Aspirations and Applications:
Analyzing Consumer Card Application Web Sites.

BY
EMILIE LUCCHESI
B.J., University of Missouri, 1999
M.A., DePaul University, 2009

DISSERTATION
Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communication
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2015

Chicago, Illinois

Defense committee:
Sharon Meraz, Chair and Advisor
Steve Jones
Zizi Papacharissi
Andrew Rojecki
Mary Beth Watson-Manheim, Business
This dissertation is dedicated to my grandfather, Dr. Leon J. Le Beau, who taught microbiology and pathology here at the University of Illinois-Chicago. I spent many weekends with him as a child, and I sometimes tagged along when he popped into his laboratory. He modeled for me the potential of a doctorate. Part of his legacy is that I am the fourth Le Beau to receive a doctorate from the University of Illinois-Chicago.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my husband, Michael Lucchesi. He shows me unconditional love and support. He is also my inspiration. While I worked toward my doctorate, Michael attended the part-time MBA program at University of Chicago. At times, he worked a 70 hour week and then added many more hours of study time. He never fatigued or complained. Our graduation ceremonies are scheduled for the exact same time. We won’t see each other complete our last steps, but neither of us would have crossed our respective stages without each other.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Sharon Meraz, my chair and advisor, for guiding me through the process. I learned a great deal from you and your help is appreciated. I also thank my committee members – Dr. Steve Jones, for supporting my historical interests; Dr. Andrew Rojecki, for introducing me to framing; Dr. Mary Beth Watson-Manheim, for sharpening my thinking; and Dr. Zizi Papacharissi who encouraged my interest in financial communication.

Special thanks to Mamie Grey for her kindness and support, and to Christina Zimmerman for all the support she has shown the graduate students.

I have deep gratitude for the circle of friends I’ve made in the doctoral program. When I started this program, I had no idea that I was about to be gifted with such incredible friends. The Red Roomers, Ladies of the Cohort, and the Monkey Roomers brightened my days. I thank you all for your support, especially Catherine, Federica, Antara, Will, Adriane, Renee, Andrea, Miao, Sabrina, Ginnifer, and Elycia. You are all wonderful people.

I also thank my friends outside the program, especially Shelby. In 2008, I sat next to you in that crowded class in our master’s program. What started as saving each other a seat turned into a best friendship. I look forward to those lunches we have planned.

I also thank my family. Lisa was with me from the get-go. Uncle Glen and I spent that memorable summer in GRE class together. Uncle Joey’s support never wavered. Aunt Michelle was a constant source of guidance. My parents-in-law, Rosa and Michael, were always on my side. And my parents, Francine and Joel, were a source of love and encouragement. Mom and Dad -- I believe this doctorate is in some way related to how you always let me order from the Scholastic Book Club. It was one of the many ways you nurtured me into a woman who could earn a doctorate.

In memory, I think of my grandparents-in-law, Evelyn and Elia. (Yes, Gunnie, you do have to call me Dr. Lucchesi now.) In memory, I thank my grandfather, Dr. Leon Le Beau, whom I think of every day.

My little lambs – Mia and Daisy—listened to a lot of presentations. My husband, Michael, made this all possible. I am grateful for your unconditional support and love. You are the best person I know.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction .........................................................</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Introducing Consumer Cards .......................................</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Prepaid cards .........................................................</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Secured cards ..........................................................</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Credit cards ...........................................................</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Applying for Consumer Cards .......................................</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Framing .................................................................</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Description of Study ................................................</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Study rational and justification ...................................</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Organization of study ................................................</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Historical Background ...............................................</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Defining Aspiration ..................................................</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Credit Before the Industrial Revolution .........................</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. The Credit Revolution ................................................</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. The Rise of Bank Issued Credit .....................................</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Credit Scoring Today ..................................................</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Alternatives to Credit ................................................</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Credit in the Post-Recession Economy ............................</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Obtaining Consumer Cards ..........................................</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Conceptual Framework And Related Literature ...................</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Framing .................................................................</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Advertising Frames ...................................................</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Interpretive Packages .................................................</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Visual Frames ..........................................................</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Advertising and Emotions ..............................................</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Selling Aspiration .....................................................</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Framing Social Class ..................................................</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Card Advertisements ..................................................</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Research Questions and Method ......................................</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Research Questions ...................................................</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Method .................................................................</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Sample .................................................................</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B. Secured Cards .......................................................... 168
  1. Varying motivations .............................................. 169
  2. Credit as good consumer citizenship ....................... 171
  3. Subordination through paternalism ......................... 173
C. Traditional Cards ..................................................... 176
  1. Subcategories of success ....................................... 177
  2. Constructing boundaries ...................................... 180
  3. Consumption through work ................................... 184
D. Conclusion .................................................................. 190

VIII. Discussion ................................................................ 192
A. Summary of Results .................................................... 194
  1. Visualizing disparities ........................................... 195
  2. Promoting disparate aspirations ............................... 201
  3. Structuring status .................................................. 205
  4. Further conclusions ............................................... 212
B. Limitations ............................................................... 214
C. Future research .......................................................... 216

CITED LITERATURE ...................................................... 218
VITA ............................................................................. 236
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. FINAL SAMPLE</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. PREPAID CARD WORD FREQUENCY</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. PREPAID CARD PAGE COUNTS</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. SECURED CARD WORD FREQUENCY</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. SECURED CARD PAGE COUNTS</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. TRADITIONAL CARD WORD FREQUENCY</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. TRADITIONAL CARD PAGE COUNTS</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SUMMARY

The aim of this dissertation is to examine a previously unstudied text – consumer card application web sites, which are aimed at disparate, competing consumer groups. Consumer card application web sites promote prepaid, secured, or traditional cards. These web sites serve as a starting point for the consumer’s online brand experience and initiate what the companies intend will be an active engagement between the consumer and the brand (Bart, Shankar, Sultan, & Urban, 2005). These web sites are framed to broadly communicate what the advertisers perceive are shared interests among a diverse target market. Within the promotional text, these web sites also address disparate audiences with distinct interests. Examining these web sites offers the opportunity to identify the aspirations the advertisers perceive are relevant to a fractured consumer market. Using aspiration as a lens, this study also seeks to understand how the American dream is encapsulated and enabled through these lender frames.

