| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Middle-class Card: A Corpus-based Study of the Characteristics of the Middle Class in US News

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| ABSTRACT

The ups and downs of the American middle class led several social scientists to rethink and reflect on their conditions, yet the characteristics of how the middle class are represented in the news have been hardly examined from a linguistic perspective. This study used a synergy of tools of Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis, guided by Norman Fairclough's 3-D model (1989), to investigate the collocation profile of the *middle class* and the ideology underpinning its representation in US web news discourse from 2010 until 2022. The study relied on a specialized news corpus that had 1,253,678 tokens, including *middle class* (30,975 times) and *middle-class* (23,587 times). The findings showed that the US web news was consistent in constructing the characteristics of the middle class during the past twelve years. Under neoliberal policies, the idea of classism is an intrinsic dividing system in American society, and the notion that the middle-class family is an economic unit seems to be ubiquitous. Also, the middle class are depicted as the economic unit that establishes stability and the political card that politicians use in their agendas to win the majority of votes. In spite of the political and economic significance of the middle class, they are mostly passivated by minimizing their human agency and downplaying their roles as doers of social actions. The study can be a part of a branch of Applied Linguistics that focuses on the relationship between the science of economics and the science of language.

1. Introduction

The rules of politics and economics are always intertwined, and they have been undergoing dramatic and radical changes over the past few years, which have led to redefining and restratifying the current social systems in many parts of the world. Basically, social systems can be divided according to birth, age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or economic ownership (Saunders, 1990). However, several countries have been moved into dividing citizens based on their economic ownership and turned to become classist societies since neoliberal public policies have been practiced in developed and underdeveloped countries and international organizations as well, such as "the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the technical agencies of the United Nations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), Food and Agriculture Organization, and UNICEF" (Navarro, 2007, p. 47). These neoliberal policies hugely impacted how social systems are defined and divided, and they have become pervasive that they even affected how humans can control their lives and shape their future and dreams and how they talk and text. On the surface, it is difficult to determine if the language of news reflects this intricate reality of politics and economics or if its discourse filtrates reality depending on the hegemonic ideological stance.

2. Literature Review
2.1. The Hegemony of Neoliberalism
To begin with, the ideology that is controlling the stratification of classes, the term *Neoliberalism* is among the first on the scene. *Neoliberalism* took root and grew in the late 1930s when many of its apostles, such as the German economist Alexander Rüstow, the American scholar Walter Lippmann, the Austrian economists Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek rejected in their writings the tenets of Soviet communism and Italian and German fascism. They found the solution in renewing and renovating the principles of classical liberalism along with regulating the role of the state over the free market, yet the neoliberal agenda remained at the margins until after WWII. The post-WWII reconstruction until the late 1970s witnessed what was designated as the *Golden Age of Capitalism* (Glyn et al., 1991), which was characterized by the growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the low inflation rates, the booming of the middle class, and the decline of unemployment rates (Rugitsky, 2014). The period was succeeded by what was called the "slowdown" period and ended when the Bretton Woods monetary system collapsed. Later, the neoliberal agendas came to surface again, especially when Margret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the US took power where the trademarks of their era were reducing taxes for the rich, the demolition of trade unions, privatization, a massive increase in rents, and competition in public sectors. David Harvey stated that neoliberalism was achieved "by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional frame-work" (Harvey, 2005, p 2). As a result, economic growth has become slower, financial crises increased, and the gap between the rich and the other classes widened. Paradoxically, the principles of neoliberalism agree to some extent with the classical communist definition of social classes. This is because Marx (1973) noticed that the division between individuals in societies is based solely on their social class, which he considered one of the inevitable characteristics of all societies even before the emergence of capitalism. Although his view has been widely criticized as it ignored other factors that contributed to the social stratification in multiple societies, in modern-day neoliberal societies, social classes can be the pertinent noticeable feature in structuring individuals. His theory also disregarded the existence of other social classes besides the infamous two-class model, which included the class of those who own and that of those who do not have possessions. Another criticism of his views is that he set aside the fact that the middle class could contribute to the political and economic growth of any nation because social polarization increases the risk of civil disorder and dissatisfaction.

2.2. A Timeline of the American Middle Class
Although many scholars agree that there is no consensus on the definition of what being a member of a middle class means, the following background on the American middle class will focus on its characteristics and origins through the empirical studies of economics and governmental reports. Some sociologists and economists see income as an intrinsic indicator of social class. According to Datta's socio-economic profile of America (2022), there are three broad class categories: the lower class, the middle class, and the upper class, and each class is divided into two categories. Therefore, the structure of the American classes encompasses the following: The poor class, the near poor, the traditional middle class, the upper middle class, the rich, the very rich, and the super-rich (Datta, 2022). Thus, the term *middle class* involves two sub-classes: the traditional middle class and the upper middle class. According to the Pew Research Center Analysis of the Current Population Survey (2021), the middle class comprises 50% of the American classes (Pew Research Center [PRC], 2022). In terms of income or consumption, the median income of a middle-class member is 90,131 dollars per year (PRC, 2022). Regarding their dreams, in Datta's view (2022), the American traditional middle-class dream consists of having a good education, a secure job leading to a safe retirement, a steady income, and the purchase of a big house and a car.

The birth of the American middle class dates from 1914 with the emergence of what is known in the economic theory as Fordism (Datta, 2022). The concept is named after Henry Ford whose approach mainly depended on the mass production of goods, the demand of the consumer, and doubling the average wage of workers to encourage them to work long hours and consequently be able to buy what they make (Loeb, 1995). These flourishing conditions of the American middle class faced major headwinds, particularly with The Great Depression of 1929 until 1941, which marked the longest and most catastrophic economic shock that impacted the United States and resonated in almost every country in the world. Years later (from 1947 until the1970s), the middle class was "booming" during the golden age of capitalism after the post-war economic revival, and the class was widened to include all ordinary American citizens. The median family income increased by 83%, and the share of adults who belong to middle-class income was 61% (Bernstein, Mishel, & Allegretto, 2007). The Boomers afforded buying cars, houses in the suburban cities, and durable goods. The period witnessed the rise of superior work conditions, civil rights movements, medical care, and social justice because of the shared prosperity between businesses and labor, which made scholars refer to this phase as the *golden years of the American middle class* (Datta, 2022). The golden years stopped when the 1973 oil crisis started as the OAPEC countries announced an embargo on oil exports to the United States and other European and African countries which militarily supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War, and the crisis escalated with the Iranian revolution in 1979 that affected the global supply of oil production. This resulted in the US economic recession of the 1980s and early 1990s where many American companies lost their global dominance, labor unions lost their power, and several workers lost their jobs. During that time, neoliberal public policies were applied in multiple sectors, and that was initiated in Reagan's era when the "government adopted a more deferential attitude toward private

economic activity" (Eide, 2022, p. 38). In his era, the middle class became measurably smaller, compared to its case in the 1970s. In the 1990s, the United States witnessed major economic booms that helped the middle class regain its economic power since the class encompassed new jobs such as software engineers. In the 2000s, the US witnessed slow economic growth, and the middle class shrunk in size because of the growth of economic inequality.

