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# Exploring First and Second Generation Immigrants' Perceptions of the American Dream

Tamara Ashkar

The U.S. is accepted as the “nation of immigrants” because immigrants represent the appeal of America: a place where those seeking opportunity can succeed. Therefore, immigration stories are quintessential to understanding the American Dream. It is estimated that by 2050, about 37% of the U.S. population will be composed of first and second generation immigrants and as this population grows, so does the necessity to center their perspectives on the American ethos they hold a large role in defining. This study explored first and second generation immigrants' perceptions of the American Dream in a non-experimental, qualitative approach, through a Google Form open-ended survey. Themes emerging from the forms' responses portray first generation immigrants as more traditional, optimistic, placing emphasis on hard work, and expressing material success. Responses portrayed second generation immigrants as “realistic,” placing an emphasis on barriers to success and idealistic views of success.

*Keywords:* American dream, immigrants, second generation immigrants, content analysis, open-ended survey

## Context

Though the meaning of the American Dream has evolved with societal beliefs, the core fundamentals of its meaning remain intact (Shiller, 2017). The American dream is defined by Merriam Webster as, “a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful” and by Oxford Dictionary as, “the belief that America offers the opportunity to everyone of a good and successful life achieved through hard work”. These definitions show that core notions include “hard work pays off” and “equal opportunity to success” and imply the existence of social mobility, or the ability of a person to move up in social status. The dictionaries' example sentences offer these core ideas and imply a meaning

of what “success” means in this context, shown through the phrases, “plenty of money”, “good jobs”, “nice house”, “two children”, and “born a poor boy; now an inventor” (Merriam Webster; Oxford Dictionary).

United States economic data suggests that the American dream may be dying, or that it is becoming harder to attain the previously stated fundamentals and the understood idea of American success. Currently, the U.S. is ranked 27th in economic mobility and the wealth divide between upper-income families and middle/lower class families is increasing, as is income inequality (Horowitz, 2020). This data contradicts the previously stated fundamentals of the American Dream, as these trends make the current achievability of the American Dream questionable. The divide among classes counters the “rags to riches” story, as the lack of social mobility prevents the transition from a “lower class” status to an “upper class”

status that this story entails. Similarly, U.S. income inequality data negates the “hard work pays off” ideal as hard work is no longer a guarantee of wealth.

Existing research has revealed disparities in perceptions of the American Dream but that overall, Americans believe that the American Dream is becoming more difficult to attain. However, although there is abundant research examining perceptions of the American Dream among generations, races, ethnicities and economic position, there has been little to no research examining the American Dream among first and second generation immigrants. A first generation immigrant refers to a foreign-born person that has moved to the U.S. and a second generation immigrant refers to a U.S. citizen with at least one foreign born parent. It is estimated that by 2050, about 37% of the U.S. population will be composed of first and second generation immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2013). Moreover, immigration stories are core to the American Dream as a whole. The U.S. is called the “nation of immigrants” because, “The story that America was populated by peoples seeking economic opportunity, fleeing injustice or oppression in their homeland, and hoping for a better life for their children has a strong grip on the American immigration”(Hirschman, 2014). Therefore, first and second generation immigrants’ perspectives are especially crucial surrounding this topic.

## Literature Review

### Perceptions and Optimism Regarding Achievability: Non-Immigrants

The American Dream has been explored through many demographics; a popular belief among many is that hard work leads to success. In a study among ethnically diverse U.S. veterans, most respondents described the “rags to riches” story, linking the American Dream to “success” and mentioning higher education (Madriaga, 2005). This idea of success included home ownership and other materialistic indicators. Generally, the respondents viewed success as completely dependent on an individual’s work ethic and associated the American Dream with immigration.

Although hard work has been found to be a common value among various demographics, levels of optimism regarding personal achievement differ. In a study

by Cohen-Marks and Stout (2011), the research aimed to explore quantitatively whether different racial and ethnic groups hold a “common vision” of the American Dream and whether it applies to them (Cohen-Marks & Stout, 2011). They found that Black and Asian Americans were less likely than white Americans to believe they had already achieved the American Dream, while Latino Americans were most optimistic about the future. Additionally, the researchers evaluated the nativity of their participants, meaning whether a participant was a non-citizen or a naturalized citizen, and found that “respondents born outside of the United States appear to be the most optimistic about their chances of eventually achieving the American dream.” This study, although briefly acknowledging immigrant generation status as an influencing factor of perception, doesn’t specifically center immigrants in gathering participants or explore differentiation in perception among immigration generations.