This study uses Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach to frame analysis to identify the broad frames used within and across the three card categories in order to understand how the advertisers seek to persuade a disparate target market. The frame analysis is followed by a discourse analysis, which seeks to drill deeper into the promotional material. Both the frame and discourse analyses identify fractured target markets whose interests were amalgamated based on their assumed participation in the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems. The results of this dissertation include a confirmation of the greatening socioeconomic divide in which consumer choice and limitations are increasingly defined by the larger financial infrastructures. This dissertation contributes both theoretically and practically to the study of advertising frames as well the examination of the promotional materials that proceed online applications for financial products.
I. INTRODUCTION

Adams (1931) observed how the unrestricted structure of American society supported an individual’s pursuit of personal achievement. Unlike the rigid, European social stratification where a person was destined to remain in the same social class in which they were born, an American could expect a better and richer life based on his or her ability to achieve. Adams (1931) coined this freedom the “American dream” and stressed that it was not based on materialism. Rather, the American dream was the freedom to aspire and achieve a particular lifestyle, unrestricted by societal boundaries:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (p.214-215).

Advertisers took a different view of the American dream. By the end of the twentieth century, the American dream was not the privilege to pursue personal advancement free from the limits of a rigid class structure. Instead, the American dream was a commitment to materialism (Nickerson, Schwartz, Diener, & Kahneman, 2003) in which homes, cars, vacations, and household goods signified success (Belk, 1985; Kasser, 2002). The material American dream presented by advertisers overwhelmingly considered a middle class lifestyle that came with the security of good employment, a stable community, and access to the credit that an individual might need in order to advance (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994). However, this dream was directed toward consumers of all socioeconomic levels and reinforced a narrow definition in which material aspirations were indicative of financial achievement. Messner and Rosenfield (1994) described how advertisers attached the term “American dream” to promotions: “The term soon
became a sales slogan for the material comforts and individual opportunities of a middle-class lifestyle: a car, a house, education for the children, a secure retirement” (pg. 6). Thus, the American dream was a dream of consumption (Artz & Ortega Murphy, 2000) in which consumers dreamt of obtaining and displaying commodities in order to signify success (De Botton, 2005).

By the start of the twenty-first century, the credit economy developed into a ubiquitous structure that enabled many consumers to secure the credit needed to perform achievement of the American Dream. The credit-debt economy provided many— but not all – consumers with an opportunity to resolve envy (Matt, 2003), quietly challenge their class status (Stearns, 2001), signal wealth (Bagwell & Burnheim, 1996) and satisfy a need for prestige (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005). However, the American dream of consumption was not uniform across the consumer spectrum because many consumers were unable to secure credit or participate in the mainstream banking system. Poor or no credit was a barrier to entering the credit/debt economy, and it was estimated that 64 million Americans had no or limited credit (Experian, 2012). The credit scoring system, which could be a pathway to personal improvement, was also a barrier to entering institutional banking. Almost one-third of Americans households did not have consistent access to credit or the mainstream banking system. In 2011, the FDIC estimated that 17 million Americans, or 8.2% of American households, were unbanked (FDIC, 2012). The unbanked had no banking access, and 29% operated primarily in cash. Sixty-five percent of the unbanked relied on alternative financial services (AFS) such as prepaid cards, pawnshops, check cashing operations, rent-to-own stores, refund anticipation operations, or loan sharks in order to receive short term credit. In 2011, the FDIC also estimated that 51 million adult Americans, or 20.1% of American households were underbanked (FDIC, 2012). In addition to having minimal access to
the banking system, the underbanked also tended to weave in and out of the system. In the survey, almost half of underbanked respondents without a checking or savings account reported having one earlier in the year and planned to rejoin a bank in the future.

The fractured American dream became more evident following the 2008 economic collapse. Many Americans experienced hardships during the recession, and 55% of workers reported experiencing an employment-related problem such as unemployment, reduced wages, or reduced hours (Pew, 2010). The impact of these difficult years were still prominent years later – even for those able to secure credit and access to the mainstream banking system. In 2014, more than one-third of Americans with a credit profile, roughly 77 million adults, had an account in collection. These delinquent accounts were for nonmortgage bills such as credit card, medical, or household utility debt, and the average owed was more than $5,000 (Ratcliffe, McKernan, Theodos & Kalish, 2014).

The post-recession years revealed distinct, competing publics who were affected differently by the recession. Following the 2008 economic collapse, much attention was paid to the “top 1%” of wealthiest American households who owned 50% of the nation’s wealth (Wolff, 2012). Protestors in the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement argued that the “top 1%” of wealthy households had become too rich and did so at the expense of working Americans. Through this protest, the OWS movement provided Americans with a new identity, that of the “99%” (Welty, Bolton, Nayak, Malone, 2013). The 99%, however, was a diverse group in which some consumers had continued access during and after the recession to the American dream of consumption, while others were challenged or permanently damaged by the economic downturn.

The current credit system reflects the fractured American dream of consumption, and it supports a variety of different aspirations for consumers of varying socioeconomic levels. In
studying the online promotions that advertise different card types directed at distinct consumer groups, this study examines the frames presented by money lenders as to who are these varying consumer groups. In studying the promotional material on consumer card application web sites, this dissertation seeks to understand how socioeconomic groups are framed visually and textually in consumer card advertisements. Using aspiration as a lens, this study also seeks to understand how the American dream is encapsulated and enabled through these lender frames.

A. **Introducing Consumer Cards**

The current credit system reflects the fractured American Dream of consumption and how not all Americans have equal access to mainstream banking or credit instruments. This is most evident in the distinct uses and target audiences for prepaid, secured, and credit cards. This section will provide a general explanation of these different consumer card types, and in doing so, demonstrate the diverse potential audiences for the promotional material on consumer card application web sites. In addition to the variety of card types, there are also varying reasons why and how a consumer uses such a card.

1. **Credit cards**

Credit cards can be used to support the American dream of consumption, and many consumers use credit cards to make purchases for which they do not have funds readily available for repayment. Many credit card holders do use these payment instruments as a type of short or long-term loan, and about 40% do not pay off purchases each month (Bricker, Kennickell, Moore, & Sabelhaus, 2012). Whereas debit card holders are most likely to use debit cards more frequently and for smaller purchases, credit cards are typically used for larger purchases. The average debit card transaction is $39, and the average credit card transaction is
Credit card users report a wide variety of uses, which indicates a diverse consumer experience. Some consumers use credit cards to extend their monthly household budget. Sixty-four percent of card users, for example, use their cards to purchase car gas. Forty-one percent of card users charge medical expenses; 47% charge car maintenance; 31% charge monthly bills; and 19% charge insurance. Consumers also use credit cards to purchase items that support the American dream of consumption. Sixty-seven percent charge clothing; 64% charge restaurant meals; 62% charge travel; and 47% charge entertainment expenses (Choi-Allum, 2014).

