

The New Materialism

Americans have entered an era of “smart extravagance”

By Diane Crispell

Rent-a-Jet: the latest convenience for your “average millionaire,” reports *Time*.¹ Those participating in the shared-ownership scheme receive the benefits of a virtually private jet without bearing the entire expense. This phenomenon exemplifies the new materialism in America. It combines two seemingly contradictory yet all-too-human desires: to have it all and to get a deal.

Most of us will never know what it means to be the “average millionaire.” The spending sprees of the super-rich provide juicy fodder for the media to serve up and the general public to gobble down. It fascinates us to learn that Sotheby’s auctioned off for \$225,100 the guitar John Lennon had when he met Paul McCartney.² However, this most conspicuous consumption of all merely reflects, in a vastly exaggerated fashion, what’s going on among the “simple folk.” Whether you define a splurge as a \$10 manicure or a \$10 million home, you can be sure Americans are doing more of it these days.

There is a new materialism afoot in the US, thanks to the booming economy. Americans are sweeping in the new century on a veritable tsunami of optimism. The vast majority of adults aged 18 and older (82%) say the past year was very or fairly good for them, a record high since the Roper Organization (now Roper Starch Worldwide) first asked the question in 1971.³ A solid 40% of adults agree “it’s a good time to buy” the things they want and need, the highest reading for this measure of confidence since 1987 and just 6 percentage points below the record high of 1986 (the question was first asked in 1973). A growing majority feel in control of their financial situation, with 57% saying “I usually have no trouble at all paying my bills and other debts,” up from 52% in 1997.

When economic times are rough, people worry about money more than anything else. When times are good, those concerns tend to move to the back burner. Money itself takes on a new meaning. Security is still the most important aspect of money in Americans’ lives, but other connotations are picking up steam. The shares of adults who say the comfort, pleasure, sense of achievement and control money conveys are important to them are all up at least 5 percentage points since 1995.

Those who fear that the evils of greed may overwhelm people’s better side can be reassured that Americans still value many things more than money. When asked which one or two things come closest to expressing their personal idea of success, the top responses are being a good spouse or parent, being true to

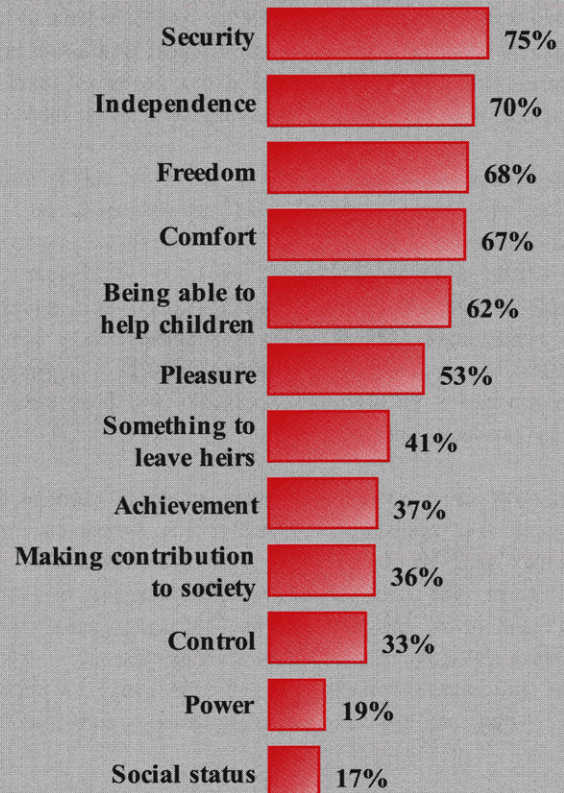
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Figure 1

Money Means More in Many Ways

Question: Money represents different things to different people. For each item, please tell me if it is a very important aspect of what money represents to you, a somewhat important aspect, or an unimportant aspect.

Percent responding very important



Source: Survey by Roper Starch Worldwide, July 1998.

yourself, being true to God, and having friends who respect you. Even so, being wealthy has moved up to fifth place, from seventh place in 1975.

Americans have not entirely abandoned their Puritan instincts against conspicuous consumption, though. Four in ten Americans agree with the statement “I am really turned off by

people's obsession with material possessions today" to the tune of 8 or higher on a 10-point scale. Nearly half (48%) agree with the statement: "I try to buy only what I need."

Need is a relative term, of course. Americans have raised the bar when it comes to the necessities of life. As the standard of living has risen, so have people's expectations. Not only do they want more, they claim to *need* more—more appliances, more electronics, more real estate.

