

6-1-2005

Credit Cards as Lifestyle Facilitators

Matthew J. Bernthal

University of South Carolina - Columbia, bernthal@mailbox.sc.edu

David Crockett

University of South Carolina - Columbia, dcrockett@moore.sc.edu

Randall L. Rose

University of South Carolina - Columbia, roser@moore.sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/sem_facpub



Part of the [Marketing Commons](#)

Publication Info

The Journal of Consumer Research, Volume 32, Issue 1, 2005, pages 130-145.

<http://jcr.wisc.edu/>

© 2005 Journal of Consumer Research, Inc.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sports and Entertainment Management, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu.

Credit Cards as Lifestyle Facilitators

MATTHEW J. BERNTHAL
DAVID CROCKETT
RANDALL L. ROSE*

Credit cards are an increasingly essential technology, but they carry with them the paradoxical capacity to propel consumers along lifestyle trajectories of marketplace freedom or constraint. We analyze accounts provided by consumers, credit counselors, and participants in a credit counseling seminar in order to develop a differentiated theory of lifestyle facilitation through credit card practice. The skills and tastes expressed by credit card practice help distinguish between the lifestyles of those with higher cultural capital relative to those with lower cultural capital. Differences in lifestyle regulation practice are posited to originate in cultural discourses related to entitlement and frugality.

The acquisition of consumption markers that signal the good life as one has come to envision it is the sine qua non of participation in consumer culture. Notwithstanding emergent forms of consumer resistance to pervasive affluenza meaningful participation in consumer culture is thought by both its critics and proponents to be bound up in a seemingly perpetual materialist quest to regulate lifestyle via the acquisition of things (Burroughs and Rindfleisc 2002; De Graaf, Wann, and Naylor 2001). This quest is, of course, not without its costs. In one humorous illustration, a television advertisement for a debt consolidation company depicts a stereotypical suburban homeowner who brags to the viewer about his outdoor pool, which he is shown gleefully cleaning, and his large backyard, which he is shown gleefully mowing on a riding lawn mower. "How did I obtain the good life?" he rhetorically asks the viewer, responding, "I'm in debt up to my eyeballs" ("Stanley Johnson," Lending Tree [client], Mullen [agency], Wenham, MA, 2003).

In the consumption-centered quest to attain the good life, it would be difficult to overstate the role played by consumer debt, particularly that in the form of short-term revolving credit and credit cards. The importance of credit cards to the American economy is evident in second-quarter 2003 data showing just under \$1 trillion in "revolving credit or

credit card debt," a category that excludes notes such as those typically issued for the purchase of automobiles, mobile homes, and other consumer durable goods (Federal Reserve Bank 2003). Not surprisingly, personal bankruptcies have reached record levels—nearly 1.5 million were filed in 2001—as many consumers struggle under the weight of excessive debt burdens (Associated Press 2001). Although debt and bankruptcy figures tell a compelling story about the importance of credit cards to the U.S. economy, they actually understate the importance of credit cards to consumer lifestyle management, as is evidenced by the fact that nearly half of all credit card holders carry no monthly balance (Manning 2000).

A broader importance of credit cards lies beyond their use as a tool to bolster purchasing power or even as a stimulus for pathological consumer behavior to encompass credit cards as a lifestyle-facilitating technology. Credit cards make immediately obtainable consumption markers whose acquisition was less available to the majority of those in the working and middle classes of previous generations. In this sense, credit cards facilitate a level of participation in contemporary consumer culture that is qualitatively different from what would be possible in their absence. The comparatively new credit card differs from previous forms of money both in the relative ease with which consumers are granted access to credit and in its virtually universal acceptance among sellers (Gelpi and Julien-Labruyere 2000). As such, the entire range of practices consumers employ to manage their lifestyles with credit cards should be of particular interest to consumer researchers (for a review of lifestyle research, see Holt [1997]).

This research readily acknowledges, as has been established in prior research, that the potential outcomes of using credit cards as a lifestyle-regulating technology include compulsive/impulsive discretionary spending and excessive

*Matthew J. Bernthal is assistant professor of sport and entertainment management in the College of Hospitality, Retail, and Sport Management, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208 (bernthal@gwm.sc.edu). David Crockett (dcrockett@moore.sc.edu) is assistant professor and Randall L. Rose (rosel@moore.sc.edu) is professor of marketing in the Moore School of Business, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208. The authors thank Robin Coulter, Terry Shimp, Stacy Wood, the editor, the associate editor, the reviewers, and the participants in the Sharing Scholarship Seminars at the Moore School for helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. The authors contributed equally to this research.

debt accumulation. However, earlier research has not explored pathology and onerous debt as part of a full array of consumption lifestyle outcomes. Research to this point has also failed to identify practices that consumers employ to cope with indebtedness. Instead, research involving credit cards has focused primarily on providing demographic descriptors of credit card users (Garcia 1980; Hirschman 1979; Kinsey 1981; Parker 1990) or on pathology and policy issues related to compulsive consumption (Faber and O’Guinn 1988; O’Guinn and Faber 1989), impulsive consumption (Rook 1987), addiction (Hirschman 1992), consumer self-control (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991), debt collection (Hill 1994), and credit-issuing institutions (Manning 2000).

The purpose of the current research is to enhance our understanding of consumer lifestyles by investigating one of the primary technologies employed to manage them, specifically, credit cards and their associated practices. We apply qualitative data collection and analysis techniques to capture accounts by consumers of their credit card practices and experiences. Using depth interviews, we develop an emic understanding of the role of credit card practices in lifestyle regulation. We then position these practices within a broader etic theoretical framework of socially constructed consumer lifestyle spaces (define subsequently), all situated inside the marketplace for commoditized goods. We identify and explicate specific consumer credit card practices that imbue con-

sumer lifestyle spaces with meaning and that facilitate movement among lifestyle spaces within the marketplace. We then describe in detail categories of practice and relate them to consumer experiences within and between two metaphorical lifestyle spaces that we label “achieving lifestyles” and “debtor’s prison.” Finally, we develop a more abstract interpretation, one that is further removed from the details of consumer practice and that explicates patterns of practice across our informants consistent with an underlying tension between empowerment and impediment in lifestyle regulation. We theorize that the tension between empowerment and impediment in lifestyle regulation depends not only on the use of credit cards but also on articulations related to resources, life events, and structural aspects of the marketplace.

RESEARCH METHODS

Our interpretation is drawn primarily from textual data generated by nondirective depth interviews of 28 credit card holders, whose credit card debt ranged from zero to 395% of pretax household income and whose income levels ranged from low to moderate. We believe that the use of consumer credit to regulate and manage lifestyle, relative to other types of money, should be especially prevalent among consumers who are not wealthy. Other demographic variables recorded in the data collection included age, gender, educational level,

TABLE 1

CARDHOLDER DESCRIPTIONS

Name	Gender	Age	Race	Education	Married	Number of children (ages)	Income (\$1,000)	Credit card debt at time of interview
Dennis	M	31	C	College	Yes	0	60	Low
Aaron	M	23	AA	College	No	0	22	Moderate
Charlotte	F	23	C	College	Yes	0	36	High
Lois	F	54	C	HS +	Yes	2 (27, 29)	60	Moderate
Juan	M	45	H	HS +	Yes	0	25	Moderate
Sandy	F	42	C	College	Yes	2 (15, 17)	85	Moderate
Brett	M	55	C	HS	Yes	0	55	High
Megan	F	29	C	College	No	1 (1)	35	High
Kara	F	32	AA	College	No	0	30	Moderate
Abigail	F	25	C	College	Yes	0	36	Low
Miranda	F	33	AA	HS	No	1 (19)	15	High
Gene	M	35	C	College +	No	0	25	Low
Paula	F	32	C	College +	No	0	20	High
Anna	F	31	C	HS	Yes	0	60	Moderate
Erica	F	26	AA	College +	No	0	18	High
Kim	F	50	AA	HS	No	3 (26, 28, 32)	19	High
Tom	M	47	AA	HS	Yes	2 (5, 7)	40	High
Georgia	F	62	C	HS	No	1 (36)	19	High
Anne	F	53	C	College +	No	1 (19)	25	Moderate
Cathy	F	37	AA	HS	No	0	16	Low
Martha	F	47	C	HS	Yes	2 (18, 28)	50	Low
Patty	F	31	C	College	Yes	2 (1, 4)	60	High
Gail	F	30	AA	College	No	0	25	Low
Chen	M	32	A	HS +	No	0	NA	Low
Claire	F	44	C	HS +	No	2 (17, 19)	6	High
Alyssa	F	21	C	HS +	No	0	15	High
Angie	F	30	C	College +	Yes	1 (2)	50	High
Mark	M	33	C	HS +	Yes	0	50	High

NOTE.—Race (AA = African American, A = Asian, H = Hispanic, C = Caucasian); Education (HS = high school graduate, HS + = at least some college education, College = college graduate, College + = at least some graduate work); Occupation (BC = blue collar, S = student, WC = white collar); Number of children (ages of children are in parentheses); Income (total pretax household income, rounded to nearest thousand); Debt (informants were divided into three debt levels based on their credit card debt as a percentage of their income); NA = no answer.