However, this American Dream of consumption is not available – or not enticing – to all consumers. Twenty-six percent of Americans do not have a credit card (Choi-Allum, 2014). For consumers who cannot or choose not to secure credit, Alternative Financial Services (AFS) such as prepaid or secured cards resemble traditional credit cards.

2. **Prepaid cards**

The Federal Reserve Board (FRB) defines a general-use prepaid card as a card that is provided to a customer without underlying funds. The consumer is authorized to upload their own funds and use in debit transactions (2013). Consumers can use prepaid cards to retrieve money from ATMs, shop online or in stores. Prepaid cards can also be used to make online bill payments or receive direct deposits from employers or government agencies. Prepaid cards were first introduced in mass in 2003, but were not used extensively until after the 2008 economic crisis. The recession increased the number of Americans either excluded from credit or looking for checking account alternatives, and prepaid card transactions doubled between 2009 and 2012 (Wilhusen, 2012).
In 2012, consumers loaded $65 billion onto prepaid cards, and 12 million adults used prepaid cards at least once a month (Pew Research, 2014). Additionally, prepaid cards are used by corporations to deposit employee wages in lieu of a paper check. Prepaid cards are also used by the U.S. government to issue benefits such as social security or food assistance. In 2012, the U.S. government distributed $1 trillion in benefits and assistance, 13% of which was issued directly to a prepaid card. The prepaid card system is reported as more cost effective than paper checks (Federal Reserve, 2013). Corporations and government agencies cite the cost-savings as a drive for distributing the cards. For consumers, the drive behind prepaid card use varies, and not all prepaid card users are rejected from the mainstream banking system. Although 41% of the cardholders used prepaid cards as an alternative to checking accounts, 59% of cardholders had active checking accounts. In a survey of prepaid card usage, participants reported using prepaid cards to avoid checking account fees and to better manage their monthly budget (Pew, 2014).

3. **Secured Cards**

A secured card requires the consumer to provide a cash deposit. The deposit determines the credit limit, and the card is intended to help improve the credit rating of consumers with limited or poor credit (Federal Reserve Board, 2013). Card companies began offering credit cards in the late 1980s to consumers who could not qualify for traditional credit cards. The cards were marketed as instruments for building credit, and surged in usage following the early 1990s recession (Ravo, 1994). This card type did not experience the same boom following the 2008 economic collapse, and card companies instead focused on prepaid cards, which were more widely used and profitable (McFadden, 2009). Although fewer in circulation than the previous recession, secured cards still offer consumers the ability to build credit by making on-time payments and demonstrating responsible borrowing habits. Similar to
prepaid and credit cards, secured cards have the look of a traditional credit card. These cards have a magnetic strip, and are embossed with the sixteen digit number and the consumer’s name. The cardholder may use the card to shop online or in a retail store and it is not visibly apparent to others that the card is funded by a security deposit. The application process between the three card types is also similar, and consumers primarily apply online at consumer card application web sites. The next section introduces what are these web sites and why they are worthy of study.

4. Applying for consumer cards

Whether a consumer is applying for a prepaid, secured, or credit card, consumer card applicant web sites are part of an evolving system of self-service banking, which according to King (2013), began in the 1980s with automated telephone banking, advanced to ATMs in the 1990s, and online applications in the 2000s. For banks, self-service options limit costs, reduce human error, and increase compliance with Federal regulations. For consumers, self-service options allow comparison shopping, convenience, and immediacy. Online credit applications, for example, deliver "immediate fulfillment of an application" and avoid a waiting period of up to 72 hours while an "antiquated manual or human 'processes' in the back office" reviews the applicant's credit worthiness (King, 2013, p. 109). Self-service options also provide a sense of privacy for consumers. Consumers rejected from credit can receive the decision quietly and choose an alternative such as prepaid or secured option that has the appearance of a traditional card. Similarly, credit card users can seek new lines of credit and manage debt quietly. Thus, the privacy afforded by online applications presents the consumer with the possibility of maintaining appearances and signaling socioeconomic standing.
Consumer card application web sites are worthy of study because they are the starting point for the online brand experience, and they initiate what is intended by the company to be an active engagement between the consumer and the brand (Bart, Shankar, Sultan, & Urban, 2005). Card companies currently encourage card holders to manage the account remotely and to have a digital consumer experience that begins with the online application. Prior to filling out the online application, consumers view the card company's promotional materials which explain the process of acquiring the card as well as the benefits of membership. In explaining the benefits of membership, these sites describe the target consumer, the material life they live, and how the card fits into their experience. Brand communication – such as the promotional material on consumer card application web sites – is designed to reframe the consumer experience (Gobé, 2007). By reframing, the brand communication takes what the consumer knows and expects, and reframes the message to appeal to aspirations. In doing so, the promotional materials reframe who is the target cardholder as a consumer and how they fit into the larger socioeconomic spectrum. Examining this brand communication offers an opportunity to explore how card companies in the post-recession economy frame different consumers, their experiences, and suggested aspiration.

A consumer card application web site is a counterpart to the offline paper application that is completed via mail or at a financial institution. These card application web sites represent an identifiable product – a particular prepaid, secured, or credit card – and promotes the card so that consumers understand it as valuable and distinct from similar, competing products. Morgan-Thomas and Veloutous (2013) describe this online brand experience as a type of “integrated bundle of information and experiences” that evoke the product’s personality and performance (pg. 22). These online texts are also designed to information rich and distinctive in a crowded
market environment (Simmons, 2008) so that consumers without the physical cues found in an offline environment do not have heightened uncertainty (Kollman & Suckown, 2008).

Although scholars do examine online promotions that augment offline counterparts, the focus tends to be directed at the online brand experience (OBE). Inquiry into the OBE tends to measure how consumers respond to the product exposure and is meant to help a marketer better improve the ability to connect with a consumer and sell successfully (Morgan-Thomas & Velouts, 2013). This study seeks to understand how the consumer card application web sites frame the consumer experience as it relates to aspiration, and how this framing varies by card type. In doing so, this study seeks to examine what the advertisers of these web sites suggest is the American dream in the post-recession economy, and how this dream of consumption is encapsulated and enabled through these lender frames. The next section addresses framing, which serves as the theoretical basis of this inquiry.

