

# Advertising: Selling the American Dream

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i  
pedagogije

Nikolina Daka

**Oglašavanje: prodaja američkog sna**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

Osijek, 2019.

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Jadranka Zlomislić, Assistant Professor

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to explore how the American Dream has changed since its origin to the present day with a particular emphasis on its commercialization through use in advertising. This paper focuses on the discrepancy between the meaning of the American Dream when it originated and the American Dream today. Through the commercialization of the American dream the founding principles of the United States of America, “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” have become a marketing slogan (US 1776). The American society is buying into the idea of the Dream as commercials are selling dreams of wealth, success and equality. Although the tenets about achieving the American Dream have proven to be unrealistic and unobtainable by all, marketing companies continue to use their business tactics to sell fantasies by utilizing the dream as their key advertising strategy. In order to examine the spiritual and material aspects of the American Dream, the paper also explores *The Great Gatsby*, a novel set in 1922 that criticizes the corruption of the American Dream and the consumer society that has lost its traditional beliefs and values.

**Keywords:** The American Dream, monetary values, ownership, national identity, advertising



## Introduction

Americans are brought up with the concept of the American Dream and the basic democratic principle stated in the Declaration of Independence that all people are created equal and that all have “certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (US 1776). These principles are also found in their traditional beliefs of individual freedom, self-reliance, equality of opportunity, competition, hard work and material wealth (Kearny et al.29). This paper presents how the American Dream shaped the American nation as the land of opportunity and the role of the shared distinct American values in holding together all those striving to achieve their dreams. The aim of this paper is to explore how the American Dream has changed since its origin to the present day with a particular emphasis on its commercialization by use in advertising. Through the commercialization of the American dream the founding principles of the United States of America, “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” (US 1776) have become a marketing slogan.

The first chapter provides various definitions of the American Dream and explains its original values. Chapter two examines the corruption of the American Dream by taking a look at the flaws and the change in meaning of the American Dream. In addition, it focuses on the shift of the American Dream from the original ideas and beliefs to the dream of money and fame it is today. Chapter three presents the American Dream in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, showing the immense changes it has undergone, and the fight for every individual’s right to the Dream. Chapter four talks about the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* and criticizes the corruption of the American Dream and the consumer society that has lost its traditional beliefs and values. Chapter five focuses on advertising that uses the Dream as its tool, both in business and personal advertisements. It examines how people are selling and buying the idea of the Dream through advertising and commercialism. The paper concludes by highlighting the main ideas of the shift in the American Dream between its original and more recent meaning and how people today are selling and buying the Dream.

## 1. The American Dream

The American Dream was originally the idea that any individual, no matter what origin, social status, or nationality can come to America and become rich and successful. It was considered to be an achievable dream for any man or woman. The American dream was attainable by hard work, pushing forward in life, pulling yourself up by the bootstraps and not giving up, no matter how tough things got. No matter what, hard and honest work was all one needed to become wealthy and earn high social status. The American Dream was defined in some of the earliest colonial writings as the belief “that every man, whatever his origins, may pursue and attain his chosen goals, be they political, monetary, or social. It was the literary expression of the concept of America: the land of opportunity” (Pearson 638). The American Dream was the reason for the first pilgrims' dangerous journey across the Atlantic Ocean and the pioneer's dangerous journey across the American Frontier. The dream gave hope to the settlers of the new country to endure the risks and hardships. For all newcomers America was the Promised Land where they would have their chance to improve their standard of living and pursue their aims and ambitions as doers and real survivors (Logicandpolitics.blogspot.com, 2019). This leads us to the conclusion that Americans are the bravest people in the world. Willing to risk their lives to make a change for the better.

In *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*, Jennifer L. Hochschild also talks about the definition of the American Dream as she explains that achieving the American Dream is not just about material wealth, but also about status and power (15). She mentions how millions of immigrants and migrants have moved to America to pursue their personal vision of the American Dream and emphasizes that while some have succeeded others have failed (15). Thus, we are reminded that each person views the American Dream from their personal perspective so that the dream is defined by the dreamer. A similar view is suggested by Bruce Springsteen who claims: “I don't think the American Dream was that everybody was going to make... a billion dollars, but it was that everybody was going to have an opportunity and the chance to live a life with some decency and some dignity and a chance for some self-respect” (qtd. in Hochschild 16). This confirms that success is very relative as each individual defines what the dream means to them personally.