TABLE 2
COUNSELOR DESCRIPTIONS

Name	Gender	Age	Race	Education	Married	Number of children (ages)	Income (\$1,000)	Credit card debt at time of interview
Cissy	F	36	C	College	Yes	3 (2, 9, 12)	55	Moderate
Alex	M	48	C	College +	Yes	2 (16, 20)	95	Low
Jason	M	66	C	HS	Yes	3 (36, 44, 46)	50	High
Mary	F	45	C	College	No	0	25	Low
Kelly	F	41	AA	College	Yes	2 (8, 12)	55	Low
Caroline	F	29	AA	College	No	0	27	Moderate
Ruth	F	52	C	College	Yes	2 (22, 28)	50	Low
Grace	F	36	AA	College	Yes	1 (NA)	NA	Low
Sharon	F	48	C	College +	No	1 (18)	25	Moderate
Ryan	M	42	C	College	No	0	22	Low

NOTE.—Race (AA = African American, A = Asian, H = Hispanic, C = Caucasian); Education (HS = high school graduate, HS + = at least some college education, College = college graduate, College + = at least some graduate work); Occupation (BC = blue collar, S = student, WC = white collar); Number of children (ages of children are in parentheses); Income (total pretax household income, rounded to nearest thousand); Debt (informants were divided into three debt levels based on their credit card debt as a percentage of their income); NA = no answer.

ethnic background, and social class. The characteristics of the primary sample can be found in table 1. Twenty interviews were conducted face to face, and eight interviews were conducted over the telephone. All informants were informed of the purpose of the study and of the confidentiality of their responses. As an incentive, each participant was given \$10 cash and entered into a \$250 lottery drawing.

Ten credit counselors were also interviewed. The counselors were recruited from Consumer Credit Counseling Services (CCCS), a division of the United Way, in two neighboring states. The CCCS counselors in the sample served both small and large cities. Table 2 provides the demographic profile of the counselor sample.

Counselors were informed that the focus of the discussion was to be solely on credit card use and debt and not on other forms of debt. Counselors were asked to give their perceptions of the causes and consequences of their clients' credit card debt and to identify how their clients coped with debt. Generally, the counselor interviews provided useful alternative perspectives to complement the insights we obtained from the card user data. Participant observation in a money management seminar offered by CCCS provided a third source of data. Sixteen individuals (10 female, six male), many of whom were struggling with credit card debt, attended the seminar. Neither the seminar instructors nor the participants were depth-interview informants. The researchers obtained valuable knowledge both from detailed observation and informal contact and from conversations held with debtors and instructors during these sessions.

A MODEL OF CREDIT CARD PRACTICES RELATED TO LIFESTYLE REGULATION

In order to facilitate and frame our investigation of credit card practice, it is useful to present the theoretical model that was informed by our participants' accounts and our reading of related literature. This model is depicted in figure 1. The model includes three primary sets of credit card practices that were clearly derived from consumers' emic

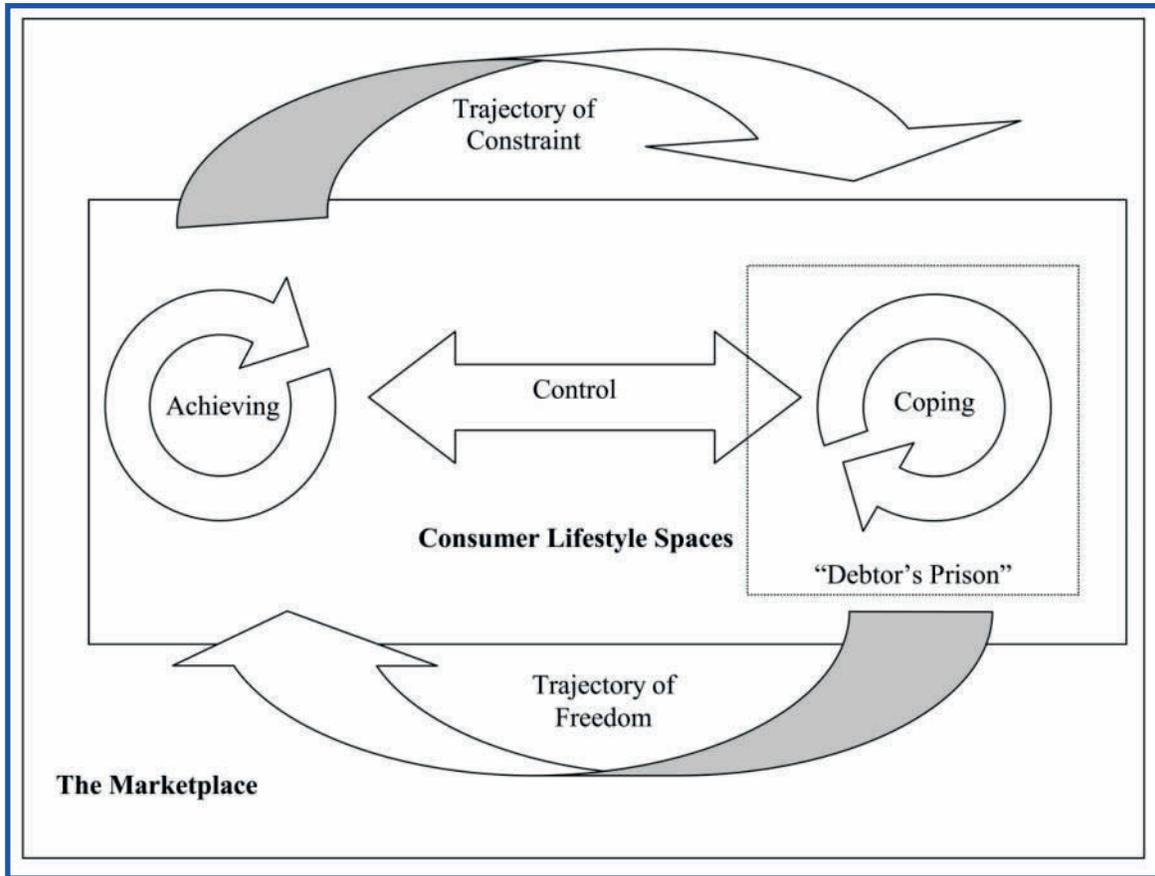
accounts. These relate to consumers achieving as lifestylers, coping with debt-imposed constraints on lifestyle achievements, and controlling their card usage. The model also depicts two trajectories of movement within the marketplace. A trajectory of freedom conveys the dynamic lifestyle implications of consumers' ability to control their credit card usage and harness the power of their cards for lifestyle enhancement. The trajectory of constraint suggests the dynamic consequences of a loss of control and accompanying reduction in the freedom to consume and buying power. While each aspect of the model will be elucidated in detail in subsequent reference to our data, our purpose here is to provide an overview of the structural and dynamic components of the model.

Lifestyle Spaces

Following the notion of a space as a practiced place, the model consists of two broad, categorical lifestyle spaces, achieving lifestyles and coping lifestyles, whose boundaries are defined in part by credit card practices that facilitate or impede movement between them (de Certeau 1984). Achieving lifestyles are characterized by an ability to attain various consumption-define lifestyle objectives, whereas a restricted ability to attain them characterizes coping lifestyles. In order to succinctly capture the confining properties of debt accumulation, we have portrayed coping lifestyles using the metaphor of a "debtor's prison." The boundaries between the lifestyle spaces are fluid and sometimes overlapping and are represented in our model accordingly by dashed lines. Achievement and confinement in the debtor's prison, freedom and constraint, are paradoxical in the sense that consumers experience them distinctively yet simultaneously through credit card practices. Kim, for example, a 50-yr.-old blue-collar worker, initially found her credit card empowering in that she was able to buy many desirable consumer goods on credit, especially jewelry and clothing, while paying for her daughter's education. Not surprisingly, these practices led to a rapid accumulation of debt that she

FIGURE 1

CONSUMER CREDIT CARD PRACTICES AND MOVEMENT AMONG SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED LIFESTYLE SPACES



was unable to repay. However, even after finding herself uncomfortably constrained by her debt, for a time she was able to continue her use of credit cards to obtain valued consumption markers by consolidating her debt through a personal loan from her credit union. Thus, even after finding herself in the debtor's prison, Kim was able to cope and to continue to achieve consumption goals by modifying her credit practices. Thus, these lifestyle spaces reveal the paradoxical nature of credit cards in the lives of our informants in that both freedom to achieve consumption-defined objectives and constraint from the same are the result of credit card practices.

