

Wendt's Promotional Class Theory: A Historical Turning Point

I. Introduction

A. Definition of Terms

- **Middle Class:** Traditionally defined by stable employment, moderate income, and a significant role in professional and administrative occupations. In the U.S., the Pew Research Center defines the middle class as households earning between two-thirds and double the median household income, approximately \$56,000 to \$168,000 annually as of 2023.
- **Promotional Class:** A new social class characterized by individuals who engage in marketing, branding, and promotional activities for others as a primary or significant part of their economic and social identity. This includes social media influencers, content creators, digital marketers, and freelance brand consultants who promote products and services for companies and brands.

B. Scope and Purpose of the Theory

- To explain how economic, social, and technological changes have driven the decline of the middle class and the emergence of the promotional class.
- To explore the implications of this transition on society, economy, and individual identities.
- To provide a comprehensive framework that explains this shift as a historical turning point, similar to the creation of the middle class.

C. Overview of Key Concepts

- Evolution of employment patterns from traditional middle-class jobs to roles centered around promoting products and services for others.
- Influence of digital platforms and social media algorithms on economic success.
- Changing social status markers from professional achievements to digital influence through promotional activities.
- The profound impact of the middle class's decline on economic stability, social cohesion, and individual well-being.

II. Historical Context

A. Traditional Role of the Middle Class

- **Economic Stability:** Historically, the middle class has been characterized by stable, well-paying jobs in sectors such as education, healthcare, manufacturing, and administration. These jobs provided benefits, job security, and opportunities for career advancement.
 - Data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2022) indicates that middle-class households earned between \$56,000 and \$168,000 annually, with many having access to homeownership, retirement savings, and higher education for their children.
 - The middle class played a crucial role in economic stability by contributing significantly to consumer spending, which drives economic growth. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, consumer spending accounted for approximately 70% of the U.S. GDP in 2023.
- **Social Stability:** The middle class has been seen as the backbone of society, promoting values such as education, hard work, and community involvement.
 - Middle-class families typically valued higher education and invested in it as a means of upward mobility. In 2022, around 52% of Americans identified as middle class, with a high percentage holding college degrees.
 - Middle-class communities often served as hubs of social stability, with lower crime rates and higher levels of civic engagement compared to lower-income areas.

B. Shifts in the Economic Landscape

- **Impact of Globalization:** The outsourcing of manufacturing and service jobs to countries with lower labor costs has reduced the availability of traditional middle-class jobs in developed economies. For instance, the U.S. saw significant declines in manufacturing jobs from 2000 to 2010, with a continued trend in subsequent years.
- **Automation and Technological Advancements:** Automation and technological advancements have further displaced middle-class jobs. A McKinsey Global Institute report (2023) estimated that up to 30% of tasks in 60% of occupations could be automated by 2030.
 - These changes have led to job market instability and a reduction in traditional middle-class employment opportunities, pushing many individuals to seek alternative forms of income.
- **Rise of the Digital Economy:** The digital economy has created new opportunities in fields such as e-commerce, digital marketing, and social media. Major tech companies like Amazon, Google, and Meta (formerly Facebook) have become significant employers, driving growth in digital and remote work sectors.
 - Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have enabled individuals to monetize their content and personal brands. As of 2024, the global digital marketing industry was valued at \$450 billion and is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 15% from 2024 to 2030 (Grand View Research).

- The gig economy has expanded significantly, with more middle-class individuals engaging in freelance work and digital entrepreneurship. According to a 2023 study by Upwork, 40% of the U.S. workforce, approximately 64 million Americans, performed freelance work in 2023, contributing \$1.4 trillion to the economy.
- **Economic Adaptation:** As traditional middle-class jobs become less secure, individuals turn to gig work and freelance opportunities in promotional activities to maintain their economic standing. The shift towards remote work and digital entrepreneurship accelerated the transition of many middle-class individuals into promotional and digital roles.
 - Government policies and economic relief measures have supported this transition, but long-term economic stability for the middle class requires adaptation to new economic realities and the ability to leverage digital platforms effectively.
- **Loss of the Middle Class:** The decline of the middle class has profound implications for economic stability, social cohesion, and individual well-being. The loss of stable, well-paying jobs leads to increased economic inequality, reduced social mobility, and greater financial insecurity for many families.
 - As middle-class jobs disappear, the social fabric that holds communities together weakens, leading to higher crime rates, lower civic engagement, and increased social tensions. This decline represents a significant turning point in history, akin to the industrial revolution that gave rise to the middle class in the first place.