B. Framing

This study uses framing theory to examine the promotions on consumer card application web sites to determine how consumer aspirations are framed and how these frames vary by card type and socioeconomic status. Framing is the process of highlighting specific aspects of an issue or an event in order to promote a particular interpretation (Entman, 1993). Framing serves a utilitarian purpose for mass communication, and frames are actively set in the mass media as a type of reference point for discussing and suggesting ways to interpret public events (Tuchman, 1978). Frames are essential tools for efficiently presenting complicated issues to lay audiences in an accessible, pre-packaged, and easily understood manner (Scheufele, 1999). Communication scholars do not agree on one definition of framing, but the key premise of
framing literature is that frames more or less predictably guide audience members' understanding of an event or issue and provide researchers with predictable conclusions (Gross, 1998).

Advertising scholars use framing research because of framing's ability to provide insight into the role of advertisements in consumer life. It is now understood that consumers process advertisements for meaning and information (McCracken, 1987), and such meaning emerges in relationship to the frames (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). In framing promotional content, advertisers use readily recognizable symbols and phrases in order to be understood by as wide of an audience as possible. Advertisers also embed layers of deeper meaning to target consumer longing and aspiration. As a result of these complexities, this dissertation uses Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach to frame analysis – interpretive packages. The underlying premise of interpretive packages is that cultural issues are “contested in a symbolic arena” through culturally available elements and symbols that are readily recognized by the public (1987; p. 376). Such elements and symbols are not communicated individually. Rather, such elements and symbols are clustered together to communicate a specific view. At the core of the viewpoint is the essence of the issue, or the frame. The frame is the viewpoint as to how the issue or event should be interpreted.

This study uses Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) model in an environment – consumer card application web sites – that could benefit from such an application. Advertising scholars primarily examine the online brand experience to better understand how other marketers can better sell to consumers. This study contributes to the literature through an effort to understand how aspirations are framed on consumer card application web sites through the utilization of the Gamson and Modigliani (1989) model. More specifically, this dissertation seeks to apply Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) model to more fully understand how the aspirations emanating
from a series of different cards reveal a spectrum of socioeconomic positioning about credit-seeking publics. The next section further describes how this study will proceed and how it is organized.

C. **Description of Study**

In examining the aspirations on consumer card application web sites, this dissertation poses three questions. First, what frames emerge in the visuals on consumer card application web sites? This question is grounded in the knowledge that interpretive packages use devices such as metaphors, catchphrases, exemplars, and depictions to communicate a larger interpretation of an issue or event. At the core of these packages are frames, which is how the event or issue should be interpreted (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Frames are communicated through select or deliberate language as well as images. In advertisements, visual frames reinforce the frames presented in the text and contribute to long-term recall (Schmitt and Simmson, 1997). These images may leave the first impression (Rodgers & Thoreson, 2000), and have the power to evoke emotion (Messaris, 1997). Thus, this question seeks to understand how the consumer card application web sites are framed visually, and how these frames might vary by card type and thereby offer insight into varying aspirations.

Second, what are the prominent frames in the promotional text? This question is prompted by the knowledge that the structure of interpretive packages derive from culturally available ideas and understanding which are readily recognizable by an audience (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). There is opportunity within this question to identify which frames the advertisers use to communicate ideas about the American dream of consumption, and the post-recession consumer experience. This question seeks to understand how the promotional text
frames the experience of card ownership and usage, and how these frames might vary by card type and thereby offer insight into varying aspirations.

To answer these questions, a frame analysis of the visual and textual promotional material on 20 consumer card application web sites was conducted to identify the prominent frames regarding material and lifestyle aspiration. These 20 web sites included five prepaid, five secured, and 10 credit cards which were directed at consumers of a specific credit level such as limited or excellent. These web sites included 472 images, 188 pages, and 36,271 words of promotional text which were all scrutinized in the analysis. Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach to framing, interpretive packages, was used to identify the core viewpoints that communicated a larger meaning about card ownership. In identifying the core viewpoints, the visuals and the promotional text were scrutinized to identify the metaphors, catchphrases, depictions, exemplars, roots, consequences, and aspirations consistently observed in the web sites. The prominent frames used to communicate the core viewpoint were identified and compared by card type to further understand how advertisers encapsulated and enabled frames regarding the American dream of consumption, and how these framed aspirations varied by consumer group. The third research question further drills into the material with a discourse analysis to determine how the card web sites used elite markers to reinforce, reject, or reproduce the larger socioeconomic structure.

1. **Study rationale and justification**

   Consumer card application web sites serve as a point for initiating brand communication (Morgan-Thomas & Velouts, 2013), and are intended to facilitate an active exchange between the consumer and the brand (Bart et. al, 2005). These web sites are complex packages that visually and textually communicate information about the brand and construct the
intended experience (Morgan Thomas & Velouts, 2013). In doing so, these web sites are designed to be distinctive, information rich, and assuring to the online shopper (Simmons, 2008; Kollman & Suckown, 2008). Thus, these web sites are encoded with information as to how the advertisers perceive the credit seeking public, consumer aspirations, and the distinct motivations among varying socioeconomic groups. Decoding these messages holds the potential to offer insight into post-recession experiences for varying consumer groups. Further, in determining how advertisers seek to persuade these distinct and competing groups, there is potential to gain more knowledge about socioeconomic anxieties, aspirations, and challenges in the post-recession economy.

Consumer card application web sites hold great potential to offer insight into the post-recession economy, yet they have not been studied by communication scholars. To date, application web sites for prepaid, secured, and traditional cards have not been analyzed by communication scholars or social scientists. In analyzing these web sites, this study hopes to learn how these web sites are encoded, particularly with aspirational messages, and to establish how other application web sites for different financial products can be examined. Online applications now exist for a host of financial products (e.g. home, student, and auto loans), and there is ample opportunity for the discipline to determine how these persuasive promotions are structured, encoded, and indicative of our choices and limitations as consumers.

This dissertation also seeks to further understand the delineations in our choices and limitations as consumers, and how these boundaries are presented to varying consumer groups. Popular discourse regarding consumer limitation and choice is frequently limited to large, categorical descriptions. Discussion regarding the middle and working classes, as well as the top “1 percent” serve to identify how socioeconomic status structures consumer groups. However,
these broad categorizations compress the distinct motivations and aspirations of varying consumer groups into common, generic interests. This study holds the opportunity to examine varying consumer groups, consider their distinct experiences in an evolving, digital economy, and determine how advertisers either differentiate or amalgamate their distinct motivations and prescribed aspirations.