Control and Trajectories of Freedom or Constraint

The ability of consumers to move freely among and within lifestyle spaces is constrained and/or influenced by control factors related to structural aspects of the marketplace, personal characteristics and self-control practices, powerful discourses regarding credit-related behavior, variability in access to resources, and exposure to uncontrollable life events. However, we restrict our focus primarily to credit card practices that relate to consumers' control of their lifestyle

choices, represented by the horizontal arrow in our model. To illustrate practices related to life in the debtor's prison, consider again Kim. She used her credit cards impulsively while shopping with a friend. She justified her lack of control by her perception that her friend usually bought more than she did. If Patricia bought five or six rings, Kim could rationalize that she had only bought four. As she put it, "Well, here's my charge card, charge it. I didn't have to pay for it at that time." This myopic view is common among informants living in the debtor's prison. By contrast, those with less debt tended to see credit cards as appropriately used for specific consumption goals, especially emergencies. These informants view their credit card as a "security blanket" or as "reserved savings." Control is, of course, dynamic, and consumers engage in practices that place them on a trajectory consistent with greater (or less) control and freedom and consequent movement away from (or toward) the debtor's prison and constraint. These trajectories of practice are represented by the curved arrows in our model. To illustrate, Juan's early trajectory of constraint was succinctly captured by his assessment of his original credit card practices. For years he made only the minimum monthly payment on a high interest credit card without focusing on the

total cost of debt. Subsequently, he learned to focus on the bottom line after struggling with onerous debt for years. This change in practice helped set him on a trajectory toward freedom. He remarked, "What I'm going to look at now is the bottom line. . . . If I have to buy with a credit card, I'm going to have to send the money in within about 25 days, or maybe when the first bill comes in."

The Marketplace

The model's lifestyle spaces and the practices that define them are embedded within the larger social space that is the marketplace for commoditized goods. While myriad theoretical perspectives on the postmodern marketplace might aid in analyzing the role of consumer credit card practices in lifestyle, we adopt Baudrillard's (1983) view of consumers as inventive *bricoleurs* who assert their independence and control through a variety of conscious marketplace practices. Consumers are willing, creative participants in the marketplace who cooperate with marketers and marketplace institutions for the satisfaction of needs in a variety of ways. In other words, consumer practices both influence and are influenced by marketers and marketplace institutions. Nonetheless, within this metaspaces, consumers typically behave. That is, they most often act in general accordance with socially constructed rules of engagement. They eat at franchised restaurants, shop on the Internet, travel to visit relatives for Thanksgiving, and purchase medical care, all in pursuit of particular consumption-define lifestyle objectives. The two broad metaphorical lifestyle spaces, defined, enabled, hindered, or constituted in part by consumer credit card practices, also constitute consumer life within the confines of the marketplace (Holt 1997).

CREDIT CARD PRACTICES RELATED TO ACHIEVING LIFESTYLES

In this section, we explore the role of credit cards in the construction of what we have labeled achieving lifestyles, that is, those focused on achieving consumption-define objectives. Drawing on social reproduction theory, we begin by positing that the acquisition of consumption markers is a critical component of lifestyle construction and thus constitutes a form of cultural capital. Furthermore, as credit card use is a primary means by which consumption markers are acquired, practices associated with their use make up the practices, skills, and tastes that constitute embodied cultural capital. We identify and detail two broad dimensions of credit card practice that in part define achieving lifestyles and distinguish between differing amounts of embodied cultural capital.

Social Reproduction and Credit Card Practice

Consumer researchers across a number of disciplines have employed social reproduction theories to investigate consumption's role in producing persistent social class and status hierarchies. Pierre Bourdieu, the most prominent of

the social reproduction theorists, argues in his influential *Distinction* (1984) that social life is in essence a competition for status attainment in which actors compete for status in multiple arenas called fields. Actors attain status in these fields by utilizing varying allotments of status-generating assets, namely, economic capital (financial resources), social capital (relationships, network ties, organizational affiliations), and cultural capital (skills, tastes, knowledge, practices). Of these, cultural capital is thought to be especially privileged in determining overall status in contemporary capitalist societies. According to this view, social actors need not intentionally jockey for status since virtually all social interactions are structured as acts of status positioning. In other words, the mere expression of valued skills, tastes, knowledge, and practices serves to sort, distinguish, and ultimately stratify. Additionally, the stratifying character of these expressions is rendered practically invisible as they are filtered through a structured set of individualizing schemas and preferences known as the habitus.

Social reproduction theory has been utilized by consumer researchers in marketing primarily to explain various aspects of cultural capital in the field of consumption. For example, Lee and Ozanne (1999) employ Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to explore conflict in service delivery between service providers and recipients, focusing on the clash between varying types and amounts of cultural capital. Holt (1998) explores cultural capital's relationship to material culture and work, which structure taste and consumption. He demonstrates how the consumption practices of those with large stores of cultural capital, or High Cultural Capital (HCC), tend to be oriented around abstraction, subjectivity, and self-expression; whereas those with smaller stores of cultural capital, or Low Cultural Capital (LCC), tend to be oriented around mastering material constraint.

Credit cards, through their power to command other consumption markers, call to our attention practices, knowledge, tastes, and skills employed to acquire objects rather than simply to utilize them. Although the acquisition and utilization of objects work in tandem, they are perhaps most distinct when acquisition involves the use of credit cards. Credit card use constitutes an embodied form of cultural capital precisely because it prevails on varying stores of knowledge and tastes. To illustrate, consider the "Using Your Credit Wisely" advertising campaign sponsored by Fannie Mae, a congressionally chartered firm that is the nation's largest source of home mortgage financing. One of the spots in the campaign features a "30-something" middle-class African American couple who receives a preapproved credit card in the mail, ultimately destroying it because they would like to eventually own a home. The ad includes a voice-over informing the viewer that using one's credit wisely is the first step to owning a home. Although the ad is about homeownership, the sponsor prevails upon the viewer's knowledge of the financial system to connect credit card practices that emphasize delayed gratification (i.e., destroying the card) with the creditworthiness necessary to achieve a consumption-define lifestyle objective (i.e., owning a

home). It is in this way that credit card use makes up the practices, skills, and tastes indicative of embodied cultural capital. Thus, in order to explicate the role of credit cards in constructing achieving lifestyles, we specify and detail two broad dimensions of embodied cultural capital that emerge from credit card practice.

Dimensions of Embodied Cultural Capital in Credit Card Practice

Credit card practices reveal an aspect of lifestyle construction left heretofore untheorized in consumer research by demonstrating patterns in the ways consumers wield their substantial purchasing power. This research posits that movement along two broad dimensions of credit card practice, known as lifestyle building and lifestyle signaling, constitutes different types of achieving lifestyles corresponding to different stores of cultural capital. We explore each in detail.

Lifestyle Building. The first dimension of credit card practice, lifestyle building, refers to practices designed to facilitate the attainment of specific lifestyle objectives. That is, these practices reveal the consumption-define objectives being pursued with credit cards.

Material constraint is a central theme around which LCC lifestyles are often constructed (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998). This notion is reflected in the credit card practices employed by our informants. Some informants utilize credit cards to maintain their current consumption patterns by providing short-run protection against misfortune. That is, credit cards serve as protection from material constraint. Not surprisingly, when asked about what they would be giving up if they could not use credit cards, informants commonly reference contingency issues such as a car in need of repair. Indicative of LCC lifestyles oriented around material constraint, the temporary loss of a working car, a job, or an unexpected death can threaten financial ruin. To illustrate, Anna cites the role of potential crisis as a primary reason for using credit cards:

I'd be giving up a lot of freedom in some ways [without credit cards]. I think there are uses for credit cards—I guess it's a security blanket—if anything ever happened, anything. If all of a sudden I find out [her husband] Jon's a mass murderer and I need to go home and I don't have the cash to get a plane ticket, take my credit card and get me out of here. If some serious accident happens and they won't do anything because we don't have our insurance cards with us or whatever, then fine. Put it on the credit card. If I'm out in the middle of nowhere and my car breaks down and they won't take a check from me, then put it on a credit card. That to me is what it should be used for.

Anna frames credit card use as a security blanket or a form of freedom, freedom from the worries and expenses associated with crisis. Clearly, credit card practice in this instance is oriented toward maintaining current levels of consumption

in the face of crisis. Other informants also similarly frame their card use as a form of insurance or reserved savings.

Erica: [My current card balance] is for car expenses as far as getting the car fixed things like that. I have used it for medical reasons outside of my insurance that weren't paid. That's about it. It is basically for the car and for things like that that come up.

Interviewer: What do you think that you would be giving up if you didn't have a credit card?

Gail: Oh Lord, probably reserved money. In case emergencies came up like deaths in the family or emergency dental bills that I didn't have the money for. Maybe some type of financial freedom to charge it now and pay later. That is pretty much it.

What is critical about these instances from the data is how the presence of material constraint constitutes the reference point against which lifestyle objectives are measured. That is, these informant responses emphasize their normative use of credit cards, namely, to navigate financial crisis. They likewise suggest that, as a form of embodied cultural capital, LCC lifestyle building is oriented around escaping crisis and privileges credit card practices that at least temporarily minimize vulnerability to the material constraints they bring about.