Conditions recuperated in 2009 when President Barack Obama took office, as the economic situation improved because there was an increase in job opportunities, household income, wages, and measures protecting consumers (Center for American Progress, 2017). However, middle-class Americans were suffering from the high prices of houses, education, health care, and childcare (Center for American Progress, 2017). It was not until 2015 that Obama took notice of the middle-class conditions, making it a priority when he announced what he called "middle-class economies" which propagate social equality (Obama, 2015). Similarly, in the Trumpian era, Donald Trump promised to revive the domestic economy and create middle-class jobs (Trump, 2017). When comparing Obama's era to Trump's, it seems that the median household income "increased $4,800 during the last two years of the Obama administration", whereas it only "increased $1,400 during the first two years of Trump's administration" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Years later, according to the 2021 Pew Research Center analysis, the economic COVID-19 pandemic toll was catastrophic and pervasive, triggering a global financial crisis that led to a decrease in growth of the middle class as 54 million people were pushed out of the class, and the increase of worldwide poverty levels (PRC, 2021). A year later, in Biden's administration (2021), middle-class conditions became worse as the first two years of his office focused on "economically squeezing the Americans" (Gawthorpe, 2022). In addition to that, the global economic prospects of the World Bank (2022) indicated that there are several factors related to the Russian-Ukrainian war that led to a slowdown in global economic growth in 2022, such as the inflationary impact on supply chains, the price of raw materials, logistics in warzones, and the freight charges (World Bank, 2022). Also, according to the report issued by the International Monterey fund in 2022, since 2021, "US inflation reached one of its highest levels in about 40 years" (International Monterey Fund, 2022).

2.3 Applied Linguistics and Social Classes
The aforementioned ups and downs of the middle class led several social scientists to rethink and reflect on the conditions of the middle class and the policies of neoliberalism that focus on individualism and the free market. In his book *Social Class in Applied Linguistics*, Block (2014) shed light on the importance of examining real-life problems in which language is a principal construct in the discussion of economic policies. This can take two approaches: how the representation of social classes can be studied through text and talk, and how language can reflect the social class of its speakers or learners. In sociolinguistics, social class was considered a social construct in early several analyses such as Labov's (1966) study of language variation in New York where he found that the sound of the /r/ varies according to the social class. However, the social class variable seemed to fade away in sociolinguistics years later. Similarly, it was barely touched upon in other branches of applied linguistics including bilingualism and second language acquisition (Block, 2014).

As for the representation of social classes in discourse, although several social scientists discussed the class struggle between the 1950s and the 1970s, paradoxically, during the 1980s and the 1980s class-based discussions were avoided and replaced by the discourse around the individualistic human experience despite the increase of social inequality (Pfefferkorn, 2014). Class-based discourse came back to the scene in the 2000s in times of economic crises when scholars needed to reassess the prevalent ideologies, yet there is a scarcity of recent linguistic studies that explore how the poor, the working class, the middle class, and the upper-class are defined and represented in news discourse. The portrayal of these classes was recently mentioned through the project conducted by Toolan (2016) which traced the features of the representations of wealth inequality in the British *Daily Mail* from 1971 to 2016. According to the study, although the term "class" had disappeared from the contemporary British news discourse, the instances of its occurrence favored being a member of the middle class over being from the working class. Theodoropoulou (2019) analyzed how class struggle is constituted through discourse, which in turn constructs the political reality. McAllister (2022) discussed the representation of the working class in the advertisements during the Trump era, which utilized class-based representations to criticize or amplify his policies and mantras. From the previous survey and to the best knowledge of the researcher, no studies have been conducted to linguistically examine the discourse around social classes, especially the middle class in news. Also, there are no studies that linguistically explore the representation of the American middle class in news discourse or the US news discourse, which makes the present study significant to the scholarship on the discourse of social classes.

2.4. Social Groups in the Perspective of News Discourse Analysis
A large part of scholarship was devoted to linguistically documenting the characteristics of social groups in news discourse in English through adopting theories of discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and/or corpus-assisted analysis. For example, the image of women in news was investigated in various countries such as women workers in Indonesia (Badara and Jamiludin, 2020), women in business media (Power, Rak, & Kim, 2020), Muslim women in the US news discourse (Neelam, 2017), women in sports journalism (Ponterotto, 2014), women voters in British newspapers (Harmer, 2013), and women in the workplace in Canadian national newspapers (Gazso, 2004). As for the division of individuals based on their religion, some scholars investigated the

portrayal of Muslims through the lens of critical discourse analysis such as Li & Zhang (2022); Poolea & Williamson (2021); Daghigh & Abdul Rahim (2020); Samaie & Malmir (2017); Ewart, Cherney, & Murphy (2017); and Al-Hejin (2012). The image of the Jews in news discourse written in English was also explored in some studies such as Varat (2021), Negrine (2013), and Mandelzis (2003). As for the discrimination based on color in newspapers, Ul-Aine, Sarvat, & Tahira (2022); Melnichuk & Saburova (2021); Colburn & Melander (2018), and TEO (2000) examined how the image of blacks is represented in news discourse. Similarly, the existence of other minority groups in the language of newspapers including refugees was studied by Mustafa-Awad & Kirner-Ludwig (2021); Abid, Manan, & Rahman (2017); Bhatia & Jenks (2018); Parker (2015); and Baker et. al., (2008). Other minority groups such as immigrants were studied by some scholars including Aluthman (2018), Silveira (2016), Quinsaat (2014), Zhu (2014), and Khosravinik (2010) who examined the discursive strategies employed by various newspapers to represent them. From the previous short review, it can be concluded that no recent research employing discourse analysis, corpus-based or corpus-assisted approaches studied the image of the middle class in media, especially in news discourse.

2.5. Web News Discourse

Before the advent of internet media, rarely was news published without adopting a certain agenda because several political, economic, historical, and social factors affected the raw information which journalists developed and filtered out. At the same time, the role of the readers was quite passive since they did not have the chance to participate in creating or publically criticizing the news. Now, in today's era of user-generated content, although there are still some remnants of the agenda-setting techniques in all news media, not all news that is disseminated online unanimously follows the same manner, according to Naser (2020), the present internet media follow either of three approaches: applying the rules of traditional journalism, not abiding by its rules, or not writing journalistic discourse at all. Also, now, the verification of news sometimes takes place after posting it, which contributes to circulating an unprecedented number of rumors and fake news. Although the traditional agenda-setting theory in media can be questioned because of the prevalence of free user-generated content and citizen journalism that can be published by unprofessional journalists, any news published online can still be subjected to a certain ideological positioning. One cannot guarantee that even independent journalism is void of particular agendas. Other aspects can contribute to publishing the news such as the "newsworthiness" of the event or person as formal and informal news outlets still have the choice to foreground and background any specific event or person (Bednarek and Caple, 2014). These factors led to a two-way effect on the publishing of news: news guided by the public and public that guides journalism (Naser, 2020). These reasons make investigating the language used by journalists to represent the reality of social classes, especially the middle class worthy of investigation.