Likewise, in a speech to the Democratic Leadership Council in 1993, Bill Clinton defined the American Dream as follows: “The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one- if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far

as your god given ability will take you” (Hochschild 18). Clinton’s definition, like the earliest definitions of the American Dream mentioned previously, highlights equality of opportunity and stresses hard work as the means of achieving the American Dream.

The American Dream is the idea that shaped the American nation and its traditional values have been its backbone since the founding of the country. In addition to hard work, basic values such as individual freedom, self-reliance, equality of opportunity, competition, and material wealth have served as guidelines for achieving the dream (Kearny et al.29). When the country was being settled, the settlers were of different religions, different backgrounds, and different nationalities. What united them were their original values and the belief in equality of opportunity to achieve their dream. This is what shaped their national spirit and turned the United States into a very proud nation that is very proud of their nationality, their heritage and their country as a land of opportunity for all.

The above-mentioned beliefs are ingrained in the mindset of Americans. From the founding of the United States children have been raised with the idea of the American Dream. They have been encouraged to believe that they can achieve their Dream, and that they need to build up the courage and strive for the thing they want in life. Not only their parents, but also society and advertisements are encouraging them to keep going forward, to try to achieve the Dream for themselves. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that most Americans believe that they have a very good chance of improving their standard of living, and that they will live better than the generation before them.

The settlers of the new country that were mentioned above mostly came from European countries where numerous obstacles prevented people from achieving their dreams. The lack of social mobility was one of the biggest obstacles. On the one hand there were noblemen, aristocrats born into their social status and clergy, who earned their social status through their religion. On the other hand, there were the less fortunate who in many cases had to work really hard just to survive. Thus, many decided to flee to America where the founding fathers ensured that they would get rid of all the barriers in order to provide equality of opportunity regardless of social status. In America things were supposed to be different; only your efforts and hard work were supposed to matter. The American Dream shaped the dreams, hopes and ideas of the newcomers who came from all over the world. What connected them was the belief that things were going to get better and that they deserved things to be better for them. The American Dream helps us better understand why all those people moved to America and what their goals were.

However, with time numerous social and economic changes were reflected in the shift in the original values and even in their corruption. The American Dream was on a decline as people became aware that it wasn't available to all equally. The dream was losing its meaning as material interests replaced the more spiritual and moral values. As Americans turned from producers to consumers and the American Dream was commercialized and the values corrupted. The United States was no longer the land of opportunity for all because the dream is not sustainable economically. Not everyone can have an amazing house with a beautiful yard and the newest car. Not everyone can have a successful business. Some people have to fail, in order for others to succeed. They were led to believe that they will all achieve exactly what they want and that with hard work, they can become anything they imagine and own anything they want. Those who have tried their hardest and still failed, because some people fail, no matter how hard they try, are the reality America was brutally woken up to.

## **2. The Corruption of the American Dream**

The corruption of the American Dream and the devaluing of its original values has led to an increased awareness that the American Dream is an unachievable concept. The promises that literally everybody who comes to America can achieve success and wealth are being seen as misconceptions. In reality, not everyone is equal nor do all have the same start in life nor the same conditions to achieve their dreams. The basic values work for some but not for all which means that despite very hard work the majority of Americans are incapable of ever achieving the American Dream.

### **2.1. Flaws in the Four Tenets of the American Dream**

Jennifer L. Hochschild explains the four tenets of the American Dream. The First Tenet of the American Dream says, “that everyone can participate equally and can always start over” which is incorrect because “people cannot shed their existing selves as snakes do their skin” (Hochschild 26). It is a problem, letting people believe this, because they start to feel like whatever they do, they can just restart and have their past wrongdoings forgiven and forgotten.

The second tenet talks about every man's right to success, i.e. “the reasonable anticipation of success” (Hochschild 26). Every American believes he was born with the right to success. This, naturally, creates a problem because there are not enough resources and opportunities for everyone to be rich and successful. This promise stems from the 18th century, when governor James Glen wrote: “Adventurers will be pleased to find a Change from Poverty and Distress to Ease and Plenty ... Country not yet half settled, where the Rivers are crowded with fish ... no heavy Taxes to impoverish them, nor oppressive Land-lords to snatch the hard-earned Morsel from the Mouth of Indigence, and where Industry will certainly enrich them” (Hochschild 27). Glen's observations are valid to the present as the dream becomes commercialized and there is the same emphasis on every individual's right to success. However, the right to success does not mean that in reality success will be attained by all. Unfortunately, circumstances do not allow every person to fulfil their Dream, so there remain a lot of unhappy dreamers, who feel cheated out of their Dream. In fact, everyone is allowed to dream but people forget that no one is actually promised success, and they get frustrated by the feeling that something that they have a right to and that belongs to them has been taken from them.