In stark contrast, HCC lifestyles emphasize credit card practices in pursuit of altogether different lifestyle objectives. The orientation toward acquisition is not at all overtly focused on material constraint or crisis. Rather, the focus is on the opportunities afforded by certain acquisitions. To illustrate, Angie and Paula used credit cards to help acquire an array of experiences central to constructing their current lifestyles.

Angie: What does money mean to me? It means vacations, it means clothes, grocery shopping. It means letting me do a lot of things that I want to do. You know, get together with family on holidays. It means—you know, it's a good thing. I don't see it as a bad thing and I want lots of it, you know. So, it just means that I can do the things that I believe should be done in my stages of life and what we should be able to do. It's allowed me to be able to do that.

Interviewer: Has [the credit card] brought you some good things?

Paula: Mmm-hmm.

Interviewer: Tell me what those are again.

Paula: Well, part of my education. I have traveled and put airline tickets on my cards. Then when I was in Europe it helped out there. Those are the big ones.

For these informants, credit card practices are oriented around the acquisition of valued experiences and opportunities. That is, the enormous purchasing power contained in credit cards is employed to garner consumption markers whose meanings are transferable, enhance relationships, and

are likely to be valued by those with similar stores of cultural capital. Consistent with notions of HCC lifestyles, these informants' practices reveal lifestyle objectives that emphasize their relative freedom to acquire such consumption markers.

Lifestyle Signaling. The second dimension, lifestyle signaling, references credit card practices designed to communicate one's efforts in acquiring lifestyle consumption markers. The use of credit cards often very clearly illustrates how lifestyles characterized by differing amounts of cultural capital are signaled through the act of acquisition. Juan utilizes a credit card practice he refers to as "showing off" that characterizes an LCC lifestyle.

Interviewer: How would you show off with your cards?

Juan: I'd go out with some [woman] and just pull the card out. I didn't even care if someone took the number off the card or whatever. . . . I see people who like to show off and all that, which sometime would be big trouble. . . . You could even get killed if you're flashin' your money.

Interviewer: What kinds of things were you putting on your cards?

Juan: Oh, you know, buying clothes. And you go buy this and buy that and buy this. And you put [food] on the plate and the big tip on and all that—just showing off.

For Juan, the objects he acquires with his credit cards appear to provide an opportunity for him to signal his raw purchasing power to others. "Showing off" in the acquisition process, a practice Juan had come to critique by the time of the interview, highlights the critical role played by material constraint. Juan's admittedly conspicuous if not cavalier use of credit cards communicates to those within his sphere of influence (e.g., his romantic interests) as well as others (e.g., service providers and patrons) his relative freedom from material constraint. In fact, his self-critical retrospective makes it clear that his concern about the practice relates to hazards associated with theft and violence rather than regret about the lifestyle signal he intends to send.

Among our informants, HCC lifestyle lists are no less preoccupied with status signaling than are LCC lifestyle lists. However, they utilize credit card practices that place much less emphasis on shows of purchasing power; that is, they place their signaling efforts into practices that align them with particular images and symbols valued by associative or aspirational others. In one instance from the data, Chen recounts specific credit card practices that he employs to signal status.

Chen: In Hong Kong, it [the credit card] is like a kind of status. If you are working, you use a credit card. It seemed strange if you didn't in a social setting.

Interviewer: So you think it gave you a higher social status?

Chen: Yes, but it depends on which card. I used two different cards on purpose. Normally I would use the Visa to buy my

personal things like clothes. But if I go out to have dinner I use the American Express. It is because it makes me feel like I have a higher status. Sometimes I'm not going out with my friends but with a client and I pay for the bill. The image has really helped me a lot.

Interviewer: Why did you use American Express for dinner and Visa for personal things?

Chen: Somehow they promote a good image. When I'm working at advertising and sales, I need to promote myself personally as a type of successful person. The American Express image helped me to do so. Somehow if I go to pay my bill by American Express card my friends and clients will know that I am doing a successful job—there will be more respect.

Chen's credit card practices are particularly focused on aligning him with images and meaning likely to be valued by those with similar endowments of cultural capital. Unlike Juan's credit card practices, Chen's employ greater sensitivity to the branded images promoted by the instruments themselves. This sensitivity ensures that the meanings accompanying his object acquisition are properly interpreted by those likely to value them. Credit card practice in this instance directly transfers embodied cultural capital via brand images that represent a taste and preference structure associated with particular lifestyles (e.g., yuppie) that is then reconstituted in actual consumption practice.

The HCC credit card practice also signals lifestyle in another way, namely, through their use as a weapon in an escalating competition of consumption markers. Angie, a wife, recent mother, and graduate school student, recounts how she utilizes her credit card to "keep up with the Joneses":

This neighborhood, it's all kinds of kids and it's white collar workers kind of stuff. So you know, it's a fabulous place for now, and when we moved in I loved it. I said, "Well, we can't move in with this furniture," and so we bought all new furniture because I was just going to be embarrassed having people in the house. Somebody like us shouldn't be living here unless we are going to play by the rules. You know there are certain kinds of rules that you play by, and so we bought the furniture on the credit card. And then there was the minivan; and with the baby that's the car we should have. . . . I'm not quite sure whether or not we've tried to keep up with the Joneses.

Angie perceives a suburban, middle-class lifestyle as a status game with attendant rules of engagement. She sees the ability to acquire the consumption markers associated with that lifestyle as a prerequisite for entry into the setting. Credit cards allow her to signal her ability to compete in this consumption arena whereas without them she could not. Similarly to what Chen does, Angie constructs a lifestyle around a particular set of tastes that do not inhere solely in specific consumption objects but just as importantly in the signal they send to those with whom she associates. Al-

though her credit card practices do not share Chen's sensitivity to brand imagery, they are similarly focused on aligning her with an image likely to be highly valued by a specific set of associates.

Although all of our informants are interested in signaling information to others about their lifestyles through their use of credit cards in acquisition, they do so in ways designed to enhance their particular store of cultural capital. Those seeking to signal their distance from material constraint do so through credit card practices that emphasize their raw purchasing power and cast that signal broadly, indicative of LCC lifestyles. Those less overtly motivated by material constraint are more sensitive to distinctions in imagery that properly align them with others likely to share their lifestyle objectives. They employ credit card practices carefully crafted such that they not only align themselves with those objectives but clearly signal this alignment to others, indicative of HCC lifestyle. Their HCC lifestyle signaling emphasizes the symbolic benefit derived specifically from their ability to acquire consumption markers with credit cards.

Credit card practices as a form of embodied cultural capital reveal stratified relationships to material culture through the lifestyles they build and signal. The practices associated with the acquisition of consumption markers in part distinguish LCC and HCC lifestyles. However, even though credit card practices can directly add to one's store of cultural capital, they also draw on one's store of economic capital. Thus credit card practices span both cultural and economic forms of capital, allowing the user to temporarily trade one for the other. Credit card practices that diminish economic capital severely enough will, however, ultimately result in movement toward a qualitatively different lifestyle space. Although perhaps filled with the consumption markers of an achieving lifestyle, this lifestyle space is oriented around coping with severely diminished stores of economic capital. Thus, we turn our attention now to coping lifestyles practiced in the lifestyle space we label the debtor's prison.

CREDIT CARD PRACTICES RELATED TO THE DEBTOR'S PRISON

We continue our investigation of consumer lifestyle regulation at the metaphorical bottom, in a uniquely undesirable lifestyle space, navigated in part by credit card practices. The debtor's prison refers to a lifestyle space imbued with meaning by credit card practices associated with the accumulation of substantial debt relative to the ability to repay. Any prison metaphor in a putatively free marketplace, particularly one that references the colorful but sad history of the debtor's prison, is certainly ironic. While higher debt lifestyles are often decorated with the goods and services afforded by credit card use, the indebted must also bear the financial and psychological costs that accompany life characterized by debt. Given our focus on credit card practices that explain movement into, within, and away from the lifestyle constraints of the debtor's prison, we forgo a description of the experience of debt-ridden

consumers, directing interested readers to Hill (1994), Manning (2000), and Medoff and Harliss (1996).

We compare the emerging debtor's prison metaphor with Foucault's (1977) view of the marketplace as a panoptic apparatus, striving to assert its own brand of discipline upon consumers and punishing those who break the rules. Once inside the debtor's prison, economic capital assumes a prevalent role in determining lifestyle objectives. At the extreme, consumers' lifestyle objectives can be made irrelevant as their labor is essentially indentured to creditors. In achieving lifestyle space, lifestyles are oriented largely around consumption-define objectives as consumers maintain control of the meaning of their expenditures, debts, and themselves. We now focus the remainder of our discussion on credit card practices oriented toward coping with life in the debtor's prison, as we illustrate in figure 1.