III. Theoretical Framework

A. Consumer Culture Theory

- **Concept Overview:** Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) explores how consumption choices and behaviors shape identities and social roles. In contemporary societies, individuals often express their identity and social status through consumption.
- **Application to Promotional Class:** The middle class has traditionally been significant drivers of consumer culture. With the rise of social media and digital platforms, this consumption has evolved into promoting products and services for others, where individuals influence the consumption behaviors of their audience.

B. Precariat Class Theory

- **Concept Overview:** The precariat is a social class formed by people suffering from precarity, which is a condition of existence without predictability or security. This class experiences job insecurity, lack of benefits, and uncertain income.
- **Application to Promotional Class:** The promotional class adopts marketing roles as a way to cope with or counteract this instability. As traditional middle-class jobs become less secure, individuals turn to gig work and freelance opportunities in promotional

activities to maintain their economic standing. The promotional class sees these roles as adaptive strategies to navigate economic uncertainty.

C. Digital Economy and Gig Work

- **Concept Overview:** The digital economy refers to economic activity that results from billions of everyday online connections among people, businesses, devices, data, and processes. Gig work is a labor market characterized by short-term contracts or freelance work as opposed to permanent jobs.
- **Application to Promotional Class:** The expansion of platforms like Upwork, Fiverr, and social media has provided new avenues for middle-class individuals to earn income. The flexibility and autonomy of gig work align with the values of many middle-class workers seeking work-life balance and control over their careers. The promotional class emerges as a direct result of these digital and gig opportunities, focusing on promoting products and services for others.

D. Professionalization of Social Media

- **Concept Overview:** Social media has evolved from a platform for personal expression to a professional arena where individuals can build careers as influencers and content creators. This professionalization involves monetizing content through sponsorships, ads, and partnerships.
- **Application to Promotional Class:** Middle-class individuals leverage their skills and resources to build followings and monetize content by promoting products and services for others. This transition from hobbyist to professional marketer represents the shift towards a promotional class. The rise of influencers and content creators from middle-class backgrounds demonstrates this evolution.

E. Hyper-Commercialization

- **Concept Overview:** Hyper-commercialization refers to the pervasive commercialization of social life, where every aspect of daily living becomes commodified and marketed. This concept extends to individuals who constantly market products and services for others.
- **Application to Promotional Class:** Middle-class individuals become marketers who promote products and services to their followers. The rise of sponsored content and affiliate marketing demonstrates how individuals turn personal interests into revenue streams by marketing for others.

F. Neoliberalism and Self-Enterprise

- **Concept Overview:** Neoliberal economic policies promote the idea of the self-enterprising individual, emphasizing personal responsibility, entrepreneurship, and market-driven solutions. This shift encourages people to view themselves as individual brands and entrepreneurs.
- **Application to Promotional Class:** Middle-class individuals are encouraged to adopt entrepreneurial marketing roles, promoting products and services for others. The gig economy and digital platforms reinforce the neoliberal emphasis on self-enterprise, as individuals turn their skills and interests into marketable services and products.

G. Social Media Algorithms

- **Algorithmic Influence**
 - **Concept Overview:** Algorithms on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok determine the visibility and reach of content. These algorithms prioritize content that generates high engagement (likes, comments, shares).
 - **Application to Promotional Class:** Success in the promotional class can be highly dependent on algorithmic favorability, influencing who gains followers and engagement. Algorithms play a critical role in determining which content becomes visible to larger audiences.
- **Demographic and Content-Based Limitations:** Social media companies also limit visibility based on demographics, interests, and behaviors of users, further influencing which content is promoted or suppressed. This targeting affects the reach of promotional activities and can create unequal opportunities based on the perceived market value of different demographic groups.
- **Impact on Success and Failure:** Algorithms create a feedback loop where high engagement leads to more visibility, and low engagement results in decreased visibility. This can make or break an individual's success in the promotional class.
- **Feedback Loop:** The feedback loop created by algorithms can significantly influence the careers of individuals in the promotional class. Those who understand and adapt to these algorithms can achieve sustained success, while others may struggle to gain visibility and engagement, which results in a lower income for the individual.

IV. Key Components of Wendt's Promotional Class Theory

A. Economic Drivers

- **Job Market Instability:** Traditional middle-class jobs are less secure due to factors like automation, globalization, and economic shifts. This instability pushes many individuals towards alternative income sources.
- **Opportunities in Digital Marketing and Gig Economy:** Digital platforms offer new income streams through gig work and freelance opportunities. The global digital

marketing industry, valued at \$450 billion in 2024, provides numerous opportunities for individuals to monetize their skills.

