity Act was passed to address racial and religious discrimination in workplaces. While families like the Jeffersons were theoretically possible, systemic prejudice and poor market conditions made it highly unlikely at the time.

Current Reality

Fifty years later, many still feel opportunities are not equally distributed:

64%

of people say there isn't equal opportunity in America.

"The middle class is shrinking because of a lack of money and opportunities."

-Male, Black, Age 70

58%

strongly agree that how rich you are when you're born impacts how successful you'll be later.

"It's unfortunate that I'll never get the opportunities the elite have, but I'm learning to have solace."

-Female, Asian, Age 16

Things are even more stark when we look at the views of young people. Gen Z is 66% more likely than Boomers to feel hard work alone can't lift you out of poverty, and are 2x more likely to feel classism exists in America.

BRAND TAKEAWAYS



Younger Americans feel self help is the only help: They have to seize success for themselves, because the system isn't set up to aid them.

Contrary to popular belief, younger people aren't hoping to become influencers because of vanity or laziness. They just no longer believe in the American Dream of building wealth slowly and upward mobility.

Nostalgia

1980s

The Wonder Years

Kevin Arnold is just an average kid growing up in late-'60s suburbia. His dad carries with him Silent Generation repressed trauma while his housewife mom is dabbling in the feminism of the times. He navigates his family and his first crush with the naivete of youth.

Here's the catch: Kevin is actually in his 30s, and all of this is a flashback. And while not every aspect of growing up is easy, Kevin's story (as the title implies) holds on to the idea that there is something magical about the past, even if tumultuous at the time.

The format has since been copied several times: *How I Met Your Mother*, *The Goldbergs* and even a new version of *The Wonder Years* itself for the 21st century.

There's lasting resonance in a little reminiscing.



The Myth: The middle class is just a little bit old-timey, never being afraid to slow things down a little at home, and never losing sight of the values they were raised on. They long for the good old days, but might forget that they have on rose-colored glasses.

Context

In the 1980s, after two volatile decades of war and social unrest, Americans were seemingly looking for reminders of “better” bygone days. An attitude that has become synonymous with the Reagan Era, nostalgia for decades past was high, and Reagan himself (an actor of some fame in the 40s) was a nostalgic choice in some ways. The Wonder Years was hardly the only piece of IP to capture this. Family Ties, Back to the Future and (a couple of years earlier) Grease also tapped into a yearning for the nostalgic conservatism of the 1950s and other eras.

Current Reality

There’s more awareness now than ever before that the good old days were not particularly good for millions of Americans. Particularly for younger Americans, many of whom fall under marginalized identities, greater DEI visibility has lifted voices who call for progress instead of romanticizing the past.

We’re not just split as a country on whether or not the past is/was better. Many people can’t even come to a consensus with themselves.

Female, Black, Age 33

“Things are getting harder globally.”

BUT agrees that things are easier for today’s kids than they were for her when she was growing up

Male, White, Age 27

“Every day there is more poverty and more inflation.”

BUT strongly agrees the country is headed in the right direction

BRAND TAKEAWAYS

Nostalgia doesn’t have to be photorealistic. When leaning into the sentimental past, think of how you can improve it for modern inclusivity.



THE AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS



Most throwbacks to the past aren’t going to be very diverse, because marginalized groups were blocked out of content creation at the time. You don’t have to stay true to that. Shows like Bridgerton have found a loophole: Rewrite history to make it more inclusive. It’s not a perfect fix, but a step in a more inclusive direction. And audiences are showing that they want to see these updates.

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Family Values

1990s

Everybody Loves Raymond

Ray Barone is your average, Long Island dad: The sole breadwinner who is just looking for a moment of peace when he comes home from a day of work. If only his wife weren't always at the ready to nag him! Said wife, Debra, is a stay-at-home mom whose biggest character flaw is being mediocre at housework.

Together, they live on a tree-lined suburban street. And their daughter and twin boys are as close to 2.5 kids you can get without literally having half a kid. Ray's cranky father, meddling mother and doofus brother constantly interrupt their suburban peace from their house across the street. And his greatest stress comes from mediating his overly critical mother's passive-aggressive comments toward his frazzled wife.