Our informants report a variety of credit card practices that facilitate the continued use of credit cards despite high debt burdens. To wit, these practices do not appear to be designed to transition the credit card user out of the prison. Rather, they represent coping mechanisms designed to psychologically shield the user from the consequences of continued debt accumulation. Higher-debt informants cope with life in the debtor's prison through reliance on rationalizations, or internal justifications for credit card use. They rationalize past and present card use through a host of credit card practices, including norm referencing, gifting and self-gifting, and discounting.

Norm Referencing Practices

Higher-debt informants tended to rationalize their spending by normalizing it (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990). These norm references serve as rationalizations designed to ease felt guilt or dissonance over debt accumulation and its resultant effects on self-concept. Debtors rationalize that many of the purchases they make while building their credit card debt are both necessary and appropriate. Such uses include purchases surrounding life events like marriage, divorce, and the birth of a child, as well as such emergency consumption situations as car repairs, emergency medical care, and periods of reduced income. One higher-debt informant, Claire, notes:

We used them [credit cards] for appliances and the kids. My husband didn't work steady so there were a lot of things that went on them, groceries, clothes, major appliances, plus TV (cable). Everything we bought went on our credit cards. At the time we separated, I was about \$12,000 in credit card debt.

Similarly, in the following quotation, note informant Patty's internal justification with her belief that she "had to" use her cards during her period of unemployment, even though such use at the time made her "cringe and sick," as well as her rationalization that, because she had to prepare

for the birth of her child, she had no choice but to use credit cards for items related to this event.

In 1992 I got pregnant, and I was working for a newspaper company that lost some major contracts and did major layoffs, and I was a casualty. I was pregnant and nobody was going to hire a pregnant woman. It was just a terrible situation. Yet our house, which we had bought in 1990, really required two incomes. My husband and I have always been—you know I had mentioned \$32,000 and \$28,000 as our salaries. It's pretty much you can see down the line that he isn't anymore of a breadwinner than I am. So it does take two salaries, and we didn't have that. And unemployment helped for that year while I was pregnant somewhat. But we racked up credit card debt. We had to pay taxes that year on credit cards. I mean do things that made us just cringe and sick. And to this day we still have not managed to nail that debt. . . . We used it for so many things for preparing for the baby. We had to have cribs and just certain items that we had nowhere else to get them, so that's what we did.

In essence, these consumers justify their card use by rationalizing that credit cards were indeed made for such situations. By contrast, credit counselor informants offer competing injunctive norms in response to emergency spending situations and life-cycle changes, namely, that the consumer should save over time so credit cards are not needed or needed less in these situations. Likewise, credit counselors in the sample suggest that, in response to periods of life change, consumers should not overspend but should gradually adjust consumption over time. Although counselors recognize that life-changing events may serve as precursors to many of their clients' debt, they expressed the belief that the link between the severity of credit card debt and critical life events is a lack of financial planning and/or a desire to overspend. To illustrate, Cissy, a counselor, suggests that, after marriage, a typical client might insist on furnishing a house with all new furniture instead of gradually building to a position of stability.

Young couples starting out buying a home going out and getting new furniture and getting the home straight; someone in college buying things that they need for college and living. That I see as well. [They are] getting themselves in a situation and building up their credit. They get a lot of credit. They use it, and then they realize that their income is not going to be able to make those payments and pay it off.

The credit counselors offer normative prescriptions for debt reduction that place the causal focus on dissaving and excess consumption rather than misfortune. In this way, they reference dominant cultural norms, such as the Protestant ethic, that privilege the ability to delay gratification. Our intent is not to, in turn, uncritically privilege their perspective; rather it is to highlight the marked disparity in the normative basis for judgments between the two groups. The norm references made by high debtors, that much of their card use is necessary,

appropriate, and fiscally responsible, serve at least in part to shield their self-concept from the normative implications of an inability to delay gratification. Their choice to characterize their spending as legitimate rather than punish themselves for not saving and/or for spending beyond their means constitutes a choice, at least initially, to cope with the psychological (rather than fiscal) consequences of debt imprisonment.

Gift-giving and Self-Gift-giving Practices

In addition to norm referencing, debtors rationalized that, when purchases are altruistic (when purchases are made for others, especially gifts for family members), credit card use is more easily justified. Below Kim characterizes her credit card use as necessary and appropriate precisely because she is making purchases for loved ones rather than for herself.

But when I say I was abusing it I really wasn't because it was need. . . . And I didn't use the card on a lot of buying clothing or just use it on fast foods. You know, how people just—I just did it for conveniences for my daughter to go to school. [Now I use it for] emergencies, like if my grandkids need—my daughter may call me and say, "Mama, the baby needs this." Maybe shoes or something that they really, really need, I would go out. Or sometimes the kids need medication at a drug store or something like that. If I didn't have the cash, then I would go and do it.

Note that, in this instance from the data, the role of clothing is quite fluid in that it is clearly frowned upon as an inappropriate personal purchase but is seen as a legitimate necessity when being purchased for a grandchild. The items themselves do not constitute inherently appropriate or inappropriate purchases; rather it is the altruistic intent of the purchase that gives it justification.

Discounting Practices

Another psychological coping mechanism involves discounting or systematically underestimating the difficulty involved in significantly reducing and/or eliminating credit card debt. One way in which this manifests itself as a conscious strategy is in a tendency among higher debtors to pay a token amount over the minimum required payment. The simple act of paying more than is required helps debtors cope, as it provides them with the belief that they are engaging in fiscally responsible payment behavior. Such payments lead them to believe that they are reducing their debt and are good cardholders. As Tom notes,

Well, I figure if I paid about \$20 to \$30 extra to try to get the bill down. You see, they had a minimum payment on there, and you want to pay more than the minimum. So I was trying to pay more than the minimum. Even if it was a rubber check, I try to pay more than the minimum, trying to knock it down [laughs].

For debtors such as Tom, underestimating payback difficulty

is a partial result of not understanding and/or attending to accumulating interest, therefore viewing minimal payments as going directly toward debt reduction. Tom had \$9,000 in credit card debt while believing his \$20 to \$30 above minimum payment was going to “knock [his debt] down.” This lack of knowledge and/or attention to debt also, at least temporarily, reduces associated stress, as exemplified in this statement by Paula:

I'd like to say [I usually paid] over the minimum, but I didn't go too much over the minimum. Like if the minimum was \$100, I'd go \$125 and feel like I was doing a good deal, you know.

In addition, debtors proactively engage in practices that help them psychologically reduce their payment burden. One common practice is actively referencing expected income. This rationalization helps alleviate debt-related stress based on expected future income, such as a salary raise, a new job, tax refunds, and even insurance settlements. It also helps to justify current credit card debt. As Sandy put it, “I also was in a car accident six months ago and that insurance money should be coming in and that will be way more than enough to pay.” In effect, this practice makes debtors feel that their debt is less troublesome. Anna reports:

I knew that it [credit card debt] would get better once I got my foot in the door at the university and then I got a promotion. Then I stayed at that level for a year, then I got this new—I knew it would get better, but I don't know that that was a thought in my head at the time. It probably was. Yeah, actually, I don't think it was a direct thought, but it was always there that I would be able to pay it off as time went on. I won't put any more on it or I'll be getting that raise in a few weeks.

The expectation of future income commonly mentioned by high debtors may simply be related to an expectation of overall economic growth and prosperity, a bias toward optimism that is based on the success of postindustrial economies (Bell 1976).

Although the aforementioned rationalizing practices are used by credit card debtors to help them cope with the negative psychological consequences of their debt, the financial consequences of debt, namely, the burden of repayment, require a different set of coping practices. Shuffling practices help delay/avoid repayment burdens and alter current consumption patterns.

Shuffling Practices

One set of practices for coping with the financial consequences of burdensome debt is to shuffle the debt among financial instruments. One specific shuffling practice is “card shuffling,” or shifting credit card debt among multiple cards (Manning 2000). For example, higher-debt informants frequently borrow money on one credit card in order to cope

with another burdensome credit card bill. These consumers often assign particular uses to cards, categorize credit cards based on balance and/or interest rates, and differentiate between cards used for holding debt and those that must be paid off first. Informant Angie reports the following:

I've got four [cards] with a lot of debt. They're the ones I've kind of moved, and they all probably have a history, you know. Each card has moved through different purposes throughout. Do you know what I mean? What they do for me. Discover is the one for all purchases, and that's the bill that I'm always supposed to pay off no matter what. That always has to have a zero balance so that I don't accrue interest. The titanium Mastercard has the zero percent interest for six months so that is loaded up with debt. I have it all written out on a sheet as I was trying to straighten my credit card life out. That has a balance of like \$7,500. The purpose of that card is to strictly hold this debt and when I get money I will pay it off. I've got my USAA card, which has a 12.9% interest rate. That's one of my zeroes now. That is just there and I'm trying to keep it away where I don't have to use it, but I do know if I do need to use it I could. But that's always one I would pay off.