This study uses both a visual and textual frame analysis to identify how the card web sites promote the intended brand experience as well as the aspirations obtainable through card usage. The visual and textual frame analyses are followed by a discourse analysis, which examines the text more deeply in order to further understand the fractured consumer experience across and within the three card types. In doing so, this study applies frame analysis to a previously unstudied text, and examines both the textual and visual promotional strategies used by the advertisers to communicate the brand’s core view point. According to Coleman (2010), visual frames are consistently understudied, yet the scholarship has established the importance of visuals in contributing to long-term recall, evoking emotion, and creating a first impression (Schmitt and Simmson, 1997; Messaris, 1997; Rodgers & Thoreson, 2000). Other scholars such as Phillips (2004) urge framing researchers to examine visuals unrelated to the natural disasters or war related visuals that typically attract scholars’ interest. This study intends to reinforce the value of applying framing to advertisements, specifically an unstudied online space – consumer card application web sites.

2. Organization of study

This study begins in chapter two with a historical review of credit history as it pertains to aspiration. Chapter two also provides further background on the rise of prepaid and secured cards and delivers insight as to who is the intended audience for these cards. Chapter
three reviews the literature on framing, the theoretical background for this study. Chapter four is the method chapter which details the sample, data collection, unit of analysis, and how the analysis was conducted using Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach to framing. Chapter five is the results for the first research question, how aspirations are visually framed, and chapter six is the results for the second research question, which aspirations emerge in the promotional text. The seventh chapter provides results for the discourse analysis, and the eighth chapter is a discussion of these findings which also includes the limitations of this study and suggestions for further research.
II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There are many ways in which to interpret credit history, and the history of credit in the U.S. has been approached from various viewpoints including economic (Caskey, 1994; Clarke, 2007; Evans & Schmalmensee, 2005; Homer & Sylla, 2001), political (Cohen, 2004; Fraser, 2005; Hyman 2012a), and social (Calder, 1999; Carruthers & Ariovich, 2010; Hyman, 2011; 2012b; Marron, 2009). The social viewpoint often considers historical access to credit based on a specific status such as gender (Lemire, 2001), socioeconomic (Nocera, 1994; Karger, 2005) or race and ethnicity (Heinz, 2001; Shapiro, 2012). Other sociological viewpoints are narrowed to consider what credit has historically meant for consumption practices (Klein, 1999; Schor, 1999; Logemann, 2008), and the consequences for these changing consumption practices (Manning, 2000; Williams, 2005; McCoy, P.A. & Reunart, 2008).

Aspiration was the viewpoint pursued in this dissertation in order to consider the history of credit through the narrow lens of desire. There were three primary reasons for privileging aspiration as the approach to credit history. First, this approach was mindful of the social history of consumption and how values regarding materialism changed as access to credit increased. Second, this approach maintained the understanding that the current credit system reflected a fractured American dream of consumption, and varying aspirations emerged for consumers of varying socioeconomic levels. And third, there was a gap in the literature regarding credit history from the viewpoint of aspiration, and this chapter sought to add a new perspective.

In order to explore credit history and further understand how credit contributes to consumer aspirations, it is first helpful to define aspiration. This chapter begins by defining aspiration and what scholars understand about the motivating force of material aspirations.
Then, a historical background of credit in the U.S. is reviewed in order to establish the different access varying consumer groups historically had and continue to have toward credit products. This historical review is followed by an explanation of the development of the current credit system and how it dictates consumer access. Lastly, the chapter provides an analysis of the economic recession post 9/11, and explains how the collapse of the economy exasperated financial problems for competing consumer groups, changed access to existing credit markets, and furthered credit alternatives.

A. **Defining Aspiration**

Sherwood (1989) defined aspiration as a goal we hoped to achieve and worked hard to achieve. Aspirations were based on goals we believed we could achieve and were not mere daydreams that we wished we could pursue but did not feel were possible (Sherwood, 1989). Because we believed aspirations were obtainable, our aspirations organized or directed our behavior for extended periods of time (Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009). This meant that capitalistic cultures (such as the U.S.) collectively valued, even respected, the pursuit of financial aspirations (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). As a result, individuals' long-term behavior was shaped by a desire for money.

Pursuing financial success was categorized as an extrinsic aspiration, which was defined as an achievement that was observable and praisable by others (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Kasser, 2005). There were two components to the current definition of extrinsic aspiration – material goods aspirations and lifestyle aspiration. First, material goods aspirations were desires for big-ticket commodities such as a nice home, car, foreign travel, or vacation property (Plangol & Easterlin, 2008). Second, lifestyle aspirations were desires to achieve a particular status such as
a profession (e.g. lawyer or pilot), education (e.g. MBA from Harvard University), or personal prestige (e.g. country club member) (Barry, Chaney & Chaney, 2011). It was arguable that the two types of extrinsic aspirations were no longer separate and the current credit/debt economy allowed for a merger in which Americans perceived lifestyle achievement as the catalyst for material goods achievement. For example, it was expected that a successful attorney attended a prestigious university, owned a lavish home, and belonged to a country club. Achieving the lifestyle aspiration of becoming a successful attorney first required acceptance into a prestigious law school and employment with an important law firm. The material goods aspiration for a lavish home and country club membership were considered the result of the lifestyle achievement. The country club membership, expensive watch, and annual tropical vacation were all conspicuous goods purchased not just to satisfy a material need. Amaldoss and Jain (2003) suggested these purchases were designed to satisfy a social need that signified exclusivity, importance and prestige. Thus, the connection between lifestyle and material good aspiration was the social need to obtain a higher standing and signify an elevated position to others.

In contrast to extrinsic aspiration, an intrinsic aspiration was a personal goal an individual hoped to achieve which may not be recognized, noticed, or praised by others (Sherwood, 1999). Intrinsic aspirations motivated an individual to do something for the pleasure of performing the activity or the goal of improving at the skill (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, an individual could learn a new sport or musical instrument for the pure pleasure of playing or mastering their skills. Intrinsic motivation was a personal drive and what motivated one person might not have motivated another (Ryan & Deci, 2000). There were significant mental benefits to intrinsic aspirations. Niemic et al. (2009) found a positive correlation between intrinsic aspirational obtainment and psychological health, and pursuing and accomplishing a personal goal helped a
person feel good about him or herself. However, the same mental benefits did not apply to extrinsic aspirations, and Niemic et al. (2009) found that extrinsic aspirational obtainment led to indicators of ill-being, and pursuing and accomplishing an extrinsic goal, such as buying a pricey car, did not make a person feel good about him or herself.