3. Theoretical Framework: Incorporating the 3-D Model by Fairclough into Corpus-based Studies

The present study uses a synergy of tools of Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis because of two reasons. First, Corpus Linguistics offers an unprecedented opportunity for linguists to examine thousands of texts including news discourse, revealing the recurrent patterns and trends of language, most used words and multi-word expressions, and keywords by comparing texts to a reference corpus, the semantic prosody and the semantic preference of significant words, and the lexico-grammatical and semantic profiles of words and patterns. Corpus-based studies refer to the ones that focus on the frequency of previously selected words or keywords in the data of the corpus whereas corpus-assisted studies combine tools of corpus-based studies and discourse analysis. Corpus-based and corpus-assisted studies can be conducted to analyze how language can construct and reflect the intricacies of politics, economics, and society. Second, the study utilized Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as it focuses on the relationship between power and ideology, and since the 1970s, CDA helped analyze news discourse. In his book *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, Fairclough (1995) stated that "news tends to be seen as very much a conceptual and ideational" rather than "feelings, circumstances, qualities of social and interpersonal relation-ships" (p. 73). Also, he saw that news discourse carries implicit materialization of ideologies, and it does not necessarily mirror reality. He viewed that textual analysis is limited, yet interpreting the text in terms of its ideological effect can yield more valuable and intriguing findings about the social practices expressed implicitly and explicitly through the text. That is why it is significant to analyze how news outlets shape the reality of society through their discourse.

One of the most utilized frameworks to analyze news discourse is Fairclough's three-dimensional model (1989). Fairclough (1989) views "language as discourse and as social practice" (p. 42). Since the present study explores a societal and a political topic, the three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by Fairclough (1989) can contribute to better interpreting the results obtained by the use of the corpus-based approach. Fairclough (1989) devised a framework for analyzing textual discourse; it is composed of textual analysis (description), process analysis (interpretation), and social analysis (explanation). In the present study, the three dimensions were applied to investigate the corpus (description) by identifying the top frequent collocates of *the middle class* and *middle-class*, which will be captured through tools of Corpus Linguistics (interpretation), and then by relating the social and political situation to the lexical choices of the language surrounding the middle class and indicating how this discourse reveals the characteristics of the middle class (explanation). The three dimensions are interdependent, and they can overlap.

4. Rational of the Study
Surveying the scholarship on social groups and news discourse, it could be concluded that several linguistic studies focus on the representation of social groups such as women, Muslims, Jews, people of color, refugees, and immigrants in US news discourse, yet there are almost no studies that investigate the image of social classes in US news discourse. Also, since the conditions of the American middle class ebbed and flowed throughout history, it is worth investigating how the US news discourse constructed its characteristics and realities during the past decade. The question of whether the discourse of US web news reflects the official government economic reports is also essential. In this research, I tried to address this gap using the tools of Corpus Linguistics and in light of Fairclough's 3-D model (1989). Investigating the collocational behavior of the word led to a deeper understanding of how this social group is constructed in the US web news.

5. Delimitations of the Study
The study investigated the News on the Web (NOW) (Davis, 2022) corpus that includes instances of the two words *middle-class* and *middle Class* from 2010 until the end of 2022 because that was the available data in the NOW corpus. Also, it did not examine the ideological agendas of the news websites that constituted the corpus because this procedure will require a long manual analysis for every news website included where there are no complete records of the news websites that NOW covers. In addition, the research was limited to studying the collocational behavior of the two words, ignoring the keyword analysis and the semantic analysis as they do not apply to the current research design.

6. Research Question
Based on the previous reasons, the study's main research question was: What are the characteristics of the middle class in news web discourse from 2010 until 2022?

This question is divided into three sub-questions:

- What is the collocational behavior of the two words *middle class* and *middle-class* in US news throughout the past twelve years?
- Do the collocates of the two words *middle class* and *middle-class* in US news reveal the characteristics of the American middle class?
- How does the political agenda of each president: Barack Obama (2009-2017), Donald Trump (2017-2021), and Joe Biden (2021- 2022), affect how the middle class is portrayed in news discourse?

7. Research Design
To answer the three sub-questions, the study analyzes the collocates of each word and qualitatively interprets the results according to Fairclough's 3-D model. The corpus of the study is divided into three sub-corpora (representing three time periods) in order to facilitate comparing the window and adjacent collocates of each word during each time period. The quantitative findings provided general frequencies concerning the number of words and collocates, whereas the qualitative analysis of the concordance lines provided a detailed interpretation of how the quantitative findings reflect deeper issues and insights on the discursive representations of the middle class in US web news.

7.1. Corpus and Methodology
The data of this study relies on the ready-made corpus of News on the Web (NOW) (Davies, 2010). The NOW corpus is part of English Corpora that are created by Professor Mark Davies, a retired Professor of Corpus Linguistics at Brigham Young University. NOW is specialized, monitor English corpus that can be considered one of the most powerful online corpora since it contains more than 16.5 billion words gathered from web-based newspapers and magazines published in English and updated daily; it is the largest online news corpora. The corpus has user-friendly features that allow users to compare between KWIC (Keyword in Context) and grammatical patterns found in news published in English in several countries (e.g., the US, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, New Zealand, China, India, Pakistan, Singapore, and Siri Lanka) and throughout the last decade (from 2010 until yesterday).

To compile the data of the present study, all occurrences of the compound noun *middle class* and its hyphenated variant *middle-class* (from 2010 – until December 2022) were extracted from the NOW corpus (https://www.english-corpora.org/now/), resulting in 116,205 instances for *the middle class*, and 69,575 instances for the hyphenated *middle-class*. The two words were not analyzed under a single entry because, in many concordance lines, each one of them has a different grammatical function. To limit the results to the web news published in the US, the Chart Function was used to examine the frequency by year and country. The highest number of occurrences of the word *middle class* was in 2013 (5709 instances), counting for 14.22 per million words, and its variant *middle-class* was in 2012 (3567 instances), counting for 9.61 per million words. As expected, the word and its hyphenated variant have the highest number of occurrences in the web news published in the US; however, when normalizing the frequency

of the two words per million words, it happened 15 times per million words in Pakistani news (*middle class*) and 6.4 in Bangladeshi news (*middle-class*). As for the US, the relative frequencies of *Middle Class* (30,975 times) and *middle-class* (23,587 times) were 4.7 and 3.6 per million words respectively.