In 1978, 31% of Americans viewed home air conditioning as a necessity rather than a luxury. That proportion has risen to 55%. The share who consider air conditioners in cars a must has grown from 22% to 55%. In the late 1980s, one in four considered microwave ovens necessities; the share has more than doubled to 53% in a decade.

No longer is a car in every garage enough; 35% say they need a second vehicle, up from 17% in 1978. And 37% have to have at least two bathrooms in their homes (Roper first asked about bathrooms in 1997, so it's unclear if this professed need has grown, although home-building trends indicate it has).

In a few cases, perceived necessity is just about met by reality. The share of people who "need" washing machines is nearly the same as the proportion who have them. The same goes for the much smaller number who "need" and have housekeepers. In a couple of cases, Americans haven't attained their perceived need. For example, 20% of adults view home security systems as necessities, but just 14% have them. This aspiration-ownership gap is an obvious opportunity for those who sell security products and services.

But in most cases, people's ownership of things outstrips their view of them as necessities. In other words, Americans openly admit they have lots of things they could live without. TV is a case in point. Far more people own TVs than think of them as "must have" items, 96% versus 67%. The same goes for other electronic devices, including answering machines, VCRs, stereos, and home computers, as well as hair dryers and credit cards. Americans are clearly used to having more than they need.

Americans' definition of the "good life" has become noticeably more materialistic in the past couple of decades. Intangibles like happy marriages and children are still very important, but the share who say "a lot of money" is part of the good life they would like to have has risen to 63% from 38% in 1975. The share who say so about "a job that pays much more than average" has increased from 45% to 62%, while the share who place this kind of value on "a job that is interesting" has fallen from 69% to 61%. In 1975, just 14% of Americans listed swimming pools as part of the "good life." That's up to 36%. In the mid-1970s, "a job that contributes to the welfare of society" just edged out "really nice clothes" by

38% to 36%. The clothes are now ahead of socially correct jobs by a length, 48% versus 32%.

Speaking of really nice clothes, nearly two-thirds of adults (63%) agree most people think of "wearing only the best designer clothing" as a status symbol. Even more feel this way about owning expensive jewelry, expensive cars, expensive boats, and eating at expensive restaurants. In other words, status is expensive.

What do Americans want? More than they have. Sometimes "more" means greater numbers of things, as in "he who dies with the most toys wins." Sometimes "more" refers to quality, as in "more stylish" clothing. Sometimes it simply refers to sheer physical size, as in "bigger is better." Sport-utility vehicles, pick-up trucks and full-size sedans are in the ascendancy as fuel prices remain manageable, safety concerns remain paramount, and Americans revisit their love of "big." Nearly three in ten vehicle-owning households (29%) now have pick-up trucks—up 6 percentage points in just one year. The ultimate big vehicle, of course, is the full-fledged RV. The Recreation Vehicle Industry Association says trends in sales of motor homes closely follow economic trends and are currently on the rise, especially among baby boomers in their late 40s and early 50s.⁴

The hankering for more applies to homes, too. The average new home has 2,120 square feet of living space, up 40% in 1970, according to the National Association of Home Builders.⁵ Developers aren't building bigger homes just for the heck of it; they are responding to demand. "Spacious" and "large" follow "comfortable" as the terms people most use to describe their "dream home," according to Roper data. As the bulk of Americans reach their middle-aged family years, home base has become an increasingly important place for people to indulge their acquisitive fantasies, from master bathrooms that double as spas and gyms to fully wired home-entertainment arenas. Three in four homes now have master bathrooms, up 8 percentage points since 1994. The share of homes with studies or offices has risen to 22% from 14% in the same period.

Size isn't the only thing that defines the "dream home." Luxuriousness has gained ground, too, at 31%, up from 26% in 1995. Furthermore, 69% consider a "beautifully decorated home" a generally recognized status symbol, up from 61% in 1996. These aspirations have given rise to the McMansion phenomenon noted in *The New York Times*.⁶ Luxury residential developments are popping up all over the map.

People who aren't buying executive homes with three-car garages and his-and-hers dressing rooms are nonetheless involved with improving their homes. One in three Americans has done a major home project in the past two years; half expect to do one in the next year or two. As any homeowner who has

undertaken improvements knows, people often spend more than expected. Some of the extra costs are due to poor planning or unpredictable problems, but others are incurred by choice. One couple “splurged” on their kitchen make-over by adding an entertainment center, skylight and bay window, better flooring and a built-in tabletop that weren’t in the original plan, reports *Today’s Homeowner*. These extras added more than \$4,000 to their budget, but also added considerably to their satisfaction with the end product.⁷ More and more, Americans feel their homes are worth this kind of attention.