The Third Tenet is “the belief that success results from actions and traits under one’s own control” (Hochschild 30). If success comes from each individual’s power to make their own decisions and choices, then failure results from the lack of it. This does not have to be the case because many people have tried their best and hardest to succeed at something, and still failed.

The Fourth Tenet is “the association of success with virtue ... but if implies virtue, failure implies sin” (Hochschild 30). This tenet can bring much harm because not all successful people are virtuous nor are all those who fail sinful.

Not only are the above tenets giving a distortion of the American Dream, but the skewed values of today are also distorting the Dream. The following example illustrates how parents can have the right values and are working hard to succeed in the harshest conditions, while their children want the same financial benefits without hard work and at a much quicker pace.

Isaac Fulwood, the former chief of police for Washington, D.C. comments on a recently arrested eighteen-year-old with ‘a hard working mother who is doing her best to provide him with what he needs’ in life- not a wealthy family, but a working family. Yet this kid has 30, 40, 50 pairs of tennis shoes, all kinds of jogging suits, and he is defining himself in terms of these material things... his world is not next year, not next week. His world is today. Instant gratification, right now’ (qtd. in Hochschild 184).

The American Dream used to mean one thing, but now, there is a shift in beliefs and ideals. Now people no longer want the hard work and honour that comes with it, they want instant gratification and material things. In today’s society people want to own things because by owning things they feel their value. The more they have, the better they feel about themselves and the better the people around them think they are. People own things just so they can say they have those things, not because it means anything more to them. Material things have become a showing of person’s value.

It can be argued that there is a lack of legitimate opportunities in today’s society, but there is not a lack of resources. The resources are completely unfairly divided, which leaves the smallest number absolutely rich and the majority very poor. The richest serve as a spark that ignites the imagination of the poor. The problem is, people are not willing to work for anything anymore, they see the richest and want what they have, but they want it now, they want it overnight, and they want it without putting in any effort.

## 2.2. The Shift to Monetary Values

If you were to ask almost anyone today what the American Dream means to them, you will almost always get the same answer – money, wealth, being rich. Nowadays, the ideas and beliefs of Americans about the American Dream, are solely those of money, property and material things. The American Dream is every person's dream of wealth and prosperity. This might be due to recent economic crises; this might have something to do with the world's wealth being not properly divided. Another possible reason is that most people are working jobs they do not want to do to pay off things they bought because others have them, and they felt obligated to buy to fit in, no matter if they really wanted them or not. This need to be as good as or better than others leads to frustration and the fact that people are not equal and do not pursue their dreams under equal circumstances leads to disappointment and even criminal actions.

Furthermore, the following statistics also bring home the inequality of opportunity: “among the 400 wealthiest Americans, nearly 1/3 of them were born with their money, or with a good start to earning enough to become part of the wealthiest” (Barnes). Consequences of inequality have been also pointed out by President Barack Obama as he “mentioned what a negative impact economic inequality has on the idea of the American Dream” and that “the growing economic inequality is preventing people from achieving the American Dream” (Barnes). It is important to mention that the press caused such a commotion and spread such fear that the President was forced to give up on making his concerns public so as not to cause great concern among the public. However, maybe it would have been worth the extra concern and even panic if it would have resulted in looking for solutions to resolving such an important issue. Maybe the United States, just like the rest of the world, needs a wakeup call to rid society of biases, inequality and discrimination.

“America is rotting at its core. The American dream is no longer a mantra of inspiration. It is a marketing campaign” (“Commercialization of the American Dream”). The values it used to hold are now forgotten and replaced with dreams of ownership and being rich. People feel the need to have a house that is too big for them, own cars that are too big and too expensive for their needs and many other material possessions that are unnecessary. This is more important to them than their liberty and happiness. They buy the products, buy into the Dream, and feel closer to success and happiness, but they never really feel happy. There is a growing need for more and more things to make us happy, and the amounts eventually get so overwhelming, until we realize that neither the Dream nor happiness has been realized.