It was not possible to use the collocation analysis offered by the NOW interface as it lacks providing the frequencies of the collocates (i.e., POS); therefore, after saving, downloading, cleaning, and filtering the non-American news in the pages of the current selected specialized corpus, TagAnt, a grammatical tagger (Anthony, 2022), was utilized to tag the corpus of the US news that included the terms: *middle Class* and *middle-class* from 2010 until the end of 2022. Each corpus was divided into three sub-corpora according to the timeline of the presidents of the United States of America through the last twelve years: from 2010-2016, 2017-2020, and 2020-2021. AntConc, a free corpus analysis tool developed by Laurance Anthony (Anthony, 2022), was then used to provide the word lists, collocation analysis of POS (i.e., verbs before and after the keywords, nouns before and after the keywords, and adjectives before and after the keywords), analysis of concordances, and comparison between the plots of the different corpora.

Two types of analysis were carried out on the corpora of the study. The first step was to conduct a collocation analysis of the two words *middle class* and *middle-class* three times on the three corpora (i.e., in the era of each American President). The collocation analysis quantitatively examined all instances of the verbs, nouns, and adjectives within a widow of three words to the left and the right sides of the two words. This was to provide a deeper understanding of the lexicogrammatical role of *the middle class* and *middle-class* as agents or themes, or the use of the *middle class* as a noun or modifier. The collocates were automatically extracted by using the query language offered by TagAnt and AntConc. The lists of collocates were downloaded and saved in different files to perform frequency analysis on each list through AntConc, which enabled me to obtain the frequency of the top-used noun, verb, or adjective collocates of each word in every period. Further n-grams analysis was conducted on the top collocates. That led to the second type of analysis which was to qualitatively interpret the data by scrutinizing the concordance lines and relating them to Fairclough's 3-D model (1989).

8. Results and Analysis

As indicated by figure 1, the words *middle class* and *middle-class* occurred mostly between the years 2010-2017 (19,075 times), representing an average relative frequency of 1.1 per million words in NOW, but their frequency dropped to some extent between 2021-2022 (14,569 times), representing an average relative frequency of 0.8 per million words. To answer the first research sub-question which focuses on the collocational behavior of the two words *middle class* and *middle-class* in US news, a collocation analysis was performed. All POS windows and adjacent collocates of the two words were extracted, quantified, and ordered according to the most used words in the three terms of each president. This step quantitatively provides the frequency of the top employed collocates to give insights on how US web news discourse describes the American middle class from 2010 until December 2022. The following section will be divided according to the POS neighboring each word.
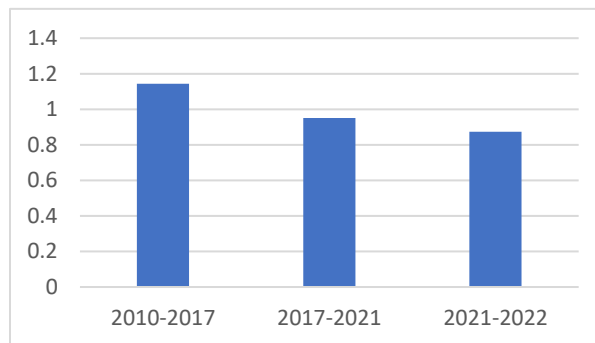
Figure 1: The Type-token Ratio of both *Middle Class* and *Middle-class* during the past twelve years in the NOW Corpus

8.1 The Middle-class Noun Collocates

From the collocation analysis of the nouns associated with the two words, it was possible to identify the number of nouns before and after the two words and list them into the top ten used collocates. Tables 1 and 2 display the frequency of collocates in ascending order. Regarding the nouns before the two words, it can be noticed that the word *taxes* was present in the top three noun collocates in the three time periods. This highlights the fact that it was an ongoing discussion in the US on whether to increase or deduct taxes for the middle class (Tax Foundation, 2008). By checking the top used n-grams of the word *taxes*, it appears that it collocated with the words *cut* and *raise* respectively. Examples (1), (2), and (3) illustrate that politicians saw that raising taxes on the middle class was the quickest solution to solve financial problems, and at the same time when they needed the support of the middle-class voters, they pledged to deduct the middle-class taxes, unlike the past presidents. Another word

associated with *taxes* and the *middle class* was the word *relief* which was repeated in the top lists of noun collocates in the three time periods. This refers to the tax relief that a middle class could obtain to reduce the burdens of taxes (See Examples 5 and 6). The examples emphasize the attempts offered to lessen the enforced taxes on the middle class through the use of constructions such as "*provide relief*" and "*much needed relief*".

(1) Biden made on Tax Day that '' congressional Republicans '' want to *raise taxes* on **middle-class** families, citing Scott's plan as evidence. (NOW, 2022)

(2) '' It sounds like we are going to be *raising taxes* on the **middle class** in order to pay for these new credits. '' # Rep. Kevin Brady (NOW, 2015)

(3) "We will massively *cut taxes* for the **middle class**, the forgotten people, the forgotten men and women of this country". (NOW, 2018)

(4) Trump is proposing a large *cut* in *taxes* for **middle-class** families, which he hopes would stimulate the economy to create livable jobs. (NOW, 2015)

(5) Care Act should be included in the bill as a way to provide *relief* to **middle class** families, an idea Republican Sen. Tom Cotton proposed in the upper chamber. (NOW, 2018)

(6) Trump pitched the plan as much-needed *relief* for **middle-class** families, while Democrats derided it as a gift to the very wealthy. (NOW, 2020)

In the web news discourse, although the words *people* and *members* topped the list of noun collocates in 2010-2017 and in 2021-2022, the close investigation of the concordance lines revealed that the words were not part of the same clause that has the words *middle class* and *middle-class*. However, there seemed to be an emphasis on the national identity of middle-class citizens as a single American unit since the words *US, America,* and *Americans* were repeated heavily throughout the three time periods (See Examples 7 and 8). It appears that the web news discourse agreed with the public discourse which reinforced the national identity. This is in line with Gilmore's study (2015) on American exceptionalism which stated that "US presidents have long tapped into the power of this national idea in their speeches to the nation" (p. 303).

(7) The *US **Middle Class*** has lost all three sociological important powers: 1) Status; 2) Power; 3) Economic equality. (NOW, 2019)

(8) That's a sustainable vision for *the American **middle-class*** that the union would do well to spread. (NOW, 2010)

The word *decline* topped the list from 2010-2017; however, a close examination of the concordance lines showed the repeated use of the word in a number of news reports from 2017 until 2022 yet with less emphasis. In 2022, the Pew Research Center stated that middle-class income has fallen steadily since 1970 (Pew Research Center, 2022). This is evident in examples from web news in 2013, 2015, and 2020.