Part of the reason achieving an extrinsic aspiration did not lead to mental well-being was due to skewed perceptions regarding financial wealth. Schor (1999) defined the aspiration gap as the difference between what one wants and what one actually possessed. When a person accomplished an extrinsic aspiration, such as buying a pricey car, he or she soon became aware of the higher priced cars that were out of reach. Simply put, it never felt like enough. This longing for more, this aspiration gap, did not narrow despite increasing financial success (Brown, Kasser, Ryan, Linley, & Orzech, 2009), and extrinsic motivations were a continuous cycle in which aspirations were desired, planned for, and achieved. Numerous studies also demonstrated that the stronger a person's financial aspirations, the lower his or her satisfaction in life (Chan & Joseph, 2003; Burroughs and Rindflieisch, 2002); although research also suggested these feelings of satisfaction were mitigated by increasing household income (Nickerson et al., 2003; Nickerson, Schwarz & Diener, 2007).

Frey and Stutzer (2002) observed how material goods could bring a consumer pleasure, but such delight was only temporary because our expectations adjusted with each new purchase, and our expectations increased. For example, Americans were once happy with black and white television sets that received two channels. In recent years, most Americans had not only color television, but hundreds of channels and streaming capability. Frey and Stutzer (2002) suggested we adjusted our expectations along with the technological advancements, and described these increasing expectations as "rising aspiration levels" that adjusted with each new purchase,
increase in income, or lifestyle accomplishment (p. 79). When we made a new purchase, we felt good until the thrill wore off and the new item became an expected part of daily life. A new car, for example, could only seem new and exciting for so long until the aspiration was raised and a newer model became the object of desire.

Rising aspiration levels affected both material goods and lifestyle aspirations. Frey and Stutzer (2002) suggested that humans were never satisfied and always wanted to achieve more. They gave the example of a Nobel Prize winner feeling initially elated but eventually thinking that Marie Curie won two Nobel Prizes: "Wants are insatiable. The more one gets, the more one wants" (p. 78). In this sense, aspirations were described as a type of continuous cycle in which extrinsic aspirations were established, achieved, and replaced by a new desire. What made aspiration unique was how the continuous cycle of what we desired to own or who we desired to become changed over time and was subject to social, political, and economic forces. Kiron (1997) identified advertising and consumer credit as two important factors shaping consumer aspirations. He noted that credit made buying easy and the financial consequences distant while advertising connected consumption with happiness:

The content of advertising also legitimizes consumerist tendencies by associating images of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness with consumption. It links success and well-being to consumer behavior, embodies aspirations and models materialistic ways of appearing and being in the world (p. 230).

Such aspirations evolved as tastes and values of consumer culture changed. Hussain (2011) observed three central features of our current consumer culture. First, people were deeply invested in achieving their desired material lifestyle. Material lifestyles were associated with particular social classes and many Americans were willing to work sixty to seventy hours a week to obtain the money needed to support a desired material lifestyle. Second, material lifestyle was
rooted in self-respect because the ability to achieve a desired and culturally valued material good contributed to a person's sense of self-worth. Failure to achieve a desired material lifestyle could negatively impact an individual's self-esteem. And third, material lifestyle provided public recognition from family, friends, community members or co-workers. However, not all Americans pursued a credit-fueled material lifestyle. The next section explained how credit access varied in the U.S. and was rooted in an exclusionary system, beginning prior to the Industrial Revolution.

B. Credit Before the Industrial Revolution

For centuries, credit in the U.S. connected individuals to their lifestyle aspirations, not material goods aspirations. This was because credit was historically scarce, reserved for business transactions, and granted only to select individuals for the purpose of achieving their lifestyle aspirations. Lenders favored corporations, and until the twentieth century, loans were only available as short-term options, which meant borrowers had as little 30 to 60 days to repay (Bodenhorn, 2003). In order to qualify for a loan, an individual or business needed to be successfully established and demonstrate that quick repayment was possible. Hyman (2012a) explained how small retailers and consumers were disconnected from the main flow of capital: "Big money invested in industries, not groceries"(p. 42).

Because credit was only granted to elites and successful businesses, credit was associated with productivity. McCloskey (1985) remarked that there was an assumption that credit decisions meant to increase productivity were assumed to be rational, completely separate from the impulsivity of daily consumers. She gave the example of an English farmer – a producer – who bought a reaping machine. The farmer could not predict future sales or unexpected expenses
but the purchase was meant to be productive so it appeared logical: "The decision maker here was not a consumer making many little decisions about toothpaste and tea; he was a producer making a few decisions about what big machine to buy, decisions on which his livelihood depended. Such a man would have every incentive to think clearly" (p. 143).

Problematically for most consumers, banks in the nineteenth century considered few credit desires logical or productive. Nocera (1994) explained how this meant that the vast majority of Americans could not receive credit to advance their productivity: "In the culture of banking, it was corporations, not consumers, that mattered" (p. 15). Credit in this sense was control. An individual with credit was an active member of the economy. An individual without credit worked for the active member of the economy. Such exclusions caused Veblen (1921) to criticize the system for favoring "financial managers" that forced their "producers" to work for such elites: "…business enterprise in great part, has passed into the hands of the corporate financier" (p. 38).

To achieve credit, to be that financial manager Veblen described, was a reflection on lifestyle achievement. Status was a main benefit of this lifestyle and credit was class based. The factory owner could secure credit, the factory worker could not. The landowner could secure credit, the farmhand could not. Thus, credit was the key to achieving lifestyle aspirations. At this point, there was little to no connection between lifestyle and material goods aspirations because such consumer desires did not exist prior to the Industrial Revolution as they did in recent years. Williams (1991) observed that people historically focused on survival and rarely imagined a richer, finer, more satisfying life for themselves. When they did indulge in these fantasies, they used religion and art as a guide, not advertising.
Prior to the Industrial Revolution, Americans also had a culture of self-sufficiency in which items such as furniture, durable goods, or food were homemade rather than purchased (Carruthers & Ariovich, 2010). This changed in the late 1800s as the Industrial Revolution and development of the department store bought new, easily accessible consumer goods to the masses. Williams (1991) described how the development of consumer goods presented through entertaining displays sparked consumer fantasy and aspiration for material goods: "Consumer goods, rather than other facets of culture, became the focal points of desire. The seemingly contrary activities of hard-headed accounting and dreamy-eyed fantasizing merged as business appealed to consumers by inviting them into a fabulous world of pleasure, comfort, and amusement" (p. 66). The Industrial Revolution brought consumers mass produced goods and introduced a desire for consumption. The next section explains how consumer credit made these material goods accessible.