Research by Pew Research Center similarly finds that white Americans were most likely to believe they have already achieved the American Dream, but that Hispanics and Black Americans were equally optimistic about achieving the American Dream in the future (Pew Research Center, 2017). When comparing by age and income levels, Pew Research Center found that older non-immigrant respondents were 42% more likely to believe they have achieved the American Dream. Respondents with the highest incomes were 50% more likely. Although these studies present generalizable statistics about a diverse sample of Americans’ perceptions regarding the American Dream, they do not focus on distinguishing and specifically exploring these demographics’ immigration populations, especially through a qualitative analysis of surveys. Therefore, although they may offer factors that affect perception, these studies leave a gap in the research, as they cannot directly answer the question of how first and second generation immigrants specifically perceive the American Dream.

### Perceptions and Optimism Regarding Achievability: Immigrants

A 2016 qualitative case study assessed how second generation African immigrants perceive the American Dream by examining how factors like school, family, and society affect the participants’ success and

struggles (Knight, 2016). Knight's findings displayed that "hard work" and "economic success" dominated these participants' perspectives. Specifically, 17 out of 18 participants mentioned "economic success," eight envisioned it as "opportunity and freedom toward making choices to pursue your own interests," and eleven saw it as "the idea that some people have to work harder to achieve similar ends." Participants viewed higher education as crucial to achieving the American Dream. The authors' findings "point to the complexity behind decisions as cultural forces -- family expectations -- intersect with understandings of the Dream". The results showed that participants, although concerned with economic success, also emphasize idealistic success and acknowledge that success may not be fair for all people. Although this study examines the American dream among second immigration generations it excludes first generation immigrants and represents a specific demographic of immigrants and cannot be fully representative of all second generation immigrants. Additionally, it places a focus on certain factors that may affect these individuals' perceptions rather than examine how their generational status influences perception.

Many studies have explored first and second generation immigrants *without* explicitly relating it to the American Dream. These findings mostly support the prevalent resulting themes of the previous American dream-centered studies (hard work ethic, social mobility, success). A publication in The Online Journal of the Migration Policy Institute examined how 10,002 immigrants felt about life in the U.S (Farkas, 2003). Three themes were found: Learning English Called Essential, Strong Work Ethic, and Making the U.S. Home. The study found that 85% of the participants found it hard to succeed in the U.S. without knowing English, and almost half had taken classes to improve their English skills. 73% of participants found it "extremely important" for immigrants to have strong work ethics and not have government support (e.g. welfare). The author concluded that the responses reflected an overall appreciation and pride of being an American immigrant. Although Farkas's study had a large and diverse sample pool, it excluded second generation immigrants altogether and first generation immigrants under the age of 18. Additionally, it employed a national telephone survey, which may have limitations, focus groups, and employed a quantitative analysis.

Pew Research Center compares collected data by generation and ethnicity with a focus on Hispanic and Asian Americans and found that second generation immigrants were "better off", or more financially secure than first generation immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2013). They had more education, higher household incomes, a lower share in poverty, and were more likely to own their home and pursue higher education. Chapter One of this study offers some possible background to these findings. About 78% of Hispanic Americans and 72% of Asian Americans emphasized that success is dependent on an individual's willingness to work hard. Regarding perceptions of generational mobility, 67% of second generation Hispanic and 75% of second generation Asian Americans believe that they have a better standard of living than their parents at the same stage of life. Similar percentages of first generation immigrants of both these groups believe the same. Additionally, first generation immigrants are more likely than native born respondents to believe they have achieved the American Dream, making them one of the most optimistic groups. First generation Latinos are 12% more likely than U.S. born Latinos to believe they have achieved the American Dream. This was the only ethnic group that was found to have notable disparities between first and second generation immigrants (Cohen-Marks & Stout, 2011).