(9) Both the White House and the Senate agreed that the *decline* of **middle-class** incomes was the most serious issue we face in this country. (NOW, 2015)

(10) This week the Census Bureau reported the latest depressing *decline* in **middle-class** incomes during the so-called economic recovery. (NOW, 2013)

(11) This, in turn, has contributed to the *decline* of **middle-class** financial security and the rise of income and wealth inequality. (NOW, 2020)

Table 1: *Frequency of Top Ten Used Noun Collocates before Middle Class and its variant Middle-Class*

Nouns Before *Middle Class*			Nouns Before *Middle-class*		
2010-2017	2017-2021	2021-2022	2010-2017	2017-2021	2021-2022
taxes (81)	US (13)	range (22)	Americans (1334)	millions (50)	taxes (33)
people (51)	taxes (10)	people (18)	parent (6)	taxes (39)	millions (14)
members (42)	costs (7)	taxes (18)	income (5)	black (20)	rate (12)
cuts (39)	people (7)	black (16)	century (4)	number (18)	relief (12)
ticket (31)	relief (7)	definition (16)	hydrocarbon (4)	people (18)	thousands (11)
relief (28)	wealth (7)	bulk (15)	term (4)	relief (17)	care (10)
decline (26)	percent (6)	collar (12)	America (3)	students (12)	lower (10)
growth (25)	black (5)	relief (11)	benefits (3)	costs (12)	market (10)
expense (18)	term (5)	US (11)	collar (3)	housing (11)	cuts (9)
path (17)	income (4)	costs (8)	days (3)	majority (11)	means (9)

Regarding the noun collocates that took place after both *the middle class* and the hyphenated *middle-class*, it is evident that both words acted as modifiers to their following nouns. The word *families* topped the list of all the periods (See Table 2), which accentuates the role of the family as an economic unit since middle-class families are the large consumers of goods and supplies, and the decline of middle-class families would result in severe economic costs. The lemmas of *the family* even outnumber the nouns related to the nationality of the middle class in the data, such as *Americans* which is in the second top ranking. Prioritizing the concept of the family over the national identity might be due to the significance of the economic role of the middle class in society (See Examples 12 and 13). Under the neoliberal system, the family should be retained as an economic unit where in times of crisis, the members of the family can help one another rather than seek governmental assistance (Cooper, 2017). This also agrees with the notion that marriage is a marker of class, especially the middle class in American society (Cooper, 2017).

(12) The plan which would have added financial pressure on **middle-class** *families* already strapped during a pandemic economy. (NOW, 2020)

(13) The average American **middle-class** *family* can expect to spend more than $300,000 over their child's lifetime on things. (NOW, 2016)

Other recurrent top noun collocates in the three periods included the word *people.* However, when investigating the top collocates associated with it, the word *America* topped the list again, which brings the emphasis on the national identity of the middle class back to the scene (See Example 14).

(14) The most pessimistic people in *America* are the people we used to call *Middle Americans*, **Middle class**, and middle rich. (NOW, 2020)

In the three time periods, other top nouns modified by *middle class* and *middle-class* involved *life*, *tax, jobs, neighborhood, household, parents, students,* and *voters* (See Table 2). These words broadened the scope of what can be described as middle-class; the concept starts with the *family*, then it is steeped in the *jobs* and their types, encompassing the *neighborhood* and *household*, and it can categorize *life* as a whole (See Example 15). In schools, students can be also classified as middle-class *students*. At work, there can be middle-class *workers* as well (See Table 2). This corroborates the idea of class as a mechanism of social division in contemporary American society. Because these words seem to be neutral as they do not carry negative or positive connotations, a comparison between the three time periods was conducted by investigating the semantic prosody of each word and examining their concordance lines. As for the words that collocated with *life,* in 2010-2017 and 2017-2021, *comfortable* and *stable* were the top-used adjectives associated with the ideal image of the middle class (See Example 15). In 2021-2022, the top-used adjective was *dehumanizing* which might refer to the deterioration of the middle class recently. The noun *job* collocated with the verbs *jeopardizes, providing,* and *creating* in 2010-2017 and 2017-2021, which again emphasized the need of middle-class members for stable jobs that are not *jeopardiz*ed by financial crises. This was also emphasized in 2021-2022 as the top used adjective was *sustainable*. Regarding the noun *tax,* from 2010 until 2021, the top collocate was *cut,* whereas, in 2021-2022, the top collocate was *refunded* which referred to the middle-class tax refund (See Example 16). This refund was offered "to provide relief to Californians" (State of California: Franchise Tax Board, 2022).

(15) They sign up for a job that offers a path to **middle-class** *life* and a chance to honor their communities by pledging to protect them, but Catholics and Jews and Mormons uneasily and looking down on fundamentalists, preaching liberty and **middle-class** morality and assimilation, secure in their Christianity and their Americanism. (NOW, 2020)

(16) The California's **Middle Class** *Tax Refund* program aims to soften the blow of rising inflation. (NOW, 2022)

Table 2: *Frequency of Top Ten Used Noun Collocates After Middle Class and its variant Middle-Class*

Nouns After *Middle Class*			Nouns After *Middle-class*		
2010-2017	**2017-2021**	**2021-2022**	**2010-2017**	**2017-2021**	**2021-2022**
families (255)	families (166)	families (263)	families (415)	families (653)	families (382)
Americans (119)	people (69)	people (101)	Americans (246)	Americans (306)	family (244)
people (115)	tax (66)	Americans (95)	people (167)	people (258)	Americans (220)
jobs (78)	family (51)	family (67)	family (161)	family (232)	people (168)
family (71)	Americans (44)	tax (66)	life (118)	tax (188)	life (116)
life (55)	jobs (31)	taxpayers (42)	jobs (112)	life (156)	households (100)
finances (54)	life (30)	jobs (35)	neighborhood (87)	jobs (130)	population (100)
workers (44)	taxes (19)	life (34)	lifestyle (83)	neighborhood (107)	jobs (76)
tax (41)	parents (18)	folks (30)	students (66)	workers (96)	taxes (75)
incomes (35)	voters (16)	Biden (27)	workers (63)	households (84)	voters (74)

8.2 Verb Collocates of the Middle Class

The verbs before the words *middle class* and *middle-class* mean that the two words are not the controllers of the action; they are affected by the action of the verb. Semantically, their role is not agents (i.e., doers of the action); they are patients or themes (i.e., entities affected by the action). The following analysis highlights how the *middle class* was acted upon by the action expressed in the preceding verb. From Table 3, the years 2010-2017 witnessed the prevalence of the verb *hurt*. The middle class as a unit was portrayed as a fragile creature that could be hurt. By investigating the concordance lines, it appeared *hurt* was always preceded by the modal verb *would* or *will,* which expressed the constant worries of the political opposition that the governmental reforms might negatively affect the middle class as illustrated in Example (17).