C. **The Credit Revolution**

Consumers who desired material goods had few credit options before the 1920s. Prior to 1917, it was illegal for lenders to charge an interest rate that was profitable (Hyman, 2011). A main reason lenders overwhelmingly favored corporations and elite borrowers was because the risk of default was assumed to be lower. Increases to interest rate limits meant lenders suddenly saw consumer lending as a money making opportunity (Hyman, 2012b). However, these lenders were interested in offering loans for specific consumer goods such as automobiles or household appliances – not open forms of credit that empowered an individual to decide how much to borrow and for what reason. This was notable because regular Americans were still excluded from corporate loans that might deliver financial independence or increased security. Credit
opened up, but only for the individual to become a consumer. It was arguable this marked a clear change in the relationship between aspiration and credit. Credit previously connected an individual to a productive lifestyle aspiration such as owning a farm or a business. The 1920s credit revolution began connecting individuals to material goods aspirations such as a car or the new automatic Frigidaire.

A consumer culture emerged in the 1920s along with an unprecedented access to material goods. Jhally (1990) described consumer culture as the relationship that developed between people and things when “consumption is the mode of living in modern culture” (p. 196). In this new consumer society, Jhally (1990) found that consumption filled the cultural void left by the transition from a traditional to an industrial society. Consumption became the focal point of discourse, it divided the social classes, and it served as a form of social identification.

Consumption as social identity came at a time when American culture was shifting both economically and culturally. The new access to credit meant the middle and lower classes accessed goods previously available only to the upper classes, and emulated the upper classes through such consumption. This disruption to the socioeconomic order also came at a time when historically oppressed groups – women, Black Americans, and immigrants – began migrating in mass and were no longer contained to specific regions or limited to certain jobs. Starting in 1910, more than one million Black Americans migrated from the American south to Northern cities (Frey, 2004). Single women increasingly migrated from rural to urban areas in order to find employment (Blackwelder, 1997). And between 1915-1920, six million immigrants arrived in the U.S. (Blackwelder, 1997), prompting the Immigration Act of 1924 which set visa quotas for how many people from a particular country could immigrate – if permitted at all (U.S. Department of State, 2013). These migrations were notable because they demonstrated the
changing culture that Jhally (1990) described as unprecedented and potentially unpredictable. Consumption as identity was a way of dividing and identifying the social classes.

Employment was another factor that threatened the established social order in the 1920s. New technologies inspired changes in the education system so that a high school education was no longer limited to the study of classics or geometry – subjects many parents worried were impractical. Instead, coursework began involving job-ready skills such as stenography, blueprint reading, and bookkeeping (Goldin, 1998). Thus, the 1920s was known as the time in American history when high school attendance and graduation rates surged, reflecting a rising presence of white-collar jobs that demanded increased knowledge and literacy (Goldin, 1994). Such white-collar jobs benefitted the working class individuals who moved up into a higher rank in society, as well as the lesser class workers who replaced them in newly vacant manufacturing positions (Blackwelder, 1997).

The news media was changing as well and turning audiences into consumers. It was estimated that as many as 40% of American households had a radio by the end of the decade, and airtime was sold to sponsors who supported programming in exchange for promotion (Rudel, 2008). Media and commerce were increasingly dependent on advertising, and Weil Davis (2000) argued that commerce in the 1920s was not possible without advertisements, which was why advertising revenues quadrupled between 1914 and 1929. The advertising which supported magazines, newspapers, cinema, and film, also served to streamline consumer desires. Previously, the U.S. was a country in which regional media dominated local markets. Radio, magazines, and film supported a growing national media that was funded by advertisers seeking to reach a national audience. According to Weil Davis (2000), national advertising for
nationwide brands had a “massive impact on American identity” as it encouraged Americans to think of themselves and their leisure practices through a consumptive identity (p. 5).

If credit before the credit revolution was about fulfilling lifestyle aspirations, then the 1920s credit revolution brought dramatic change. In short, consumer credit during the 1920s connected the pent-up consumer desire for commodities with newly legal credit options which established a new understanding of credit and enabled consumers to create material goods aspirations. These material goods aspirations were informed by advertising and a growing desire to perform class anxiety through consumption. As Williams (1991) noted, there was an increase in consumer fantasy after the Industrial Revolution, and the 1890s was regarded as the Gilded Age because Americans traded their religious and artistic lifestyle aspirations for those defined by consumer goods.

During the Gilded Age and up until the 1920s, the majority of Americans simply did not qualify for credit due to the illegality of profitable lending (Calder, 1999). Many Americans quietly turned to illegal lenders – pawn shops, loan sharks, and installment peddlers to acquire desired goods. Installment peddlers were expensive (Heinze, 2001), loan sharks were dangerous because they charged exorbitant interest rates and threatened violence against those who defaulted (Homer & Sylla, 2005), and pawn shops were shameful because others in the community could see the borrower entering and leaving the shop (Calder, 1999). This meant that pursuing a consumer loan to acquire personal items such as wedding dresses or children's toys did have that illogical and reckless feel that McCloskey (1985) described. It was in fact not sensible to pursue a loan through an unsavory lender in order to buy a non-essential. However, this mentality changed as the opening of consumer credit in the 1920s meant loans were available from safe, institutional lenders.
Of course, these newly available loans were intended for purchasing specific commodities such as automobile or appliances. Consumers did not receive open credit to make self-directed decisions on what to buy and when. Instead, consumers received loans from retailers to buy specific items such as automobiles or radios (Markham, 2002). But many consumers were excluded from these installment-type loans. Cohen (2008) noted how consumer access to these loans were unequal: "Not all Americans participated equally in mass consumer markets; many more lacked a car, washing machine, vacuum clean, and radio in 1930 than had one" (p. 22). Lack of equal access to installment loans meant many Americans in the 1920s and 1930s did not consider themselves mass consumers, and Cohen argued this changed through advertising.

