



CONSEIL EN STRATEGIE INTERNATIONALE LUXE  
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## A TOCQUEVILLIAN APPROACH TO LUXURY IN AMERICA

Reading Tocqueville enables one to grasp the different factors that have forged the American character: the Puritans' Protestant ethics, the size and wealth of possibilities this land offered to immigrants, and the democratic institutions that shaped a society in which people's worth is primarily measured by their riches. Tocqueville's work proves to be relevant as a starting point to reflect on the way Americans contemplate luxury, and more specifically with regard to their relationship to status and pleasure which various research highlight as being the main motivational factor of the luxury purchase in this market.

*The American Dream is still alive and most Americans believe in their ability to achieve it.*

There is a convergence between Tocqueville's writings and much of what was later written on American society: it is because America is, at the outset a democratic society, therefore classless, that rank is so important to Americans. Researching Americans' relationship with status comes down to the question of understanding the meaning and relevance of the concept of the American Dream in contemporary America.

The American Dream which promises this country's citizens the opportunity to achieve a better and fuller life according to their ability, has been mostly interpreted in its purely materialistic dimension, thereby matching Americans' constant preoccupation described by Tocqueville, that of improving their situation and displaying their success through the acquisition of material goods. While this concept was coined by James Truslow Adams in the 1930s and was consistent with Tocqueville's work, since then the American Dream has constantly been reshaped by the economic and political environment; hence, the need to revisit this notion at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Researching the evolutions of the Dream in the 20<sup>st</sup> century showed that home ownership has become one of its central elements and that, to Americans, social status is first and foremost conveyed by the area in which people live. My research<sup>1</sup> not only confirms that home ownership is still Americans' number one dream, but also that the values promoted by the American Dream remain widely shared by Americans who are rather optimistic regarding their chances to achieve it.

*Younger Americans are even more status oriented than their elders*

Despite the many crises that Americans have faced since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, younger generations still believe in the American Dream and remain fairly optimistic with regard to their own success in life. Gen Z is the least optimistic group with 75.8% believing moderately to very much in their chances to achieve

it; with 83.5% believing the same, Millennials are the second most optimistic generation after Baby-Boomers.

Most Americans are concerned with achieving the Dream and showing their success; 73.3% think it is moderately to very important to show social success to at least one group of people among family, friends, professional acquaintances, neighbors or strangers. Younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) even more so, and Millennials really stand out in the extreme status seekers' group (people considering important to show status to all of the groups mentioned above) of which they constitute almost half of the members.

Moreover, my research confirms the findings of much of the literature on Millennials setting this generation apart from others and it shows that they are more motivated by money than other generations including Gen Z (who are said to be very motivated by money). The analysis made on their consumption behavior in the foreseeable future indicates that they are the least likely to donate to charities and with only 16% saying "I will not spend on luxuries", they are by far the group that seems the most motivated by luxury. This is confirmed by the fact that they are likely to top all other age groups in luxury spending in the foreseeable future except on luxury apparel and accessories, these are two categories on which more Gen Z than Millennials declare that they intend to spend in the near future.

### *Pleasure derived by Americans from luxury is closely linked to their relationship with status*

Although the notion of pleasure is not central to Tocqueville's depiction of American society, he nonetheless seems to have been struck by the fact that Americans appear to have little time for pleasure in their lives. Moreover, he makes it clear that for Americans, happiness depends greatly on social success and the wealth associated with it. He observes that they constantly delay their enjoyment in order to seek further improvement in their situation, thus disregarding present pleasure in favor of hypothetical future happiness thereby making it impossible to find. Not only does his work provides insights into the reasons why a considerable literature on happiness later developed in the US, but it clearly makes a link between status, pleasure and happiness. Elaborating on Tocqueville's findings, my research confirms that the pleasure level derived by Americans from luxury is strongly linked to their attitude toward social status.

<sup>1</sup> A quantitative research was conducted in the US between December 9 and December 16, 2020, on a sample of 808 Americans aged 18 to 70. Evenly distributed geographically as well as between genders and age categories. Revenues over \$ 75,000.00 a year.