(17) Nevertheless, others believe Obama's plan will *hurt* the **middle class** rather than help it. (NOW, 2014)

During the same years, the second most used verb was the auxiliary *is,* and by investigating the concordance lines, the verb "*is"* was associated with the present participles that carried negative connotations such as *destroying, hitting, polarizing, screwing, ignoring, squeezing, raping, killing, robbing, crushing, impoverishing, harming,* and *attacking,* which reflected the harsh conditions the middle class faced during the two terms of Obama. It is worth mentioning how the web news used metaphor to express these conditions as illustrated in Examples (18), (19), and (20). In Example (18), the middle class was depicted as an entity that could be destroyed with force. In Examples (19) and (20), the middle class was represented with human qualities through the verbs *killing* and *raping*. According to Lakoff & Johnson, metaphors help us view the target domain (the middle class in this case) as "a cause and identify a particular aspect of it and have certain feelings in accordance with it" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 28).

(18) A better vision of healthcare # Obamacare is *crushing* the **middle class**. (NOW, 2014)

(19) ' The government is *raping* the **middle class**, '' said Dharminder Gills of Mariners Harbor, whose family runs the Dongan. (NOW, 2015)

(20) Greed is *killing* the '' **MIDDLE CLASS**. '' Greed was the downfall of many great nations in the past. (NOW, 2013)

The third top-utilized verb in 2010-2017 was *help* which was found in later years 2017-2021 and 2021-2022. It indicates the constant efforts to aid the middle class that was depicted as a weak person who was in dire need. The verb was mostly used in the infinitive form to indicate the intention and the promises of the three successive administrations instead of using it in the past tense to point to an actual, finished plan. This is exemplified in (21), (22), and (23). From 2017 until 2022, although the present participle

growing topped the list, the verb was related to the importance of a growing middle-class, not to the fact that the middle class was growing in real (See Example 24). Similarly, the use of *rising* was related to the plan to help the middle class increase in size as in Example (25). The news showed how politicians used the middle-class card every time by promising to help them strengthen and expand. This was emphasized through their continuous use of the n-grams: *strengthen, expand, built, promised,* and *rebuild* as in Example (26).

(21) But the Obama administration's proposals to *help* the **middle class** cost money. (NOW, 2015)

(22) ...the preferential tax treatment college endowments receive to their efforts to *help* **middle-class** students afford the school (NOW, 2017)

(23) The Biden administration promises to *help* the **middle class** by handing out trillions of dollars of free money to citizens and paying people. (NOW, 2021)

(24) A *growing* **middle class** is essential to a stable democracy. (NOW, 2021)

(25) These steps will help grow our economy and rebuild a *rising*, thriving **middle class**. (NOW, 2015)

(26) We need to continue to *strengthen* the **middle class** and ensure that college is affordable for everyone.

The past participle *educated* was used with the hyphenated *middle-class* to illustrate one of the characteristics that distinguished members of the middle class, which agrees with Datta's view (2022) that saw that most of the middle class are educated citizens (See Section 2.2.). In the three time periods, other verbs that carried negative connotations are used as n-grams such as *shrinking, hit,* and *struggling* which delineated how the middle class was losing its ground.

Table 3: *Frequency of Top Ten Used Verb Collocates before Middle Class and its variant Middle-Class*

Verbs Before *Middle Class*			Verbs Before *Middle-class*		
2010-2017	2017-2021	2021-2022	2010-2017	2017-2021	2021-2022
hurt (82)	growing (54)	growing (152)	are (30)	are (27)	growing (57)
is (66)	help (54)	built (101)	educated (23)	were (27)	educated (29)
help (64)	is (39)	help (69)	help (20)	educated (20)	help (27)
be (61)	expanding (30)	rising (58)	working (18)	help (19)	are (25)
are (35)	rising (25)	be (54)	were (14)	benefit (18)	paying (19)
enter (28)	shrinking (25)	rebuild (53)	is (14)	be (16)	provide (9)
being (27)	are (23)	are (51)	struggling (10)	paying (13)	is (8)
helping (26)	benefit (21)	believe (25)	says (9)	hit (9)	keep (7)
build (25)	rebuilding (21)	helping (25)	be (7)	lead (9)	make (7)
grow (16)	helping (15)	shrinking (24)	being (7)	do (8)	promised (7)

Table 4 reveals the cases where *the middle class and middle-class* acted as agents of the following action. Since the word *middle class* is a collective noun that can be either singular or plural when the news discourse referred to the individuals of the class, it used the plural verb, but when the *middle class* was represented as one single unit, the singular form was utilized. The top-used verbs were "verb to be" and "verb to have" in the three periods, but to get the full context, the concordance lines and the top collocates of each linking or auxiliary verb in the lists needed to be examined. The 2010-2017 list had "*are*" as the top used verb, but it appeared that it was mostly used as an auxiliary verb with the passive form. Examples (27) and (28) reveal that the *middle class* in this grammatical construction were still a theme, not an agent; they were *hurt, robbed,* and *murdered*.

(27) We, the **middle class**, *are* the most to get hurt by the economy. (NOW, 2013)

(28) The American dream, small business and the **middle class** *are being* murdered. (NOW, 2017)

Although in the 2017-2021 list, the verb *has* was the top-used verb, it was not used to indicate possession; it was again employed as part of the passive form construction where it was negatively connoted as in *the middle class* **has been forced, has been obliterated, has been gutted, has been under the attack, has been ignored, has been hallowed out, has been squeezed,** and **has been hit hard**. It is worth noting that the same happened in 2021-2022, as the verbs collocated with the top-employed verb carry negative connotations such as: **are getting squeezed, are struggling,** and **are being impacted the most** (See Example 29).

(29) Significant segments of the ***middle class** are struggling* to establish sustainable economic foundations for themselves and their families. (NOW, 2022)

When analyzing the top n-grams of the rest of the verbs in the 2010-2017 lists, it appeared they were mostly used as auxiliary verbs as in *the middle class **was created**, the middle class **have been getting stuck**, the middle class **will be squeezed**, the middle class **will be shredded**,* and *the middle class **would be affected***. Similarly, in the 2017-2021 lists, the middle class was included in the passive structure in examples such as *the middle class **was being clobbered**, the middle class **was being crushed**, the middle class **will be upset**, the middle class **will be affected**, the middle class **will be taxed**, the middle class **are being priced out**, the middle class **have been pushed into**,* and *the middle class **had been under strain***. The was a slight difference in the 2021-2022 lists as they showed no difference in the type of structure and type of verbs utilized, for example, *the middle class **was built**, the middle class **will be affected** by this tax, the middle class **will be caught up**,* and *the middle class **will be angry***. Some examples in 2021-2022 did not have the middle class as themes but as agents such as *the middle class **cannot afford to pay***. In addition, the verb *said* was recurrent among the top verbs in the three time periods, but the concordance lines showed that it was always used as part of the reported speech about the middle class. It should be noted that the majority of the verbs throughout the three presidential terms conveyed unfavorable connotations since they all indicated the suffering of the middle class regardless of the promises of the politicians in office.