### Concern for the American Dream

There is a concern regarding the achievability of the American Dream. Pew Research finds only 36% of Americans believe their family has achieved the American Dream and less than half are optimistic about the future (Pew Research Center, 2017). Two thirds of second generation Hispanics and only 41% of second generation Asians believe their children will experience higher standards of living than they (Pew Research Center, 2013). This concern is expanded on in a study that finds that, although first and second generation immigrants seem to find better chances at success in the U.S. than in most of their countries of origin, these conditions are worsening (Venator et al, 2014). Wages are falling for immigrants who, as of 2000, make 20% less than non-immigrants. The upward mobility of both generations of immigrants is decreasing. As these trends continue, America may not be a nation where

immigrants can achieve the American Dream. In a study conducted by New America that examines perceptions by generation, more than half of participants believe it has become more difficult to afford a family and find a well-paying job compared to previous generations. Generation X was the least optimistic. An overwhelming majority of generation Z believes that it is easier to be successful with a college degree than without (New America, 2017).

Addressing this issue, Madeline High argues that there is an issue that the American Dream has become more materialistic, with a neglect of measuring the quality of life and greater focus on the amount of "property" people have (High, 2015). She finds that the American Dream faces two challenges: 1. The emphasis on material prosperity and 2. The wealth inequality in the U.S., emphasizing that these issues have prevented many from achieving the Dream and being optimistic about achieving it in the future. She concludes that "In order for the American Dream to become fully available to more people, there needs to be a balance between economic prosperity and the quality of life."

## Rationale For the Study

The firsthand responses collected in this study provide qualitative insight into how the American Dream compares between first and second generation immigrants of all ages, including those under 18, which is a current gap in the research. By exploring the patterns between perceptions of these groups, findings contextualize and further the understanding of the existing quantitative data regarding these participant groups, and build on current American dream research which focuses on specific groups of immigrants or Americans and research that centers on immigrants but does not directly explore the American Dream.

## Method

The method of inquiry is a non-experimental qualitative, Google Form survey including six open-ended response questions. The general topics of the six survey questions (Table 1) were based on pre-existing Pew Research Center survey questions surrounding

the American Dream and other similar survey topics, such as wealth inequality (Pew Research Center, 2013). Topics include defining the American Dream, opinions on personal present day and future achievement, describing individual optimism, future "success", and opinions about social mobility. Taking a qualitative approach for this study allowed for exploration of the perceptions of both immigrant generations in depth, following the approach of qualitative research done in a study exploring immigrant's motivations for remaining in the U.S. (Valdez, 2013). A qualitative approach allowed the research inquiry to be addressed while still highlighting the views and unique lived experiences of these participants, especially because this specific demographic of participants' stories are highlighted in the discussion of the American Dream. Additionally, as COVID-19 poses a health threat, utilizing an open-ended survey when in-person interviews are not feasible preserves the benefits of an interview, such as gathering "personal", detailed information, which would be lost in a multiple choice or quantitative survey. Utilizing Google Forms to distribute this survey also added convenience for the participants, as it prevented having to schedule an interview time that is manageable for both parties. The survey was able to be completed at any time within the data collection time frame. In order to answer the line of inquiry, the open-ended responses were analyzed through a content analysis. Responses were dissected for codes and categories to summarize the largest themes in order to analyze and evaluate the relationship between these themes among the immigrant generations. Content analyses aim to determine the most prevalent words, themes, and concepts within text to form conclusions. As the purpose of this research is ultimately to explore and compare the perceptions of the American dream among first and second generation immigrants, a content analysis was the most effective and appropriate method of data analysis to utilize in order to directly accomplish this.

## Participants and Procedures

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board in order to ensure that this research is ethical. In order to gain participants, an interest form was sent out through an Outlook mass email to Bergen County Technical Highschool and posted on Instagram

and open to anyone who identified as first or second generation immigrants. Participation was open to all ages, which allowed this research to contribute to the field by elevating the voices of youth as well as adults. Emails were collected in order for consent forms and survey links to be sent. Minors were asked to provide a parent's/guardian's email address instead of their own. Participants were sent the link to the survey after they or their parents/guardians had consented to their participation in the study. Minors then expressed assent on the survey itself. In order to maintain anonymity, names, emails and other identifiable information were not collected in the survey. The study aimed for a participant sample size between 20 to 50 with an even distribution between generations, as this quantity is recommended for qualitative surveys.

## Results

The results are organized into two sections: one presenting the themes of the responses of first generation immigrant respondents and other presenting second generation immigrant respondents. Quotes from collected survey responses are presented in italics.