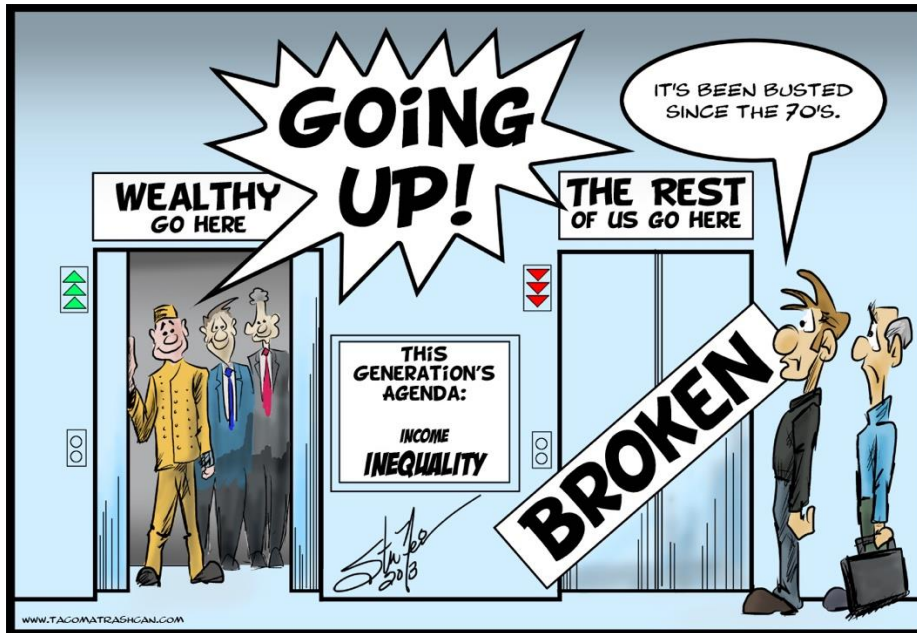


Fig.1. illustration shows how equality of opportunity works in real life.

The unreachable American Dream <https://rampages.us/barnesml2/2015/07/20/the-unreachable-american-dream/> accessed June 17, 2019



### 3. The American Dream in the 20th and the 21st Centuries

“In the twenty-first century, the American Dream still remains a major element of national identity, and yet national identity is itself marked by a sense of uncertainty that may well be greater than ever before” (Cullen 6).

It is difficult to answer the question what the American Dream is these days. There are so many people in America, and to each person, the American Dream has a specific meaning. To some, it represents the dream of having your own property; to some it represents materialistic independence and liberty. Each person has their view of the Dream and what it means to them, as well as how they want to achieve it.

The American Dream has physics and metaphysics, a material and a spiritual component. The material component concerns wealth or well-being, with citizenship shading into ownership: One steps closer to the American Dream by buying a house or owning a car. The material component suggests class mobility or simply the pleasure of economic opportunity, a motive for immigration to America as long as there have been immigrants. (Kimmage 27)

We can see Kimmage here mentioning the value of citizenship being replaced with the value of ownership, which tells us what the Dream means to people today, whether they are immigrants or not. This could also bring us to the conclusion that being an American is not why people wish to live in the United States, but because of the promise of wealth and prosperity. The spiritual component of the Dream has almost been forgotten. Consumption has replaced spirituality.

A well-known fact is that back in 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. fought for the opportunities of African Americans in the United States. Even the need for this movement shows how bad the class and racial division was. America was supposed to be a promised land for all, but in the end, the few overruled the many and most people did not get to experience the equality of opportunity, or even their civil rights. They were pushed to the side, separated, made to come in at different entrances, to sit in a separate part of the bus. The 20th century was when the oppressed started demanding their rights. Before that, the Dream was in fact only meant for a few, even though it was advertised for everyone, the majority was not even allowed to dream.

#### 4. The Distortion of the Dream in *The Great Gatsby*

F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* has been selected because of its criticism of the American Dream and the American society in which the Dream as well as its traditional values have been distorted. According to Pearson "F. Scott Fitzgerald has come to be associated with this concept of the American dream more so than any other writer of the twentieth century" but "Fitzgerald's unique expression of the American dream lacks the optimism, the sense of fulfilment, so evident in the expressions of his predecessors" (Pearson 638).