Similarly, debtors also delay the negative consequences of credit card debt through debt conversion, that is, freeing space on credit cards by moving existing debt to other forms of revolving credit. A common method involves debt consolidation loans. Tom, after temporarily paring down his consumption and attempting to pay off over \$10,000 in credit card debt, became frustrated and consolidated his card debt via a home equity loan.

We got a home equity loan from the credit union. That was about \$10,700 or so and paid off both cards. I was sitting down thinking that the way this card is set up I'll be paying Sears for 20 to 30 years . . . so I was sitting there thinking, and I told my wife that I was going to try to get a home equity loan and see how much we could get so I could pay the cards off. You know, the interest rate is 18 to 27 percent. I was paying extra to get the bill down; wasn't charging anything either, but it still wasn't going down as fast as I'd like it to.

The loan allowed Tom to delay his repayment burden and enhanced his ability to resume prior consumption patterns. Less than a year later, he had accrued \$9,000 in additional credit card debt by continuing his longstanding credit card practices. A related delaying tactic commonly used by higher debtors is simply to request additional credit or obtain new cards once their credit limit has been reached rather than having to face being “maxed out” on credit cards and perhaps having to dramatically scale back consumption. This has the effect of reducing the psychological debt burden and delaying the financial debt burden.

The credit card practices used to cope with higher-debt loads, typified by the informant accounts noted here, fit well

within postmodern frameworks that view consumption as a form of production that “does not manifest itself through products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order” (de Certeau 1984, xiii). While credit cards are clearly creations of marketplace institutions intended to generate profit practices like shuffling provide insight into how consumers adapt and transform these instruments, even if only temporarily, to their own ends within the constraints imposed by regulation and competition. These mechanisms of adaptation, or *dispositifs* as Foucault refers to them, in effect undermine the system of discipline imposed by market forces and empower cardholders as lifestylists. Shifting funds from one no-interest card to another, declaring bankruptcy, and other shuffling practices are forms of what de Certeau (1984, 25) describes as *la perruque*, or literally “the wig.” Putting on the wig is a metaphor for putting one over on the established order, in this case the credit card-issuing institutions. Although limited in their impact, these practices nonetheless allow for some degree of freedom even within the confine of the debtor’s prison. Informants find ways to create livable space within its walls by using the rules of the marketplace to their personal advantage. They co-opt a system that strives to instill homogeneity and order with respect to payment practices. Despite this, these practices do not suggest a trajectory toward an achieving lifestyle.

MOVEMENT BETWEEN LIFESTYLE SPACES

Credit Cards and Control Practices

Our informants provided rich accounts of practices used to manage and control their use of credit cards in order to avoid confinement or to escape to a more satisfying, achieving lifestyle. As reflected in figure 1, informants articulate a belief that building one’s store of economic capital through self-control (i.e., delaying or altogether denying the gratification that comes with acquiring and consuming) can lead away from the debtor’s prison. Moreover, they also believe the reverse to be true. An inability to display self-control leads directly to lifestyles characterized by confinement. Consequently, our informants employ practices designed to control their urges to use their cards or to limit their exposure to card use situations. Prior research in the area of consumer self-control identifies various self-control practices consumers use to restrain their behavior and guides our interpretation (e.g., Hirschman 1992; Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; Rook and Hoch 1985). The practices commonly employed by our informants include precommitment, consideration of economic costs, and time binding.

Asserting Control through Precommitment Practices. Precommitment has been defined as the self-imposition or altering of incentives for future behavior (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991). In credit card practice, the primary form of precommitment is the strict application of injunctive norms to govern card usage. Precommitment practices have the

effect of placing direct limits on consumption prior to entering a spending situation. Card users tend to do this either by limiting the amount they will spend and/or by designating specific uses of credit as appropriate, clearly demarcating them from inappropriate uses. As evidenced earlier in this article in the discussion of LCC lifestyle building (see verbatims of Anna, Erica, and Gail), health-related emergencies and unexpected car repairs are considered to be quintessentially appropriate spending situations primarily because they are not regularly occurring expenditures and thus are perceived as difficult to budget. In addition, the use of credit cards is considered appropriate for reimbursable business transactions that require a credit card (e.g., hotel reservations and car rentals) and some personal purchases.

Chen, who carries no credit card debt, illustrates two forms of precommitment, as he prespecifies the purpose and limits amount of credit card usage. As noted elsewhere in this article, he uses his personal American Express card solely for business entertainment purposes, primarily to enhance his image among clients, dutifully paying any balance each month. In addition, he articulates how he places strict limits on spending although he uses his Visa card for more mundane personal purchases:

The Visa card for me is just like plastic money. I use it as is. I never ask the bank to give me extra credit. Every year, if they have it for a thousand, I will just use it until it gets to that. Then, I pay it off at the end of the month.

Although his credit card practices are clearly affected by the image building and positioning strategies adopted by the credit card-issuing companies, Chen places very strict limits on the types and amount of gratification he derives from their usage. Precommitment alone is not often sufficient to suggest a trajectory of control, as many higher debt informants who articulate precommitment strategies find themselves unable to implement them.

Asserting Control through Economic Cost Assessment Practices. One set of practices that aids cardholders in keeping their prior commitment to limited card use is economic cost assessment, defined as the conscious consideration of a purchase’s economic costs (Rook and Hoch 1985). With regard to credit cards, this involves not only consideration of the initial purchase cost but also the consideration of the interest applied to the purchase. Credit card statements that prominently highlight low minimum monthly payments as opposed to the total debt invite users to discount the total economic cost of their purchases. As illustrated by Juan, card users often go through a period of adjustment in terms of actively considering the total economic cost of card purchases; nonetheless, Juan and other lower-debtors in our sample consistently exhibited an economic cost assessment of their card purchases.

I bought a washing machine on [a Sears card]. Every time the bill came it was \$10. That’s good, \$10. When the payment came, \$10 a month, I was happy. I said, “That’s all?!” But

after I paid that bill for one year [the balance] just barely moved. I mean the machine was \$300 and the bill was still \$300. I called the Sears people and said I bought this machine and I've been paying \$10 a month and it should make at least a couple of pennies difference. They said "Sorry, you're just paying the interest; you never paid the balance really." Finally, I talked to some people, made some phone calls, and they told me you need to find a card with a low interest rate and where you can find out how much of the payment is going to the interest and how much to the principal. They told me you got to know that. If you don't know that, you're just shit out of luck, you know?

In another instance from the data, Angie, who is attempting to manage household debt by shuffling balances between low-interest cards, combines the previously described card shuffling with economic cost assessment.

But now when I get credit cards it's always for the low interest rate, which was never the motivation before, you know. . . . I'm always seeking out the credit cards at the 3.9% [APR]. For example, I have a credit card with 0% interest for six months and so I got it just because of that. . . . You know I've just—if you can believe it—I just got a credit card in the mail, because I said I'm not going to get any more credit cards. However, one of my cards is going to jump up to a high interest rate come November, and I got something in the mail saying this is 3.9% until next October. So, I was like I could transfer that debt which is [currently] at a [low] percent interest rate onto this card which also has that [low] percent interest rate and you know, instead of getting whammed.

Card shuffling is characterized elsewhere as a coping practice rather than a control practice. This informant, however, is utilizing shuffling and economic cost assessment to control the spiraling future costs of previous spending. That is, managing interest costs by shifting debt to low-interest credit instruments is being self-consciously employed here as a strategy for at least temporarily controlling debt load rather than solely for lowering its psychological impact.

Asserting Control through Time Binding Time binding is defined as focusing on the positive benefit of delay (Jones and Gerard 1967). Central to control practices is a belief that delayed gratification will ultimately be rewarded. To illustrate, Tom, a high-debt informant, elaborates on the opportunity costs of his failure to delay gratification—a common lament of the high-debtors in our sample. Note particularly Tom's sense of a loss of marketplace freedom.

Well, let's see, right now I'm thinking about that home equity loan. That money could have been used for something else. I need to pave my driveway and add some insulation in the roof of the house. So I could have used that money to do that instead of just putting it into paying those cards. I'm kind of angry about that now. . . . I could have used that money to do other things instead of just paying off some

cards. It limits you and what you can accomplish. If you start watching your finance and limit what you put on the credit cards, save more and learn about investing money, marketing and all that, you will come out better. You might be able to retire early or take some money and invest it. You can just do more. . . . If I had the money I could invest in something like [an investment opportunity he had recently read about]. . . . It might pay off 10 to 15 years from now. [Credit card debt] binds you up. It limits you. All you are doing is working to pay somebody else. You don't want to do that.

Similarly, low-debt informants consistently discuss the virtues of greater rewards in the future, such as financial security in the form of savings, investments, and having money available for needed purchases of a home or car.