But despite all the bickering, this family is loving, church-going, and traditional.



The Myth: If it wasn't already clear, the term "middle class" almost implies "family." As a result, there's something very "Rated G" about it: It's the middle class's job to be the keeper of American morality. This means leading a virtuous life and teaching your kids to do the same.

Context

By the time Everybody Loves Raymond debuted in 1996, the percent of households with stay-at-home moms had been steadily decreasing for decades before bottoming out at 23% in 1999 (Source: Pew Research). Debra Ramone was already an anomaly for the times.

Current Reality

"Family-oriented" was one of the top five words survey respondents said they associated with the middle class. But this association is waning. Millennials were only about half as likely to associate "family-oriented" with "middle class," and families today look a lot different than they did in even the '90s.

"[The middle class] used to be the nuclear family, but I doubt that is the typical household any longer."

-Male, Hispanic, Age 61

"The middle class is struggling to find joy with the stifling pressure of financial success and family relationships."

-Female, White, Age 34

In 1990, 2.9% of marriages were interracial compared to 15.1% in 2020 (Source: U.S. Census Bureau). The percent of unmarried couples who cohabitates has doubled in that same time span, and adults are 21% less likely to be married now (Source: Pew Research Center). Heterosexual nuclear families aren't necessarily the default anymore, and it's clear certain pockets of the country are at odds about this. Regardless of their thoughts around family, though, 77% of middle class survey respondents still said leading a moral life is important. What that entails, though, might be changing.

BRAND TAKEAWAYS



Brands have to find a way to bridge the gap between people who are still adhering to hyper-traditional family structures and values, while understanding what modern morality means to the other side of the spectrum.

Our interviews found plenty of people (even young ones) who still cite Everybody Loves Raymond as one of their favorite shows. Trends like #tradwife show that there are still people who believe in traditional values even as the world changes.

Perseverance

2000s

Reba

Reba Hart's got a lot on her plate in Season 1. She's ambushed with a divorce from her husband after he gets his mistress pregnant. She's trying to civilly navigate coparenting their three children. She needs to get back into the workforce as a new single mom. Her oldest daughter is about to become a teen parent, and she's had to take in the baby's father now that he's been disowned. And oh yeah: Somehow, it's also her job to do emotional labor for her ex-husband's new wife, too.

By the time the show ends, she's a thriving real estate agent, has guided all of her children toward successful, independent lives, manages to finally forgive her ex and his wife and is at peace with her single life. Her family might not look like Debra Barone's, but she's living proof of middle class resilience and self-made reinvention.



The Myth: The middle class family is hard-working, gritty and resourceful. While not always truly rags-to-riches, there's a self-made spirit that implies they've earned every penny they've got. They are the embodiment of the saying, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade."

Context

It's impossible to ignore that Reba premiered less than a month after 9/11. Much like the nation as a whole, the show opens with Reba trying to rebuild a life and trust that was taken from her. Not everyone can take this on the chin the way Reba does. And in fact, the political polarization and economic impact of multiple wars that resulted from this era have had a lasting emotional impact on middle class families.

Current Reality

Many households feel they are a job loss, a medical bill, a divorce away from financial ruin. Rather than being able to rebuild their lives, they know an unexpected expense could be crippling. For millions of younger Americans, student loan debt has left them struggling to build a life, let alone rebuild one.

But perseverance perseveres. Americans are still as resourceful and adaptable as they've always been, even if things feel harder now. Whether it be a #lifehack or a side hustle, they're finding ways to make it work and taking pride in what they've accomplished.

"I feel like I deserve what I have because I have worked hard for it."

-Male, Hispanic, Age 61

1/2

of middle class people say they worry about debt, paying their bills on time, and being able to retire.

"I'm very proud of being middle class because [my family got here through] hard work and sweat."

-Female, Asian, Age 16

BRAND TAKEAWAYS

r/self
by [deleted] • 12 yr. ago

I never realized how crippling credit card debt can be until I no longer had any.

I have basically carried some sort of unsecured debt since I graduated high school.

Last year I finally paid off all of my debt and started building savings. Then I quit my job for a year and lived on savings. Recently I got a job, while still having savings left. The new job I got was a bit of a raise from my previous, around 10%, but now I have so much money every month that I don't even know what to do with it.