The novel is set in 1922 and gives us an insight in how the Dream clearly already turned sour, even back then. Today, more than ever we can see what great changes there are in the American Dream – dreams of wealth, fame and instant success. The United States was founded as a place where you were supposed to look beyond family names, beyond social status and be against social class and class divisions, but it failed in doing so and the society became heavily divided. Today, these divisions are just as present.

In *The Great Gatsby*, the American Dream meant accumulating wealth and earning your status along with it, and because of it. It did not reflect the values of hard, honest work, or of self-reliance and equality of opportunity – it became solely about the money. The author comments on the social class division and mentions how even the wealthiest, those on top of the chain were divided and discriminated against by being separated into two fixed groups – "old money" and "new money." "old money" were people who were born into their social class, into wealth; they did nothing to earn any of what they had because their wealth has been passed down for generations. They were respected in society, had the opportunities for the best education, housing, travel and everything else that money could buy. They could spend their days reading books, playing polo, or however they liked. On the other hand, the "New money" were people who were also wealthy, sometimes even as wealthy as the "old money" people but were not as respected. Regardless of their great wealth, they were still judged and treated very differently. "New money" people were those who earned their wealth on their own, they were people who you could say actually achieved the American Dream, worked their way up to the top, and earned what they owned.

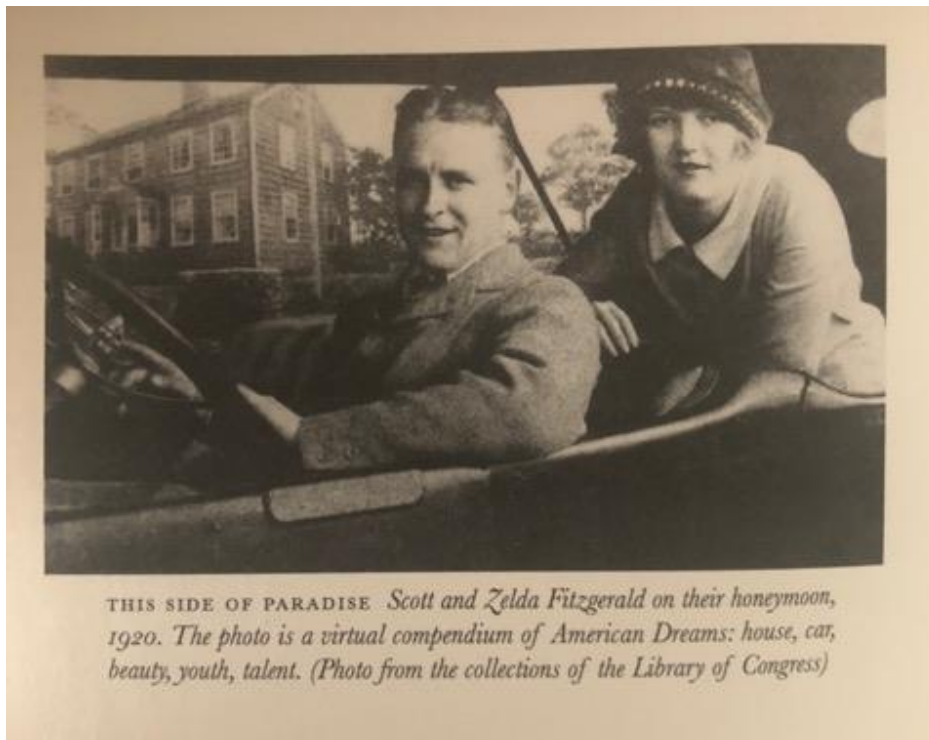


Fig. 2. Picture show Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald on their honeymoon in 1920. This photo is a virtual compendium of American Dreams: house, car, beauty, youth, talent. Photo from the collections of the Library of Congress.