In sum, our informants present a version of movement between lifestyle spaces that in many ways privileges their efficacy as lifestylers. They see movement away from debtor's prison into achieving lifestyles largely as a function of their ability to control their card use and, more fundamentally, to delay gratification. Exerting sufficient control over urges to use credit cards in order to achieve consumption-defined lifestyle objectives while also retaining one's freedom in the marketplace is certainly no easy task. The very meaning of what constitutes control in a given spending situation can vary radically with the onset of family lifecycle changes, unexpected changes in income as well as emergencies. The ability of informants to successfully engage in control practices in significant part determines their trajectory either toward or away from the debtor's prison. What then underlies the observed variations in consumers' ability to control their credit card practices? To answer this question we identify an underlying tension between two ideologies, one of entitlement, the other of frugality.

Ideological Underpinnings of Constraint and Freedom Trajectories

Entitlement. Whether as a reward for hard work or for surviving a bad day, informants commonly reason that they are due rewards for having endured various hardships, and they see the credit card as a legitimate means to claim these well-earned rewards. As one informant remarked about her debt, "I don't like it, but I don't dislike it enough to give up some of the things that I'm doing that I have worked 42 years to be able to have the right to go do." This sense of entitlement can be traced to powerful social discourses in American history. The Calvinist expectation of material and spiritual gain as a reward for hard work underlies the notion of the Protestant work ethic, a foundational myth of American consumer culture (Weber 1958). Applbaum (1998) and Sahlins (1996) link consumer participation in the marketplace to material rewards, or what Applbaum refers to as a "secular form of salvation." Thus, powerful cultural discourses related to work, and consumption as a reward for work, underlie consumer entitlement rationales that both

contribute to and help cope with higher levels of credit card debt.

Not surprisingly, entitlement ideology is particularly pronounced as a rationale for self-gratification (Dilley 1992). In addition, informants' beliefs about what is being consumed by others are employed frequently as benchmarks in a process of social comparison that has been well documented (e.g., De Graaf et al. 2001; Richins 1991). Angie and Abigail were typical of informants who found themselves on a trajectory toward constraint based on using credit cards to obtain lifestyle markers they believed to be integral to their new social roles:

Angie: But it's like okay, we're parents now, and we have a daughter, and so we live in a neighborhood. We bought all new furniture for the house, and we bought the minivan. . . . But it's like you're at certain stages in your life, and I have my own mental models [of] where [I'm] supposed to be and what it should be like for my daughter; and so that's where I've decided those choices there were more important than the comfortableness of having zero debt.

Abigail: When I first started out [her first job after college], as the months went by, I thought that I owed myself so much, so I guess that is when I began to use [credit cards] probably not in a good way. I had to get some of the things that I wanted even though I didn't have the cash on hand at that time. So, "I deserve this." You know, you have worked hard. You went to college for four years. Get some of the things that you want. You know you may not [be able to] buy them all at one time, but you can get some of them and just pay the monthly payments. I bought jewelry, probably a stereo, a TV, an entertainment system, music.

Angie's and Abigail's entitlement ideology is clearly normatively derived. For Angie, the perceived comfort of low debt is willingly traded off against her achieving lifestyle objectives, whose consumption markers signify her as the proverbial middle-class soccer mom. These objects, all purchased with credit cards (including part of her minivan) serve to establish her family in a new, middle-class neighborhood. She fears being perceived as an outsider based on the types of furnishings, clothing, and automobiles her family previously possessed. Thus, she uses credit cards to facilitate a middle-class consumption lifestyle, even while she and her husband are still attending school. Similarly, Abigail's use of expressions such as "I owed myself," "I deserve it," and "had to get some of the things I wanted" in the context of "just making the monthly payments" is clearly consistent with the notion that entitlement ideology is a threat to the maintenance of control.

Credit card practices guided by an entitlement ideology often result in a myopic, short-term focus on need gratification or mood repair (Mick and DeMoss 1990). These practices represent the ability to gratify and self-medicate with card-enabled consumption during times of duress. In other words, informants frequently felt entitled to feel good. Informant Miranda reports,

I don't have the willpower not to use it. I may get upset and go to the mall and go shopping. If I get mad at somebody, I will. I may get upset. Something might have happened at home, and it's just a way of going off by myself, looking at things or purchasing things. They might be something foolish that I don't even want. I have done it several times.

In essence, informants on a trajectory toward constraint frequently exhibit practices that reflect their use of credit cards to construct the lifestyles to which they feel entitled with little regard for the implications of such practices for economic capital. One informant, Megan, discusses her own card-enabled lifestyle marker purchases:

When you [her ex-husband] are a young lawyer working in a big firm with a lot of big shots, you want to be like them faster. You use credit cards to have your wife dress like the other wives, to give your wife jewelry like the other wives to make your appearance more established.

Prominent among the goods and services regularly purchased on credit cards by informants on a constraint trajectory are hedonic products such as vacations, dining out, tickets to events, clothing, and alcohol. Megan again remarks, "The first ones I got in college, and I wanted to buy clothes, you know, to keep up. But I started buying drinks with it and using it to go out and get really happy." We note, however, that the specific products purchased by Megan and similar informants are not important to this analysis, but rather it is their orientation toward credit card use that is critical. Credit card practices exemplify their entitlement ideology through the employment of commodity consumption directly in the service of attaining or maintaining status, as well as altering mood.

Frugality. The trajectory of freedom was characterized by informants' stories imbued with very different ideological beliefs. In particular, successful use of credit card control practices was associated with an ideology of frugality. Informants carrying little or no debt and those reconstructing achieving lifestyles after a period of constraint imposed by debt commonly espoused strong beliefs in the value of frugality and delayed gratification. Many expressed paradoxical attitudes toward credit cards and debt in general by using terms such as "convenient" and "necessary" but also "addicting" and "tempting." This duality and the tension it creates are evident in Dennis's attitude toward using his credit card, a practice that he views as convenient and useful for emergencies but also as potentially dangerous and imprudent:

I feel like if I put something on a credit card, I say "I'll pay it off in a month," but then something else will come up, some little purchase that you can figure in your head to be an emergency. So I'd rather not use the damn thing at all. That's my money being used by someone else. I'd like to keep it in my bank in my account. If you don't have the

money, don't buy it. That's not how I grew up. That's how I came to realize that's the best way to handle it.

Similarly, Gene's moralistic view of the use of credit cards for status-oriented consumption displays reinforces the ideological underpinnings of control practices. Informants tending to exercise more control and restraint in their use of credit cards often referred to credit cards, credit card users, and card-issuing institutions in normative terms, as this statement by Gene illustrates:

People just don't have any strength. They try to make themselves feel equal to others. If they don't, they buy other things. You know, something outrageously expensive and wear it like Minnie Pearl with the price tag still on it. . . . If you have to define yourself by having your Air Jordans or a brand new Camaro or something. . . . Different classes and different segments definitely have totems of status. I guess to me I just got rid of that because it seems like a weakness, like a moral weakness. . . . It sort of goes back to the idea that some people look to define themselves with their material consumer goods. You try to look like Joe Blow next to you. Some people's needs and wants seem kind of frivolous.

An ideology of frugality also owes much to the Protestant ethic and capitalistic spirit described by Weber (1958), in which hard work, savings, reinvestment, modesty, prudence, and discipline are viewed as essential for material success and ultimately spiritual salvation. Thus, although one could argue about the mythical nature of the Protestant ethic as an ideal form (Bell 1976), our informants holding an ideology of frugality could be said to practice an ideology akin to the Protestant ethic as a counterpoint to their participation in a capitalist culture of acquisition. In contrast, holders of an ideology of entitlement could be said to have deemphasized the Protestant ethic (without rejecting it) and embraced the acquisitive spirit of modern consumerism.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The data presented here support a dynamic, practice-based model of the relationship among consumer lifestyles, credit card practice, and, by extension, marketplace institutions. Consumer credit card practices in part define the meaning of consumption lifestyles and facilitate their attainment through consumption. Conversely, some credit card practices act to impede consumers from attaining or maintaining desired lifestyles. The very act of acquiring the markers of a given consumption-define lifestyle can trigger rapid debt accumulation and a proportionate loss of mobility within the marketplace. Prior research has tended to frame these practices as pathological. However, such framing can mask important ideological and collective aspects of credit card practice. Credit card practices may be employed as a means of avoiding, coping with, or shielding the self-concept from the consequences of confinement within the debtors' prison. Even credit card practices that impede long-term market-

place mobility may nonetheless be employed in ways that suggest consumer agency, if not outright cunning in navigating the rules of the marketplace. Consumers employ credit cards to aid in their efforts to get the right house in the right neighborhood with the right accoutrements and as a means of transforming short-term bursts of mere buying power into cultural capital.