### First Generation

The first generation survey results are organized around two general themes that were most prominent

in the responses (Table 2). The first theme, "Perception on the Evolution of American Dream" represents respondents' expression on the change or lack of change they have witnessed the American Dream experience, as well as factors that may have caused this or will in the future. The second theme represents respondents' views on the achievability of the American Dream. This theme is split into three sections. The first regarding their views on the achievability for themselves and other immigrants', the second regarding achievability for general Americans, and the third regarding the meaning of achievability, or what achieving the American Dream means.

### First Generation Perceptions on Evolution of American Dream (table 3)

Regarding the evolution of the American Dream, many first generation immigrants explained that its meaning is dependent on many factors, including the strength of such social beliefs as the U.S.'s value of work ethic, and the socio-economic status of the U.S. (e.g. the amount of opportunity). Some factors named as affecting the idea and significance of the American Dream include government laws and policies, including those regarding immigration and free enterprise, as well as the amount of immigration to the country. Some respondents expressed that the American Dream *could* change in the future, but either expressed that they didn't know what could change it or just didn't name any factors. Additionally, many also

Table 1

Open Ended Survey Questions
How would you personally define "The American Dream"?
Has your definition and understanding of the American Dream changed over the course of your life? If so, how?
Do you believe that you have achieved the American Dream or will be able to in the future? Why or why not?
In your opinion, do you believe that most people in the U.S. are able to achieve the American Dream? Why or why not?
Do you believe that the general idea of the American Dream will change over time? Why or why not?
Do you believe the American Dream has meaning and significance currently? Why or why not?

FIRST & SECOND GENERATION IMMIGRANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Table 2

Themes and subthemes relating to first generation immigrants' perceptions of the American Dream

Themes and Subthemes Relating to First Generation Immigrants' perceptions of the American Dream	
General themes	Specific codes
Perceptions on Evolution of American Dream <i>Expressing their views on how the American Dream has and will change</i>	Has remained stagnant Changes depend on many factors (government, economy, society, immigration)
Perceptions on Achievability <i>Expressing their views on</i> Achievability for themselves and other immigrants General achievability and what achievement means	Feeling of disconnect Feeling optimistic Overly glorified Hard work Barriers Less applicable to Immigrants Materialistic achievement Idealistic achievement

Table 3

Response Examples of First Generation Perceptions on Evolution of American Dream

"I think living happily is always going to have meaning and significance, but tying that to a country/nation is outdated in my opinion."
"The American Dream may not change in the short time, but may change depending on the socio-economic situation in the future"
"I think times have changed and the new version of American Dream= free stuff"
"The American Dream is very significant because people from other countries come to America more than other countries because of the opportunity"

felt as though the idea of the American Dream hasn't changed in meaning or significance over time, nor will it ever change. Some felt as though the American dream currently holds a different meaning than it did in the past; the majority who did felt that it had changed "for the worse".

**First Generation Perceptions on General Achievability & What Achievement Means (table 4)**

First generation responses were mixed regarding the achievability of the American Dream. In many cases, hard work or the idea of "drive" were highlighted as crucial to success. These ideas were often associated with an emphasis on independence, as in not relying on government aid; and resourcefulness, such as using the opportunities available to you. For these respondents, success came down to "how bad do you really want it?" However, a small portion disagreed. Factors such as a global pandemic, bad economic conditions, language barriers, lack of experience, lack of access to education, and "every day struggles" played a role in preventing immigrants from achieving the American Dream. One participant also felt that the American Dream was less fair to immigrants specifically, as they often face exploitation and discrimination, and because of their disconnect to American culture, could not "relate"

to it. This feeling of disconnect was exhibited among a few participants. In one case, a shift to pessimism occurred after immigrating to America. Some participants felt as though their belief in the American Dream was stronger before moving to the U.S. and had lessened after time.

However, a majority of respondents expressed that they felt as though they have achieved the American Dream in some sense. For almost every participant, this meant material success, like having a stable job, financial security, homeownership, and having a family. For a few others, success was idealistic, like opportunity, a better future, happiness, and freedom.

**Second Generation Immigrants**

The second generation survey results in this section are organized around three general prominent themes (Table 5). The first theme, "Perceptions of Self" represents respondents' expression of their views on their place in and experience with the American Dream. The second theme represents respondents' expression of the "evolution" of or "change" in the American Dream. The third theme represents the respondent's general views on the American Dream's achievability and what achievement means.