I never realized how much money was just disappearing every month and going straight to credit cards.

The difference is shocking, and my spending habits aren't even that different. I was basically responsible but just carrying the anchor of debt from when I wasn't responsible in my youth. I guess you just get used to it.

Now I am like AWWWWWWEEEEEEEE YYYYYEEEEAAAAAAAHHHHH :)

It's about time we celebrated the everyday victories, not just the momentous rebuilds. Let's give credit where credit is due, and support the more modest ways people show their resilience.

Social media is full of stories of people proudly describing how they paid off a medical bill, finally were able to start a retirement fund or were able to save for something they've wanted for years. Success comes in all shapes and forms, and brands could do a whole lot better to highlight and respect this.

Harmony

2010s

Modern Family

Modern Family puts a lot of emphasis on the first word in its title. At its onset, it claimed to be a sitcom that showed parts of the family experience rarely represented on screen. The typical family—the middle class family— could take on more than just one form: An older patriarch who has remarried a much younger, Latina wife and has a baby that will be younger than its nieces and nephews. A gay brother and his husband with an adopted Chinese child. And...a white, heterosexual, nuclear central family with a white picket fence and a stay-at-home mom?



The Myth: Middle class folks aren't sh*t stirrers. This is easy when we historically also consider them to be homogeneous—there's not much sh*t to stir when everyone is living just like you. But we also consider them to be tolerant of diversity and polite to everyone.

Context

The show debuted in 2009, the tail end of The Great Recession. As a result of the recession, around 3.8M Americans lost their homes to foreclosure (Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, 2016). The bulk of these occurred during Modern Family's first couple of seasons. And yet the patriarch of the show owns a closet business (??) and his son-in-law is a realtor. They all live in suburban homes well beyond the average family's means.

In many ways, Modern Family was not modern at all. The Latina stepmom has since been criticized as an offensive stereotype, and the challenges of her interracial household are nearly never played for more than a punch line. Any homophobia the brother's family faces is kept a safe distance away from feeling too real, and the realities of their child's ethnic heritage are almost entirely ignored. And of course there's also the fact that all of these people would actually qualify as upper class.

Current Reality

*There is no average American household.
There is a great deal of diversity."*

—Male, White, Age 56

*"Diversity is one of the
biggest barriers to becoming
more financially stable."*

—Female, White, Age 69

The actual middle class is radically diverse. But this diversity isn't always met as warmly as in Modern Family. 43% of people in our survey said they worry about immigration. But the fact is, the middle class (and the country as a whole) has become increasingly Hispanic and Asian in recent years, and as our survey illuminated, many see this as a threat to the middle class itself.

*"[Our] infrastructure does
not support the diversity
of the middle class."*

—Female, White, Age 69

That said, particularly with Gen Z and Millennials, diversity is a critical component of the middle class's future, many of whom cited ethnic, racial, and gender diversity as reasons why the middle class is important.

BRAND TAKEAWAYS



A commitment to embracing diversity requires more than just diverse casting. Keeping the rest of the imagery the same continues to perpetuate the myth of middle class homogeneity.

Bangladeshi-American influencer Nabela Noor has made a career out of photographing her multiracial family. She is a relatively rare example of diversity in the mommy blogger space, but the aesthetic she has curated is nonetheless indistinguishable from that established by the largely white influencers that came before her.

Familiarity

2020s

The Conners

Originally a revival of the 1980s' *Roseanne*, *The Conners* follows the lives of its characters decades later. The show resets a season in, with the death of the exurban Illinois family's matriarch. They are lower middle class and dealing with co-parenting, financial insecurity and grief—common issues for most families in their socioeconomic status.

Their lives are far from the manicured, sunny lawns of *Modern Family* but no less loving. And even when times are tough, optimism and joy lead the way.



The Myth: The pace of change seems to get faster every year, but the middle class home is where we return to for that dose of normalcy and familiarity. There's food on the table, your job is secure, and your kids are thriving. Your lawn is landscaped just like your neighbors', and those neighbors look an awful lot like you. It's an image and a feeling that will always be consistent.