This research places such consumer practice at the center of consumption phenomena and their meaning (c.f., Holt 1995, 1997; Kozinets 2001, 2002). Our research is consonant with Holt's (1997) contention that the credit-driven ready availability of consumption objects makes practice the most important determinant of lifestyle. However, our work departs from Holt's both in focus and contribution by showing how acquisition practices in addition to utilization practices structure lifestyles and facilitate movement among them. These acquisition practices have previously been discussed largely in terms of access and equity (e.g., the poor pay more) or in terms of pathology (e.g., impulsivity or compulsivity). We propose a differentiated theory of lifestyle facilitation through credit card practice. That is, the skills and tastes expressed by credit card practice help distinguish between lifestyles of those with higher cultural capital relative to those with lower cultural capital within the set of achieving lifestyle spaces. Further, we show that credit card practices directly draw on economic capital, unlike the practices associated with product utilization identified by Holt. Thus, practices such as "showing off" (LCC) or "keeping up with the Joneses" (HCC) can potentially move a person out of the achieving lifestyle space into a metaphorical debtor's prison. Finally, we specify a mechanism, credit card control practices, through which consumers move into and out of achieving and coping lifestyle spaces.

Although our primary goal was the development of an emic practice-based model of consumers' credit card behaviors and their lifestyle implications, through a systematic unpacking of informants' accounts, we also discovered evidence of underlying ideologies that shape their credit practices. In particular, our informants' tendencies toward controlled or uncontrolled use of credit cards were shaped by their internalization (to varying degrees) of ideologies of frugality and entitlement. Those practices most closely associated with movement along a trajectory of constraint with respect to lifestyle were found in informants' accounts where feelings of entitlement were most prominent. In contrast, an ideology of frugality was evident among those exhibiting closer control over credit card practice and lower debt levels.

In order to understand more fully the role of credit cards (and credit in general) in the regulation of lifestyle, it is necessary to identify the factors that lead to the development and maintenance of ideologies that undergird control. While Weber (1958) theorized that the Protestant ethic, most clearly expressed through Calvinism, explains in part the success of capitalism in northern European societies, the transformation of this ideal into modern consumerism is one of the most important phenomena in Western history (Tucker 1991). Campbell's (1987) theory of "modern autonomous

imaginative hedonism” goes beyond Weber to suggest that, within the broader Protestant ethic, Puritanism and Romanticism actually represent sibling ideologies rather than polarities. Control is valued by both rational utilitarian consumers and romantic consumers, but for different reasons. Control allows the modern-day Puritan to resist desire while facilitating the daydreaming and imagining that fuel desire among contemporary Romantics. Thus, Campbell’s theory suggests that credit card practices may reflect an essential cultural tension between rationality and desire. As Campbell (1987, 227) elegantly concludes, “In struggling to cope with the necessity of making trade-offs between need and pleasure . . . modern individuals inhabit not just an ‘iron cage’ of economic necessity, but a castle of romantic dreams, striving through their conduct to turn one into the other.”

In essence, entitlement and frugality are “flip sides” of the same Weberian coin. Our informants’ references to credit cards as both a necessary evil and a means to feel great about the acquisition of desired lifestyle markers clearly reflect this ideological paradox. We have also explained this paradox in terms of differing stores of cultural and economic capital and to exposure to life events that carry implications for changes in stores of capital (e.g., loss of a job or spouse). Holt (2002, 88) has proclaimed, “Today, the market is organized to produce the experiential and symbolic freedom that Murray and Ozanne (1991) and Firat and Venkatesh (1995) envision as only possible through emancipation from capitalism.” As such, credit cards are an important facilitator of consumer emancipation through lifestyle within the current market structure. They offer clear functional, palliative, sybaritic, and hedonistic benefits. Yet these benefits must be weighed against a powerful downside to credit card practices, including degraded self-image, loss of marketplace mobility, accumulation of onerous debt, and even addiction. It is this paradox of empowerment and impediment, identified by Mick and Fournier (1998) as a defining characteristic of postmodern consumer life, which makes the study of credit card practice so fascinating and important to a fuller understanding of consumer lifestyle.

[Dawn Iacobucci served as editor and Eric Arnould served as associate editor for this article.]

REFERENCES

- Appelbaum, Kalman (1998), “The Sweetness of Salvation,” *Current Anthropology*, 39 (3), 323–49.
- Associated Press (2001), “Debt Pinches Consumers,” http://cnnfn.cnn.com/2...6/20/news/wires/consumers_debt_wg.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1983), *Simulations*, New York: Semiotext(e).
- Bell, Daniel (1976), *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, New York: Basic Books.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burroughs, James E. and Aric Rindfleisc (2002), “Materialism and Well-Being: A Conflictin Values Perspective,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (December), 348–70.
- Campbell, Colin (1987), *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, London: Basil Blackwell.
- Cialdini, Robert B., Raymond R. Reno, and Carl A. Kallgren (1990), “A Focus Theory of Normative Conduct: Recycling the Concept of Norms to Reduce Littering in Public Places,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58 (6), 1015–26.
- De Certeau, Michel (1984), *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- De Graaf, John, David Wann, and Thomas H. Naylor (2001), *Affluenza The All-Consuming Epidemic*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Dilley, Roy (1992), “A General Introduction to Market Ideology, Imagery, and Discourse,” in *Contesting Markets: Analyses of Ideology, Discourse, and Practice*, ed. Roy Dilley, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1–34.
- Faber, Ronald J. and Thomas C. O’Guinn (1988), “Compulsive Consumption and Credit Abuse,” *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 11 (1), 97–109.
- Federal Reserve Bank (2003), Federal Reserve Statistical Release, G19: Consumer Credit, October 7, <http://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g19>.
- Firat, A. Fuat and Alladi Venkatesh (1995), “Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (December), 239–67.
- Foucault, Michel (1977), *Discipline and Punish*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York: Pantheon.
- Garcia, Gillian (1980), “Credit Cards: An Interdisciplinary Survey,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 6 (March), 327–37.
- Gelpi, Rosa-Maria and Francois Julien-Labruyere (2000), *The History of Consumer Credit: Doctrines and Practices*, New York: St. Martin’s.
- Hill, Ronald Paul (1994), “Bill Collectors and Consumers: A Troublesome Exchange Relationship,” *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, 13 (Spring), 20–35.
- Hirschman, Elizabeth C. (1979), “Differences in Consumer Purchase Behavior by Credit Card Payment System,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 6 (June), 58–66.
- (1992), “The Consciousness of Addiction: Toward a General Theory of Compulsive Consumption,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19 (September), 155–79.
- Hoch, Stephen J. and George F. Loewenstein (1991), “Time-Inconsistent Preferences and Consumer Self-Control,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (March), 492–507.
- Holt, Douglas B. (1995), “How Consumers Consume: A Typology of Consumption Practices,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (June), 1–16.
- (1997), “Poststructuralist Lifestyle Analysis: Conceptualizing the Social Patterning of Consumption in Postmodernity,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 23 (December), 326–50.
- (1998), “Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25 (June), 1–25.
- (2002), “Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (June), 70–90.
- Jones, Edward and Harold B. Gerard (1967), *Foundations of Social Psychology*, New York: Wiley.
- Kinsey, Jean (1981), “Determinants of Credit Card Accounts: An Application of Tobit Analysis,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 8 (September), 172–82.
- Kozinets, Robert (2001), “Utopian Enterprise: Articulating the Meanings of *Star Trek*’s Culture of Consumption,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28 (June), 67–88.
- (2002), “Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipa-

- tory Illuminations from Burning Man,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (June), 20–38.
- Lee, Renee Gravois and Julie L. Ozanne (1999) “Improving Service Encounters through Resource Sensitivity: The Case of Health Care Delivery in an Appalachian Community,” *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, 18 (Fall), 230–50.
- Manning, Robert D. (2000), *Credit Card Nation: The Consequences of America’s Addiction to Credit*, New York: Basic Books.
- Medoff, James L., and Andrew Harliss (1996), *The Indebted Society: Anatomy of an Ongoing Disaster*, Boston: Little, Brown.
- Mick, David Glen and Michelle DeMoss (1990), “Self-Gifts: Phenomenological Insights from Four Contexts,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (December), 322–32.
- Mick, David Glen and Susan Fournier (1998), “Paradoxes of Technology: Consumer Cognizance, Emotions, and Coping Strategies,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25 (September), 123–43.
- Murray, Jeff B. and Julie L. Ozanne (1991), “The Critical Imagination: Emancipatory Interests in Consumer Research,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18 (September), 129–44.
- O’Guinn, Thomas C. and Ronald J. Faber (1989), “Compulsive Buying: A Phenomenological Exploration,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16 (September), 147–57.
- Parker, Gillian (1990), *Getting and Spending: Credit and Debt in Britain*, Aldershot: Avebury.
- Richins, Marsha (1991), “Valuing Things: The Public and Private Meanings of Possessions,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21 (December), 504–21.
- Rook, Dennis W. (1987), “The Buying Impulse,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14 (September), 189–99.
- Rook, Dennis W. and Stephen J. Hoch (1985), “Consuming Impulses,” in *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 12, ed. Elizabeth C. Hirschman and Morris B. Holbrook, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 23–37.
- Sahlins, Marshall (1996), “The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology,” *Current Anthropology*, 37 (3), 395–428.
- Tucker, David M. (1991), *The Decline of Thrift in America: Our Cultural Shift from Saving to Spending*, New York: Praeger.
- Weber, Max (1958), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York: Scribner.