Table 4: *Frequency of Top Ten Used Verb Collocates After Middle Class and its variant Middle-Class*

Verbs After *Middle Class*			Verbs after *Middle-class*		
2010-2017	**2017-2021**	**2021-2022**	**2010-2017**	**2017-2021**	**2021-2022**
are (118)	has (118)	are (72)	has (15)	working (12)	coming (6)
was (97)	was (64)	was (57)	educated (11)	educated (8)	figuring (6)
have (80)	will (60)	built (40)	are (5)	has (6)	working (6)
will (66)	would (51)	will (39)	was (5)	have (5)	pay (4)
be (41)	are (46)	have (37)	been (3)	will (5)	afford (3)
can (32)	be (35)	said (32)	being (3)	are (4)	are (3)
said (32)	have (31)	can (27)	does (3)	is (4)	cohabiting (3)
would (29)	said (31)	be (23)	will (3)	would (4)	continues (3)
continues (26)	had (20)	does (22)	finished (2)	be (2)	could (3)
had (25)	get (19)	could (16)	gets (2)	benefit (2)	decided (3)

8.3 Adjective Collocates of the Middle Class

Tables 5 and 6 display that the majority of adjectives are attributive (pre-modifiers of nouns) rather than predictive. Adjectives provide details and information about the following nouns when used attributively. The three periods of time shared the adjective *upper* as the top utilized collocate (See Example 30), which indicated the inner classism inside the main category of the middle class. This classism was corroborated by the high frequency of the word *upper* (1220 tokens) in comparison to the word *lower* (524 tokens).

(30) The gap has widened at the top, and the consequences of falling out of the *upper **middle class*** have worsened. (NOW, 2017)

The second sub-division upon which the middle class was stratified was the division based on nationality where the national identity was a mark of group boundaries. The word *American* was the top second-used adjective to add details about the middle class in the three time periods, which resonated with the results of *middle-class* noun collocates. The third and the fourth top frequent adjective were related to discrimination based on color, exemplified in the occurrence of the two adjectives *black* and *white* in the three time periods. Instead of posting news in a neutral manner, most of the news in the selected data tended to add another classification that focused on the race of the class represented. Mentioning the race of the person gives the reader the impression that the color of any person matters in news. This contributes to the systematic racism constructed in US news discourse, which agrees with Dijk's view (2000) on racism in news. In Example (31), there was a tendency to accentuate the race of each class although the writer could have mentioned the *middle class* without adding the colors *black* and *white* as modifiers.

(31) Politicians beholden to the one percent ask *the black **middle class** and the white **middle** class* to fight over scraps. (NOW, 2014)

The adjectives *strong* and *solid* were repeated in the three time periods not to describe the present conditions of the middle class but to indicate what a middle class should be, or to describe the past conditions of the middle class when narrating past events as

in Examples (32) and (33). Example (34) negated the existence of a strong middle class and emphasized the importance of creating one.

(32) But we loved to complain about big business and big government, but we had a *solid **middle class*** upbringing. We had good public schools. We had accessible health care. (NOW, 2011)

(33) The vision of a *strong **middle class*** is what we're fighting for. (NOW, 2010)

(34) A society which lacks a *strong **middle class*** is a society facing revolutionary collapse. (NOW, 2021)

Table 5: *Frequency of Top Ten Used Adjective Collocates before Middle Class and its variant Middle-Class*

Adjectives Before *Middle Class*			Adjectives Before *Middle-class*		
2010-2017	**2017-2021**	**2021-2022**	**2010-2017**	**2017-2021**	**2021-2022**
upper (323)	upper (219)	upper (276)	white (181)	white (251)	white (127)
American (292)	American (173)	American (239)	upper (60)	upper (86)	upper (68)
Black (143)	Black (102)	Black (116)	American (35)	comfortable (47)	comfortable (38)
white (92)	white (67)	white (96)	average (33)	typical (45)	suburban (28)
strong (63)	urban (32)	strong (34)	good (29)	solid (33)	average (23)
urban (54)	strong (21)	large (21)	Black (25)	ordinary (14)	good (23)
broad (29)	large (18)	comfortable (18)	typical (25)	Black (27)	solid (23)
large (26)	solid (14)	great (15)	comfortable (24)	good (23)	typical (23)
traditional (20)	average (10)	average (13)	new (24)	average (22)	savvy (18)
good (18)	comfortable (8)	broad (13)	young (18)	suburban (20)	Black (14)
solid (16)	good (8)	good (11)	solid (17)	American (19)	

Other adjectives reinforcing the classism practiced in web news discourse were *traditional* in the 2010-2017 list and *average* and *typical* in 2017-2021 and 2021-2022. They stipulated the stereotypical characteristics of the middle class in discourse. These adjectives emphasized the mental image constructed in news about the middle class as illustrated in Examples (35) and (36). By repeating the stereotypical image of the middle class, any reader can conjure up the image of a *typical, average,* or *traditional* middle class.

(35) He embodies the averageness of the *average **middle-class*** American fighting his average familial and social battles. (NOW, 2017)

(36) He is very rough and as a *typical **middle-class*** father. (NOW, 2020)

The adjectives after the two words *middle Class* and *middle-class* were not different from the adjectives on their left side. The top recurrent adjective was *white* followed by *American* and *black*. The word *suburban* made an appearance in the three time periods. One of the parameters that defines middle-class members is their ability to purchase a residence in suburban areas (Datta, 2022). That might be the reason why the word was associated with the stereotypical image of the members of the middle class as the word *suburban* was closely collocated with nouns such as *middle-class suburban **life**, middle-class suburban **family**, middle-class suburban **area**, middle-class suburban **consumers**,* and *middle-class suburban **community***. Also, another word that appeared in the three time periods is the word *Jewish,* whereas the word *Muslim* happened in 2017-2021 list only. The classification based on religion adds another discriminating layer to the complex layers that characterize the middle class in news discourse. Other stratifying adjectives describing the sexual orientation such as *heterosexual* (in 2017-2021) and *straight* (2021-2022) occurred also but in low frequencies.