Context

If upon seeing *The Conners* your question was, "Who asked for this?" then we're right there with you. The answer is, a lot of people. *The Conners* is hardly an isolated example. The last few years have seen reboots, continuations and spin-offs of classic properties that suggest something beyond just the usual Hollywood laziness and risk aversion. There's a revamp of *The Wonder Years*, *That '90s Show* and *How I Met Your Father*. Outside the family sitcom space, there are revivals of *Clone High* and *Futurama*, a remake of *Night Court* and a *Teen Wolf* spinoff. And this is just on TV. Elsewhere, "The Macarena" is apparently back, too. Not all of this is for nostalgic Millennials and Gen Xers. One of Gen Z's favorite TV shows is *Friends*, which went off the air before many of them were even born.

Current Reality

With many Americans feeling like the pace of change is spiraling out of control, demand for the familiar is skyrocketing. *The Conners* reflects this desire to return to familiar, solid ground. But something's not quite right. Case in point: The show's original namesake, Roseanne Barr, is no longer compatible with modern sensibilities. We've brought back the show, but it doesn't quite speak to 2023 like it did in 1993 without modification. Families, homes, jobs, dreams, and culture has evolved – and will continue to. The images and portrayals that once were constant are now not as relevant. And new stories of what it means to be middle class are out there still waiting to be told. Familiarity might imply a desire for the same, but what that 'same' is, will continue to shift.

"I don't think there is an 'average' American family anymore."

-Female, White, Age 43

81%

of people do NOT associate "aspirational" with the middle class.

49%

of people say the middle class is shrinking. Only 14% disagree.

BRAND TAKEAWAYS

We don't have to force-fit familiar things into modern life to help people cope with change. Brands that tap into core, human experiences instead of solely relying on old IP are more effective at providing comfort.



THE AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS



From *Caddyshack* to *Clueless*, Super Bowl LVIII couldn't stop dishing out revamped versions of the old. On the flip side, McDonald's knows no matter how the world changes or how old we get, we can't let go of the unbridled joy of childhood. Their Cactus Plant Flea Market Happy Meal activation understood this.

Elements of the Myth TL;DR

The image we carry and the assumptions we make about the middle class don't always match up to the reality of actual middle class lives. And people are definitely noticing the dissonance:

MYTH-REALITY GAP



For young Americans, homeownership has become a pipe dream. And where it isn't, the supply doesn't match the demands of today.



Millions of middle class Americans no longer feel physically safe in their own communities, let alone stable in their lives.



Many feel where you start out—your race, gender, parents' wealth, etc.—determines where you'll end up.



People yearn for yesteryear but are conflicted knowing that things weren't always better for everyone in the "good old days."



In many ways, we live in two Americas: One where traditional gender roles and family structures hold true, and one where they're met with disgust.



It's hard to keep up optimism when it feels like the deck is stacked against you, but people are able to carve out space to be proud of how far they've come.



There's room for improvement when it comes to supporting diversity and non-traditional structures within middle class families.



We're seeking out comfort wherever we can in the face of unprecedented change, but just a fresh coat of paint isn't always the answer.

BRAND TAKEAWAY

It's time to update our imagery when it comes to the typical American home.

Many people feel let down by traditional institutions for not preserving basic security in their communities. Can brands fill the emotional gap?

Gen Z feels self help is the only help: They have to seize success for themselves, because the system isn't set up to aid them.

Nostalgia doesn't have to be photorealistic. When leaning into the sentimental past, think of how you can improve it for modern inclusivity.

Brands either have to pick a side or bridge the gap between pockets of the country that are still traditional, and those that feel strongly otherwise.

It's about time we celebrated the everyday victories, not just the momentous rebuilds.

A commitment to embracing diversity requires more than just diverse casting. Keeping the rest of the imagery the same continues to perpetuate the myth of middle class homogeneity.

Brands that tap into core, human experiences instead of solely relying on old IP are more effective at providing comfort.

Next Time On The American Middle Class...

When we talk about a shrinking middle class, we're usually commenting on how this growing gap between myth and reality makes us feel. Next time, we'll explore the causes of this growing gap and the impact it has on people both psychologically and functionally.