(Cullen, Jim. "The American Dream. A History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation" Oxford University Press)

Considering the disparity between the characters in the novel, one is also reminded of Fitzgerald's parents as well as his family's financial situation. F. Scott Fitzgerald "was the only son of an unsuccessful, aristocratic father and an energetic, provincial mother" ("F. Scott Fitzgerald"). Seeing this, the disparity between what was supposedly favourable and what was not – his father being the highest class – an aristocrat, and his mother one of the lowest classes – provincial. This is perhaps why he made the low-class character the one that made something out of himself and became a respected man, while Tom Buchanan, the high-class, old money was portrayed as an aggressive, arrogant ignorant man who thinks he knows and deserves anything and everything, just because he was born into wealth. It could explain why he made Gatsby some sort of a hero, while "old money" Tom was the villain. Tom and Daisy Buchanan were people who were born into the American Dream – into wealth, as was Fitzgerald himself. Gatsby was the opposite, in a way, he was not born into wealth but rather he earned his wealth and respect for himself. He became a man who people envied, wanted to be, someone who earned other

people's respect and awe, a man who was truly self-made. Gatsby seemed to believe he could actually achieve the American dream through hard work and self-control. He is a secretive man, who sparks a lot of rumours, there are people who talk about him being a German spy, and even about him killing a man.

A big debate in the novel is whether Jay ever achieves the American Dream. This also begs the question if the Dream is only a dream, or something regular people can actually achieve. Jay Gatsby was a greatly respected, rich man with a lot of material wealth. At first, it seems like he is the embodiment of the American Dream. But then there are implications that his wealth was not earned in an honest way, he was most likely a bootlegger, which seems logical because throughout the novel we can see he seems to lie and hide, and also seems to know a lot of people and have many connections.

Because Gatsby was new money, he was never accepted in the same way as those who belonged to the old money. This just shows how the social class you were born into was the one from which you could never escape. Gatsby himself suffered because he was not born into the old money social class, in the end his wealth did not matter so much, because this status was still something unachievable. Old money was always around to remind him that no matter how rich he was, or how much wealth he accumulated, he will never escape the discrimination and bias because of the social class he was born in. The American Dream has lost its meaning of equality of opportunity and social mobility and the traditional values have also been distorted.

## 5. The American Dream in Advertisements

The American Dream has become an marketing strategy. More and more companies use it as their special tool to attract consumers. Americans, patriotic as they are, go for anything American, and especially the Dream. Because reality shows that the Dream is no longer possible for the majority, there has been a significant increase in products brought into a connection with the American Dream. Unfortunately, most of the offers are selling illusions or even taking away the Dream.

### 5.1. Business Advertisements

Many advertisements and commercials were published in America with the same idea – living the American Dream. One such example is the “advertisement from Citicorp Bank” with “carefully balanced group of shining faces– young and old, male and female, black, Latino, Nordic, and Asian – all gazing starry-eyed over the words THE WILL TO SUCCEED IS PART OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT” (Hochschild 21). The add makes a connection of the American Dream with one’s will which is a definite link to the third tenet that claims “that success results from actions and traits under a person's own control” (Cullen 21).

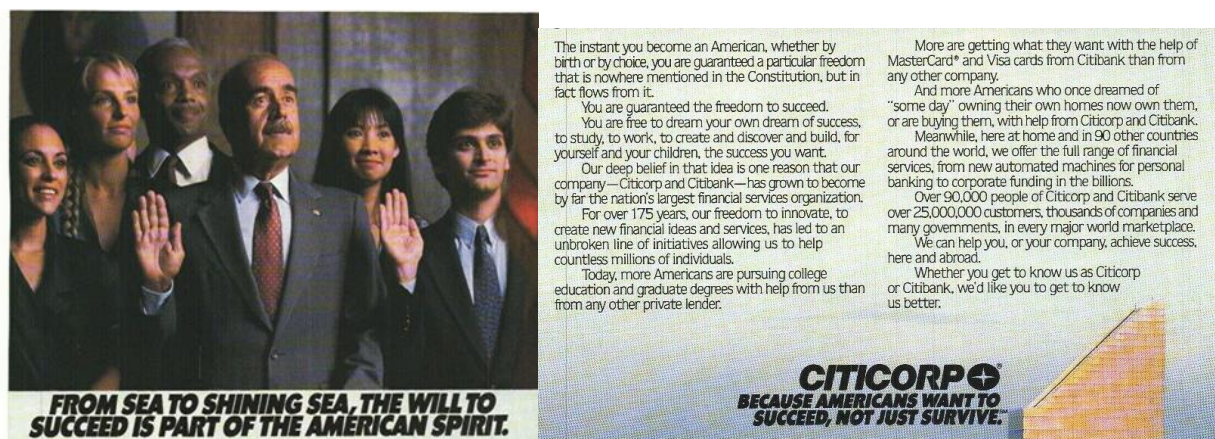


Fig.3. “Citicorp/ Citibank New York ad showing people of all races and nationalities sharing the American Dream.”