One home isn’t necessarily enough, either. Forty-three percent of adults say a vacation home is part of the good life, and 72% say it’s a status symbol. Vacation homes are one of Americans’ greatest unrealized fantasies; 57% would like to have one, but just 3% do.

Of course, there’s another way to have a home away from home. People can rent ski lodges, go to beach resorts or stay in European castles converted into hotels. “Traveling abroad frequently for pleasure” ties with vacation homes as a status symbol, at 72%, closely followed by “staying in luxury hotels,” at 70%. One website clearly subscribes to the notion that “if you have to ask how much, you can’t afford it.” Luxurytraveler.com provides listings of deluxe European lodgings, including Claridge’s of London and the Coombe Abbey Hotel, complete with genuine moat. What it doesn’t list are prices.

The new materialism isn’t always expressed at the ultra-lavish level. The average American may yearn after an island of his or her own but has little real chance of realizing this dream. What the average American can do is indulge in little treats. Pampering oneself, the kids or the dog is an affordable luxury for most.

The small things in which people indulge are often scaled-down versions of more extravagant but less attainable desires. Maybe you can’t afford the Royal & Ancient in St. Andrews, but you can go golfing on the municipal course. Can’t manage the week at the exclusive southwestern spa? Get a massage, manicure, or facial at a local salon.

Taking baths is a popular indulgence, mentioned by 28% of adults as something they do to give themselves a treat. This explains the massive number of bath products on the market these days. Food is another way to splurge. One in four adults indulges by eating at expensive restaurants; 21% pamper themselves with special desserts. An internet search for “splurge” turns up many references to Ben & Jerry’s ice cream.

The popularity of eating out offers perhaps the most widespread evidence of increased prosperity. Virtually everyone does it sometimes; 93% of American adults have been to a restaurant

in the past month. They eat an average of four meals per week away from home.

Ultimately, in a way, the new materialism isn’t even about things. The top reason people give for their most recent visits to fast-food restaurants is that they “didn’t feel like cooking.” In other words, they chose to spend their time doing something other than preparing a meal. The top reasons for visits to other kinds of restaurants are to “celebrate special occasions” (fine dining), “get together with friends” (casual dining) and “do something as a family” (family-style).

Americans are big on freedom of choice, especially when it comes to choosing how to spend their most precious resource—not money, but time. They are keen on products and services that help them make the most of their time, whether they are doing things they have to do (like working and cleaning) or pursuing an ever-growing and ambitious schedule of leisure activities. The real goal is quality of life, not mere acquisition.

Furthermore, the new materialism is not about unrestrained spending sprees. People have not unlearned the hard lessons of the early 1990s. Getting the deal still matters a lot, to everyone; 40% of adults with household incomes of \$75,000 or more completely agree “I feel really satisfied with myself, even excited, when I get a good deal,” versus a 37% average for all adults. This high-income group is even more likely than average to agree the “most important thing about a brand is that it gives good value for the money,” 42% versus 33% of all adults. These numbers far outstrip the 4% of Americans who agree they “generally prefer to buy exclusive luxury brands.”

Money means status and power to some, but to far more people, it signifies freedom and comfort. Materialism at the brink of the 21st century is a considered, thoughtful process that nurtures the body, mind and soul, not a reckless or impulsive hedonism. All things considered, \$99 might seem a reasonable price to pay for the “photodiode” LazerSmile Tooth Whitening System from Sharper Image. This product has it all. It appeals to our vanity, desire for convenience, fascination with gadgets, and even our passion for value—batteries *are* included. ●

Endnotes

¹A. Zagorin, “Rent-a-Jet Cachet,” *Time*, September 13, 1999, pp. 48-49.

²Reuters news wire (London), September 14, 1999.

³Unless otherwise noted, information in this article is from Roper Starch Worldwide’s syndicated research service, Roper Reports.

⁴Cited in “RVs Increasing on America’s Roads,” Associated Press (Manassas, VA), July 6, 1999.

⁵National Association of Home Builders.

⁶Debra West, “Suburbs’ Mass Market Mansions,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1998, B1.

⁷E. Martin Petrowski, “Where to Splurge,” *Today’s Homeowner* (Times Mirror Interzines), 1999.