Table 6: *Frequency of Top Ten Used Adjective Collocates after Middle Class and its variant Middle-Class*

Adjectives after *Middle Class*			Adjectives after *Middle-class*		
2010-2017	2017-2021	2021-2022	2010-2017	2017-2021	2021-2022
white (47)	white (26)	white (34)	white (113)	white (158)	white (9)
American (19)	American (8)	Black (13)	Black (47)	Black (88)	Black (66)
Black (15)	Black (7)	electric (11)	American (42)	American (58)	American (41)
suburban (15)	low (7)	American (10)	suburban (25)	suburban (42)	suburban (31)
upper (12)	prosperous (5)	suburban (9)	Jewish (14)	Jewish (25)	Jewish (9)
economic (8)	upper (5)	Jewish (7)	economic (12)	young (8)	young (9)
public (7)	last (4)	small (7)	public (7)	economic (7)	economic (7)
eager (6)	Muslim (4)	affluent (4)	young (7)	urban (7)	affordable (6)
other (6)	Blue (3)	upper (4)	heterosexual (6)	liberal (6)	small (5)
Blue (5)	high (3)	young (4)	cultural (5)	rural (6)	straight (5)

9. Discussion: The Characteristics of the Middle Class in US Web News

The web news was consistent in constructing the characteristics of the middle class in the periods of the three American presidents. Since according to Fairclough (2001), language is a social practice, it was significant to interpret the previous collocation analysis in light of the hidden ideologies, power relations, and the order of social structures that were manifested in US news discourse. The previous analysis showed that slight changes in the characteristics of the middle class were noticed throughout the three periods and that the political agenda of each president: Barack Obama (2009-2017), Donald Trump (2017-2021), and Joe Biden (2021- 2022) did not affect how the middle class was portrayed in news discourse. However, other agendas governing the representation of the middle class were present. Under the neoliberal policies, the idea of classism is an intrinsic dividing system in American society, and the notion that the family is an economic unit is ubiquitous. The middle class was always represented as one entity with minimal reference to the individualistic characteristics of its members; their roles merely varied between *parents, workers, voters,* and sometimes *students*. No focus on other occupations was explicitly stated. It seems it is taken for granted in news discourse that once the *middle class* is associated with *family, community, life, consumers,* and *neighborhood*, a set of established beliefs about the middle class should be conjured up in the minds of the readers without much explanation. This agrees with Sacks' vision (1972) on membership categorization that is used to build the normative behavior of any category. Therefore, the noun collocates of the middle class were always written without further details, and this stereotypical outlook was reinforced by repeating adjectives such as *average, traditional,* and *typical* before the word *middle class*. This adds to the wealth of studies stating that mass media plays a significant role in the reactivation of prejudiced perceptions of social groups (Mastro, 2009).

The word *suburban* might be inclusive of where they live; nevertheless, the dwellings of the middle class or the characteristics of their houses were absent in news discourse. Concerning the physical appearance of the middle-class members, no remarks were mentioned in the data of the study, yet the major focus was on emphasizing their nationality as *Americans* first, and their color was mentioned second. This discourse explicitly evoked their sense of nationhood, which might lead to the marginalization and exclusion of other middle-class nationalities and immigrants that live in the US, although the US is described as the land of immigrants. Highlighting the national identity in news discourse is in line with Perkins et. al., (2019) who found that in US political discourse, some social groups are perceived as more fully embodying the national character than others. Furthermore, the dominance of the *white* color to depict the middle class is similar to what Park et. al. (2008) pointed to about the prevalence of whiteness in the US national imagination. In the data of this study, there was also a minimal reference to other stratifying aspects such as their religion and sexual orientation, which adds multifaceted discrimination inside one class.

Also, although the term middle class involves two sub-classes: the traditional middle class and the upper middle Class (Datta, 2022), there seemed to be an emphasis on one sector inside the middle class, exemplified by the high frequency of the word *upper* to modify the middle class. The analysis showed that the three administrations were keen on promising a *strong* and *stable American* middle class, with no actual mention of whether these promises were fulfilled. The careful examination of the roles assigned to the middle class gave the impression that the existence of this class was aimed at serving a specific economic role because the word was associated with *taxes, costs, expenses,* and *jobs*. This might substantiate the economic and political power of the middle class; they are the economic unit that establishes stability and the political card that politicians employ in their agendas

to win the majority of votes. Other social, cultural, historical, or educational roles seemed to be non-existent in the US web news discourse. Their dreams, conflicts, activities, or leisure habitats were not well depicted in news; they were only ground between different policies and economies. The discursive examination shows that the news about the middle class deprived this social group of their humanity as they were portrayed as a tool that was utilized for political or economic purposes. Metaphorically, in some cases, the middle class was represented with human qualities using verb collocates such as *killing* the middle class, *being hurt,* and *raping* the middle class. Regarding the social effect of the text here, it seems that despite the utmost significance of this social group, they were mostly passivized by minimizing their agency and backgrounding their function as doers of actions; the middle class was the one who has been always *getting stuck, squeezed, shredded, clobbered, crushed, taxed, priced out, forced, obliterated, gutted,* and *ignored.* According to Dijk (1985), the passive structure "may be used to hide or downplay the violent or other negative actions of state agents." (p. 474). This is evident in downplaying the role of successive administrations in the deteriorating conditions of the middle class, which agrees with the neoliberal policies that propagate less governmental involvement. The class is mostly associated with verbs that carry negative connotations as it is portrayed as a victim. Possibly, the US web news discourse is a mirror that reflects the harsh realities the middle class are facing; nevertheless, it agrees with the mainstream political discourse that views this class as a card that could be manipulated to gain political and economic powers.

10. Conclusion

In times of fluctuating economic conditions, investigating how language can reflect the changes in the economic and political situation is indispensable. Using the tools of Corpus Linguistics and Fairclough's 3-D model (1989), the present study aimed at examining a social group that is being hardly studied from a linguistic perspective. The compound nouns *middle class* and *middle-class* were utilized to elicit a specialized corpus out of the ready-made news corpus NOW from 2010 until the last day of 2022. The corpus has 1,253,678 tokens, including *the middle class* (30,975 times) and *middle-class* (23,587 times). To answer the first two research sub-questions, the detailed quantitative analysis of the POS surrounding the two words provided a collocational profile of each word in the periods of three American Presidents: Barack Obama (2009-2017), Donald Trump (2017-2021), and Joe Biden (2021- 2022). The qualitative analysis, guided by Fairclough's 3-D model (1989), of how the top POS was used in light of the economic and political situation of the middle class throughout the three periods answered the third research sub-question. It was obvious that the US web news discourse did not change its agenda toward representing the middle class during the past twelve years. It focused on its economic issues, ignoring all the other responsibilities or duties that this class might have toward its society. It was depicted as a silent, obscure social group that was crushed by other dominant forces that might control their actions and future. It could be suggested that more studies would adopt the same linguistic approach with regard to partisan media positioning. Future studies can be conducted to compare how the conditions of social classes are represented in liberal, conservative, and nonpartisan media. Social classes in other countries could be compared as well. The study can be a part of a branch of Applied Linguistics that focuses on the relationship between the science of economics and the science of language.

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