(Hochschild, Jennifer L. Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class and the Soul of the Nation, Jennifer L. Hochschild. Princeton University Press, 2006.)

Another advertisement shown in this document (Fig. 4), from a company called Texaco shows happy young and old people, men and women smiling with big, bold words “GO FOR IT.” This is telling the American man or woman not to give up and to keep pushing and going, not to be afraid or scared of anything, not even thinking of failure, as if it was not an option.

Americans live their life as if there is no chance of failure; they feel, because of the American Dream, they are owed success. Therefore, there is no fear to start a new business, or expand the one you have. Success is practically guaranteed by the dream, so there is no fear of failure, and risk becomes a thing of the past. You are not really taking a chance if you already know you are going to succeed, since you were promised that by the American Dream at an early age. This could easily be included in the list of reasons why America was in such a crisis. People were spending beyond their means, without worry, because there is no way they could fail. So there was no way overspending and bad investments could come back to haunt them, since they were promised success. If you spend your life in the belief that you will thrive in life, you almost do not even need the advertisements telling you to “go for it” and take out a loan, to start a new business, buy stocks or a great big house.

But when the advertisement is there, it makes it that much easier for you to even remember what you are “owed” and it helps a person believe everyone else is doing it, so they do not want to feel left out. Seeing happy, smiling faces of people you never met but somehow trust in an advertisement helps you take the leap and do the thing you need their “help” for.



Fig.4. “Texaco Inc. ad showing their employees smiling and encouraging people to go for it.”

(Hochschild, Jennifer L. Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class and the Soul of the Nation, Jennifer L. Hochschild. Princeton University Press, 2006.)

## 5.2. Emotional Advertising

The advertisements that appeal to one's personal nature are even more effective than those appealing to one's business sense. Not every person wants to own their own business, but almost every person wants to be rich, feel like a good American, be true to their roots, and own property. For example, we can see many people buying pickup trucks, even though they have no particular need for such a vehicle. Despite the fact that there is little need for a pickup truck, it is not a comfortable vehicle, and it eats up gas enormously, people keep buying them. They are more popular than ever because the ads link buyers to their American roots, make them feel like cowboys, or pioneers on the frontier. Up until 2001, the government was even giving tax reliefs on pickup trucks. They became a status symbol. The advertisements promoting these trucks appeal to the American man's roots and his wild side, the naturist, the agriculturalist in him (Huffman 2016).



Fig.5. Ford Pickup Truck off-road with the American Flag, giving sense of adventure like the forefathers had.

(Why do Americans Love Pickup Cars? <https://www.thedrive.com/travel/1751/why-do-americans-love-pickup-trucks-ask-the-drive> accessed June 24, 2019)

We can see in *The Great Gatsby* how people become so wrapped up in their Dream that they eventually become victims of the things they believe. The market today is selling individual dreams, which people are quick to believe, and it leads many to failure. Advertisements now are





## **Conclusion**

Through the commercialization of the American dream the founding principles of the United States of America, “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” have become a marketing slogan (US 1776). The American Dream was established as one of the most important ideas at the very founding of the new American nation which promised equality and freedom to all. However, the society today is different than it was when the nation was established, and so is the dream. People today feel like they were promised success, and do not need to earn it. There has been a huge shift in the American Dream due to the change in the traditional American beliefs and values of the present-day consumer society. The focus of the dream has shifted to instant success, fame, glory and all that money can buy. Nobody wants to really buckle down and work hard for it. Nobody wants to earn anything, they just want to own it, for owning things sake. Owning things has become a new mania.

In closing, commercials and advertisements today are selling a lot of items that people have learned to connect to the American Dream. Because the American Dream is not achievable by all, consumers are more prone to turn to products that claim to sell the Dream. The advertisements no longer sell the product; they sell the feeling of success, the feeling of fulfilment, the feeling of being accepted in a social class or having others envy what you own. They make you believe that if you buy their product(s) you will be happy and others will see you as a person of a higher class, they will respect you, not because of what you have accomplished, but because of what you own. Owning things and becoming famous overnight is the new American Dream. Instant success is all anybody cares about. The ideals from the Frontier have been erased and replaced with materialism.

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