Table 4

Response Examples of First Generation Perceptions on General Achievability and What Achievement Means

"It's not really something I believe in since my connection to the US isn't deep in the cultural sense"
"...opportunities to succeed are always available if you work as hard as you can and put the time and effort needed to get where you want to be"
"I only had believed in American Dream before I came to the USA, the reality was much different"
"I think that the American Dream always had a hint of propoganda in it. It seems like it could be related to American exceptionalism..."
"I have to struggle with everyday reality, dreams are not a part of it."
"I have a beautiful family, steady stable and successful career, and I have enough to keep up with the bills and personal finances"

Table 5

Themes and Subthemes relating to second generation immigrants' perceptions of the American Dream

Themes and Subthemes Relating to Generation Immigrants' perceptions of the American Dream	
General themes	Specific codes
Perceptions of Self Expressing their views on their place in the American Dream	Appreciativeness Optimism regarding self Pessimism regarding self
Evolution of American Dream Expressing their views on how the American Dream has and will change	Losing meaning/significance Preserving meaning Reality check
Perceptions on Achievability Expressing their views on General achievability What achievement means	Fairness Barriers vs Catalysts Social Mobility Rags to riches (AKA "material gain") Idealistic gain

Table 6

Response Examples of Second Generation Perceptions of Self

"...they see my sister and I doing better than themselves in the years to come and I always say it is because of the foundation they established for us in this country"
"...due to the fact that my parents have done a lot of the heavy lifting for me to be in a better place, now I just have to build on it. They have given me the materials I need to be successful..."
"I have higher goals for myself given what my parents have accomplished and have left for me"

**Second Generation Perceptions Of Self (Table 6)**  
 Regarding personal achievement of the American Dream, a majority of second generation participants felt as if they were on the "right path" or in a better-

off position than others to achieve it. This optimism was attributed to a number of factors, one of the most prominent being a feeling of privilege and appreciation for their current position as a result of the "hard

work” of their first generation immigrant parent(s). Even most of those who did not present the most optimistic view on their future expressed a feeling of privilege.

**Second Generation Evolution of Perception (table 7)**

As a whole, second generation participants expressed that one’s view of the American Dream is not stagnant. Almost every respondent indicated a change in their perception of the American Dream as they’ve grown up. When reflecting on their past to present selves, participants described experiencing “reality checks”. These “reality checks” are best defined as a shift from an overly-optimistic view of the American Dream to a more pessimistic view -- which, by the tone of most individuals, would most likely be labeled as “realistic”. “Reality checks” also took the form of participants straying away from the more traditional

view of the American Dream to a more “realistic” or personal understanding of it. Seen in most responses, this change is most commonly attributed to the learning of certain “barriers” or new experiences. Additionally, almost all second generation immigrants expressed that the overall “American Dream” is losing “significance” in a general sense or expressed the idea that it evolves “with the people”. Accompanying the exhibition of pessimistic views on the evolution of the dream, many respondents named the cause(s) or “barriers” of this “loss in meaning” that separate the more optimistic American Dream from the “realistic” one. However, even though most second generation participants agreed that the American dream is “dying”, some argued that the core of the American Dream, such as a “yearn” to “[climb] the ladder of wealth” remain.

Table 7

Response Examples of Second Generation Evolution of Perception

“ When I was little, the American Dream didn’t account for things like wealth, racism, sexism, etc.”
“...before, I was taught in school that the American Dream was the house with a picket fence, but that changed because I thought about it and learned from my family”
“Originally it was just the classic white picket fence and two and a half children but now I have higher goals for myself..”
“...the house and the picket fence is unrealistic and it will change to my definition over time”
“I started off thinking it was mostly escape from arguably worse situations because that’s also what applies to most immigrants I know, but now I’m not sure if that sentiment about how great America is might play a larger role than I expected.”
“I believe that freedom, opportunities, and equality will always be values, yet there may be an extension based on the time. As time changes, so do values”
“It’s not the same meaning as it used to be 30 years ago”
“It has significance but it is not as gleaming and hopeful as it once was....the American dream no longer sparks joy, but rather creates this feeling of oppression and failure.”
“...my understanding of economic and other social systems has improved, my belief in the American Dream has changed where I don’t think that truly achieving the American Dream is something that anyone can do...”