- **Economic Adaptation:** The shift towards remote work and digital entrepreneurship has accelerated the transition of many middle-class individuals into promotional roles, where they can leverage their skills to promote products and services for others.

B. Social Drivers

- **Influence of Social Media:** Social media platforms play a crucial role in shaping personal and professional identities. Success on these platforms is often measured by followers, likes, and engagement, which translate into economic opportunities.
- **Changes in Social Identity and Status Markers:** Traditional status markers such as job titles and homeownership are increasingly supplemented or replaced by digital influence and online presence. Personal branding and the ability to promote products and services effectively become key aspects of social identity.

C. Technological Drivers

- **Accessibility of Digital Marketing Tools:** Advances in technology have made digital marketing tools more affordable and user-friendly, enabling individuals to create and promote content with minimal investment. Tools like Canva, Hootsuite, and Mailchimp allow users to design graphics, manage social media accounts, and run email marketing campaigns efficiently.
- **Importance of Digital Presence and Branding:** A strong digital presence is essential for professional and social success, with many opportunities tied to online visibility. Personal branding involves strategic use of social media, websites, and other digital platforms to establish and promote one's identity and offerings.

D. Algorithmic Influence

- **Demographic and Content-Based Limitations:** Social media companies limit visibility based not only on engagement metrics but also on user demographics, interests, and behaviors. This targeting affects the reach of promotional activities and can create unequal opportunities based on the perceived market value of different demographic groups.
- **Impact on Visibility and Engagement:** Algorithms create a feedback loop where content that aligns with algorithmic preferences gains more visibility and engagement, leading to sustained success for those who can adapt.

V. Comparative Analysis

A. Consumer Culture Theory

- **Similarities:** Both emphasize the role of identity in consumption. Wendt's Promotional Class Theory extends this to the creation and promotion of personal brands, highlighting the shift from passive consumption to active marketing of products and services for others.
- **Differences:** Consumer Culture Theory primarily focuses on consumption as a form of identity expression, whereas Promotional Class Theory emphasizes the active role of individuals in influencing others' consumption through marketing and branding activities.

B. Precariat Class Theory

- **Similarities:** Both recognize economic instability and the need for adaptive strategies. The promotional class adopts marketing roles to cope with or counteract job insecurity.
- **Differences:** While the precariat focuses on job insecurity and marginalization, Wendt's Promotional Class Theory views marketing roles as a potential source of empowerment and economic stability.

C. Digital Economy and Gig Work

- **Similarities:** Both theories recognize the rise of gig opportunities and the importance of digital platforms. Wendt's Promotional Class Theory specifically focuses on marketing-related gigs as a defining feature.
- **Differences:** The promotional class emphasizes personal branding and digital influence, highlighting the role of marketing for others as a primary economic activity.

D. Professionalization of Social Media

- **Similarities:** Both acknowledge the professionalization of social media activities. Wendt's Promotional Class Theory sees a broader application to the middle class beyond influencers.
- **Differences:** Wendt's Promotional Class Theory emphasizes how ordinary individuals leverage social media for economic and social success by promoting products and services for others.

E. Hyper-Commercialization

- **Similarities:** Both theories note pervasive commercialization. Wendt's Promotional Class Theory highlights the active role of the middle class in marketing, not just as consumers.

- **Differences:** The theory underscores how individuals turn personal interests into revenue streams through digital platforms, actively engaging in the commercialization process.

F. Neoliberalism and Self-Enterprise

- **Similarities:** Both emphasize individual enterprise and branding. Wendt's Promotional Class Theory applies these concepts to middle-class transitions in a digital economy.
- **Differences:** The theory illustrates how individuals adapt to changing economic conditions by embracing self-enterprise and leveraging digital tools to create new opportunities, emphasizing the shift towards marketing and promotional roles.

VI. Sustainability and Economic Models

A. Sustainability of the Promotional Class

- **Economic Viability:** The promotional class provides new economic opportunities, but its sustainability depends on continuous engagement with digital platforms and the ability to adapt to algorithmic changes. The reliance on social media and digital tools creates a dynamic but potentially unstable income source.
- **Long-Term Prospects:** The promotional class must navigate challenges such as market saturation, algorithm changes, and platform dependency. Long-term success requires diversification of income streams and constant adaptation to evolving digital trends.