**Second Generation Perceptions on Achievability**

Second generation perceptions on achievability exhibited two major trends: 1) the naming of certain barriers and catalysts to achieving the American Dream and 2) what achieving the American Dream means.

When discussing achievability of the American Dream, these participants argued that there were overwhelming disadvantages for some groups of people more than others, and overall argued that the road to achievement is “unfair” and “unequal”. Even among those who defined the American Dream as an ideal that included opportunity for all, critiques regarding the validity of ‘the dream’ were still made. Many participants provided these barriers in the forms of anecdotes, whether about experiences of these barriers firsthand or being in an environment surrounded by these inequalities. A common theme among the bar-

riers to achieving the American Dream is that they could be labeled as flaws in systems, rather than as flaws in the individuals, as inequalities like racism, sexism, and wealth were the most prominent “barriers” named. Participants, although less frequently, also expressed criticism specifically at certain systems, such as “society”, “our government”, and “franchises” for contributing to the general discrimination of American success (table 8).

Participants also named “catalysts” to the American Dream, or certain advantages someone may inherit or decisions someone may make in order to assist in achieving the American Dream (table 9). Most prominent catalysts included connections with successful people, generational wealth, college/access to education, and speaking English. These catalysts were discussed in both positive and negative tones. For example, college was discussed in a positive tone when an individual felt it could help them achieve the American Dream and in a negative tone in con-

Table 8

Response examples of second generation perceptions on achievability: barriers

“It depends on how people treat me because I’m a black woman. I am only 19 and already have a lot of college debt. That doesn’t seem very dream-like to me...it really is hard for people of color and women.”
“For as long as nothing is fair and equal, the American Dream is invalid”
“Though people might escape/ leave their previous lives in other places, they are still faced with new challenges that don’t readily give them the ticket to their definition of ‘success’”
“There is a gender wage gap and as a Muslim, I do believe my family and I face more inequalities”

Table 9

Response examples of second generation perceptions on achievability: catalysts

“...someone who lives here their entire life is able to have a lot of opportunities to increase their social status (especially when knowing the language)”
“I think that I’m on the path towards achieving the American Dream. I plan on going to college, getting a job, and working hard...”
“I consider a college education one of these systems and while more and more people are able to obtain one, access to it is not equal. For those that already start off wealthy, they’re able to not only better obtain resources to prepare for a college education and get into top schools...”

texts where certain barriers regarding inequalities affected access to this catalyst. Less frequently named were catalysts like “hard work” and “determination” as gateways to success.

Participants also described what achieving the American Dream means (table 10). The consensus is that the American Dream is a story of social mobility -- starting from the bottom and getting to the top. “Mobility” was most prominently presented in two themes: a “rags to riches” view which heavily associates the concept of success with materialistic achievement (“house,” “car,” “good job,” “money”) and an idealistic view which describes success of the American Dream as achieving something intangible (“freedom,” “opportunity,” “independence,” “equality”). This idea of social mobility can also be seen in the frequent association of the American Dream with stories of immigrants coming to America from a less desirable situation elsewhere.

## Conclusion and Discussion

This study utilized a content analysis to explore first and second generation immigrants’ perceptions of the American Dream, an ideal that is continually evolving. Participants in this study described multiple opinions regarding the American Dream and shared views on themselves, the evolution and significance of the ideal, and its achievability. Importantly, this research sheds light on the perspectives of those most viewed as chasing an American dream and presents the disparities in opinion between generations, as well

as exemplifying the notion that generational experience can shape perspective.

Overall, first generation respondents leaned toward traditional ideals of the American Dream. There was an emphasis on hard work being crucial to success with minimal regards to barriers. Success was materialistic in a majority of responses. First generation respondents overall were more optimistic, meaning they were more likely to believe they had achieved or will achieve the American Dream and that the American Dream was preserved and significant.

Second generation respondents emphasized numerous barriers, like discrimination and an unequal playing field for achieving the American Dream, especially for certain demographic groups, as well as noting many things that put people at advantages and are important for success, like an education. With this, second generation participants expressed feelings like privilege and appreciation immensely, reflecting on their parent’s struggles as first generation immigrants and the lives they gave them. When defining the American Dream and achievement of it, responses largely leaned toward idealist and intangible indicators of success, like freedom. However, tying back to their emphasis on barriers and catalysts, second generation immigrants in this study were wholly less optimistic achieving the traditional American Dream and doubtful about the significance of the American Dream.

Connecting back to Madriaga’s study on veterans, considering the U.S.’s low military enlistment rate (<.005 percent of American population), the findings of that study such as themes like “rags to riches” and

Table 10

Response examples of second generation perceptions on achievability: what achievability means

“Coming to America and starting with nothing, and then gaining success overtime until you have achieved true prosperity.”
“Coming from a poorer farming village in southern Egypt to America hustling trying to make money..”
“Coming into America in hopes of being able to create a better life for yourself while having the freedom to believe and seek what you wish.”
“...starting from the bottom (lower class) and working you way to the top (higher class)”

“work ethic” cannot necessarily be representative of all Americans’ perceptions (Madriaga, 2005). However, a commonality between U.S. veterans and U.S. immigrants is a factor of American pride that is associated with both groups. Veterans choose to fight for America and first generation immigrants choose to come to America, actions that signify pride for the country. The first generation results point to confirming the assertion that veterans’ perceptions of the American Dream may be generalizable to first generation immigrants, as these two groups believe success to be heavily reliant on an individual’s work ethic. This may indicate a connection between pride and these values.

Additionally, Cohen-Marks and Stout’s quantitative findings that “respondents born outside of the United States appear to be the most optimistic about their chances of eventually achieving the American Dream” are supported by this study’s qualitative data that finds first generation immigrants overall a more optimistic population than second generation immigrants (Cohen-Marks & Stout, 2011).

Furthermore, this study’s second generation results mostly agree with Knight’s findings of African second generation immigrants. Both Knight and this study found that second generation immigrants held idealistic ideas about success and discussed barriers to success. Although Knight’s study focuses specifically on African participants and names “cultural forces” as the influences in their participant’s understanding of the dream, the similarities between both that and this study’s second generation response implies the significant influence of the immigration status of a person on their perception of the American Dream.

Pew Research Center’s quantitative data shows that second generation immigrants tend to have more education and are more likely to pursue higher education than first generation immigrants. This study exemplifies this, as the importance of education as a catalyst to success was emphasized among second generation responses. However, quantitative data shows that second generation immigrants are more likely to own their home, which contradicts the lack of naming “homeowning” in their responses. Most first generation respondents, however, expressed owning a home as an indicator of success.

Furthermore, Pew Research center finds that a majority of each demographic of second generation im-

migrants believe that they have a higher standard of living than their parents did at the same stage of life. This data connects with both Madeline High and this study’s results. As this study finds, second generation immigrants expressed feelings of appreciation and privilege when discussing their parents’ immigration to the U.S. These respondents were heavily idealistic rather than materialistic when discussing success. This gratefulness for their parents’ immigration along with their idealism connect back to High’s conclusion that adopting an idealistic rather than materialistic view of success makes for a better quality of life and standard of living and explains their lean away from wanting to achieve the traditional “unrealistic” goals.

## Limitations

Trading interviews for surveys creates a few limitations. This method hindered the participant from asking for clarification on questions and didn’t allow follow up questions, which might have allowed for greater detail in answering the inquiry. Additional limitations include a small and uneven sample size. In total, there were 6 full first generation respondents (or 36 open ended answers) and 13 full second generation respondents (or 78 open ended answers), an overrepresentation in second generation immigrants. This small sample size limits the generalizability of these results. The use of a content analysis in this study offers limitations of its own, including human error. Themes and codes emerged as a result of personal interpretation, and although extreme measures were taken to prevent personal bias, subjectivity still remains a limitation.

## Future Directions

Future researchers are advised to conduct an identical study on a larger sample size in order to support these findings on a more generalizable level. Additionally, it is recommended that future researchers explore this line of inquiry through an interview method, because, as stated before, participants’ ability to ask for clarification and the researchers’ ability to ask follow up questions may increase data collected and lead to more in-depth answers. Lastly, to build on this

research, a study should be conducted examining first generation immigrants' age and year of immigration to the U.S., as the status of America at the time and the age at which they immigrated may have an influence on their motivations to immigrate and, therefore, on their perception of the American Dream.

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