B. Comparison to Capitalism and Communism

Integration with Capitalism:

- **Individual Enterprise:** Capitalism emphasizes the importance of individual initiative and entrepreneurship. The promotional class thrives in this environment as individuals can build personal brands, engage in self-promotion, and monetize their digital presence. This aligns with capitalist values that reward personal effort and innovation.
- **Market-Driven Success:** In capitalist systems, the market determines success based on supply and demand. The promotional class operates within this framework, where digital influencers and content creators must respond to market trends and audience preferences to achieve financial success.
- **Personal Branding:** Capitalism supports the idea of personal branding and the self-made individual. The promotional class exemplifies this through their focus on building unique personal brands that can attract sponsorships and partnerships, reflecting capitalist principles of self-reliance and marketability.
- **Competition:** Capitalism thrives on competition, and the promotional class embodies this by competing for audience attention, engagement, and commercial opportunities. This competitive environment encourages innovation and efficiency, which are core tenets of capitalism.

Integration with Communism:

- **Collective Benefit:** Communism emphasizes the welfare of the community and collective ownership. The promotional class can contribute to this by leveraging their influence to promote social causes, community initiatives, and collective well-being. Influencers can use their platforms to advocate for equality, and communal goals, aligning with communist values of collective benefit.
- **Redistribution of Wealth:** While the promotional class is often associated with individual income, it can also align with communist principles through practices like revenue sharing, collaborative content creation, and supporting smaller creators. Influencers can redistribute their earnings by funding community projects, supporting local businesses, and promoting economic equality.
- **Collective Success:** Communism values the success of the community over individual achievement. The promotional class can reflect this by fostering a sense of community among followers, encouraging cooperative efforts, and promoting shared goals. This communal approach can enhance social cohesion and collective identity.
- **Egalitarian Opportunities:** In a communist framework, the promotional class can democratize access to economic opportunities by providing platforms for diverse voices and underrepresented groups. This aligns with communist ideals of reducing inequality and ensuring that everyone has an equal chance to succeed.

Comparative Analysis:

- **Economic Participation:** In both capitalism and communism, the promotional class can play a significant role in economic participation. In capitalism, they operate within a market-driven economy, using personal branding and competition to achieve success. In communism, they can contribute to collective welfare by promoting communal values, supporting equitable wealth distribution, and advocating for shared goals.
- **Social Dynamics:** The promotional class influences social dynamics in both frameworks. Under capitalism, they drive consumer culture and individualism. In communism, they can enhance social solidarity and collective identity by using their platforms for communal benefit and social advocacy.
- **Resource Allocation:** In capitalism, resource allocation is based on market success, with the promotional class benefiting from their ability to attract and engage audiences. In communism, resource allocation can be influenced by the promotional class's efforts to support community projects, advocate for equality, and redistribute wealth.
- **Economic Mobility:** The promotional class offers avenues for economic mobility in both systems. In capitalism, this mobility is driven by market mechanisms and individual effort. In communism, it can be facilitated by collective support and efforts to ensure equal opportunities for all members of society.

The Promotional Class Theory demonstrates how this new social class can integrate and align with both capitalist and communist frameworks. In capitalism, it thrives on individual enterprise, market-driven success, and competition. In communism, it can support collective benefit,

redistribution of wealth, and communal success. By leveraging their influence, the promotional class can contribute to the economic and social goals of both systems.

C. Seeds of Destruction

- **Capitalist Critique:** According to some critiques of capitalism, the seeds of destruction are inherent in its structure, leading to inequality and market volatility. The promotional class, driven by individual enterprise and digital influence, may exacerbate economic disparities and contribute to a volatile gig economy.
- **Sustainability Concerns:** The promotional class's reliance on digital platforms and algorithm-driven success can create economic instability. As algorithms and platform policies change, individuals in the promotional class must constantly adapt, risking economic insecurity.

VII. Conclusion

A. Summary of Key Points

- Wendt's Promotional Class Theory explains the transition of the middle class into roles centered on marketing and promoting products and services for others.
- This shift is driven by economic instability, opportunities in the digital economy, and the influence of social media and algorithms.

B. Reiteration of the Theory's Importance

- Understanding this transition is crucial for developing policies and strategies that support the evolving nature of work and social identity in the digital age.

C. Final Thoughts and Call for Further Research

- Encourage further study into the The Promotional Class Theory and its impact on society, economy, and individual identities.
- Suggest exploring the long-term implications of this shift and potential strategies to support those navigating this new landscape.