Advertising assigned standards and fixed value on a commodity to make it worthy of mass consumption (Potter, 1954). Merchant-provided consumer loans promoted consumer desires and encouraged consumers to purchase an item they could otherwise not afford (Logemann, 2008). Advertising promoted a commodity as culturally valuable and taught the public to covet the item. For example, the automobile in the early twentieth century was initially viewed as a play-toy for the wealthy. Advertising promoted the value of car ownership and in doing so taught the public to covet the car as a necessity. The idea of cars further gained through automobile inspired travel narratives and novels which constructed the automobile as culturally valued (Berger, 2001). The automobile's increasing cultural value was reflected by the formation of a highway lobby which successfully pushed in 1916 for the Federal government to allocate $75 million for road creation and improvement (Berger, 2001). Although the car was culturally valued, it wasn't open for mass consumption until credit made it affordable for the middle class. Boorstin (1974) noted how an automobile purchase cost an average of 10 to 20% of a typical
household income, which meant credit was essential. Merchants such as the Ford Motor Company responded by offering installment payments in 1921 which allowed consumers to repay an auto purchase over an extended time period, and GM quickly followed.

Other merchants began offering installment loans for specific commodities to the point that scholars later deemed the 1920s a "credit revolution" (Calder, 1999). During this credit revolution, more consumers than ever participated in credit purchases, and by the end of the 1920s, up to 90% of durable goods were purchased with credit. Most of these items were major durables such as automobiles, appliances, and radios. Consumers adjusted to the new budgetary demand by limiting the amount sent to personal savings (Olney, 1999).

The credit revolution enabled more consumers to step out of the shadows of predatory lending and receive loans from the conventional economy. However, many consumers were still excluded from institutional lending. Working and lesser class consumers, women, consumers of colors, and new immigrants were either rejected from merchant-provided credit or subject to unfavorable borrowing terms (Manning, 2000). The rise of bank issued credit meant more – but not all – consumer had new access to credit in the years following the Second World War, and this credit was becoming increasingly regulated.

D. The Rise of Bank Issued Credit

Until after the Second World War, credit was primarily offered by merchants such as department stores or automobile companies. This changed in the late 1940s when banks began offering similar loans for consumers to buy durable household goods such as television sets or washing machines (Nocera, 1994). Many scholars consider the 1950s the start of the so-called "buy now, pay later" mentality for everyday items. Bennett (1996) attributed the increase in
consumptive behavior to three factors. First, the G.I. bill increased disposable income by providing returning soldiers with credits for education and low-cost loans for home purchases. Second, the growing availability of television furthered a national culture and streamlined consumer fantasies. And third, consumers were ready to spend again after two decades of austerity and rationing, and retailers were ready to sell: "Everything was new: new homes, new cars, new appliances, new markets, new foods, new friends, new ways of entertaining … new schools, even new churches. Rarely in the history of the world had more people enjoyed so many new things so quickly" (p. 296).

Merchant and bank loans connected consumers with all these new commodities but these lines of credit also presented consumers with inconvenience of paying multiple creditors each month. Williams (2005) explained how banks saw an opportunity to offer a single credit instrument that would allow consumers to merge all their lines of credit into one monthly payment:

Why should people carry different loans for cars, refrigerators, sofas, sewing machines, and pianos when they could owe all their money to one source? Why not offer an all-encompassing card to replace customers' myriads of debt relations with small stores? Why not bind them completely and complexly to the bank? (p. 12).

The introduction of credit cards in the late 1950s offered a solution to consumers' inconveniences by giving the individual consumer a spending limit and then allowing them to make independent choices on what to buy. In this sense, a new understanding developed for how lenders and consumers viewed credit. No longer was there a need to justify the desire for a washing machine or television set to a loan officer, the consumer decided how to spend the money. Hyman (2001) described the agency associated with credit cards as a type of empowerment: "For the first time, consumers decided how much they should borrow" (p. 171).
If credit cards felt like freedom, then that's because advertisers promoted the card as freedom. Klein (1999) observed how credit card advertisements boasted the freedom of not carrying cash, which meant consumers were protected if their wallet was lost or stolen. Credit cards also brought the freedom to enroll through a mailed application, which meant consumers avoided justifying the need for a loan to a credit officer at the local bank and privately made a self-directed decision at home.

Credit cards as an available payment instrument began in the late 1950s and widened in the early 1960s. Nocera (1994) described the 1958 Bank of America credit card "drop" on Fresno, California as the launch of the credit card. The credit card drop sent 60,000 unsolicited cards to households in Fresno inviting consumers to charge purchases with retailers. Karger (2005) noted how more than two million cards were in circulation in California within the year of the drop. According to Garcia (1980), other banks quickly pursued consumer credit through credit cards. In 1967, bank cards held 7.3% of market share; the amount ballooned to 38.4% by 1977.

As banks pursued consumer lending, a nascent scoring system developed to predict whether a consumer was worth the risk. In the early years, credit scoring was a point system in which a consumers’ lifestyle and purchase choices were analyzed and assigned a point value. Myers and Forgy (1963) detailed and promoted the process as necessary given the heavy demand that new credit applications put on analyst departments. In this early scorecard, analysts scored 41 items including personal information such as marital status (10 points for married; three for single), and predictive status such as having a bank account, home phone, or work phone.

The credit scoring system enabled card companies to systematically reject consumers on the basis that their profile was too risky, and many creditors considered gender and race to be
risk factors. For example, many banks hesitated to grant married women credit in their own 
name and shamelessly inquired about a woman's fertility and whether she used contraception 
discrimination in granting credit based on gender, race or ethnicity, age, or marital status or 
status as a public aid recipient (Nielsen, 1977). However, credit opened to consumers when 
profits, not social change, prompted lenders to expand credit access. In 1979, a Supreme Court 
ruling relaxed usury caps (McCoy & Renuart, 2008), which meant lenders were able to pursue 
high-risk, low-income borrowers and charge substantial interest rates and fees that did not apply 
to preferred, low-risk, high-income borrowers (Athreya, 2001). Interest rate spikes meant 
higher risk consumers were profitable to lenders, and credit card usage soared as a result. In 
1970, 16% of American households had a credit card. By 1998, the percentage had jumped to 
68% (Durkin & Elliehausen, 2011), indicating most but not all consumers were considered 
worthy of a traditional credit card. As credit access increased, lenders continued to rely on the 
credit scoring system to estimate a consumer’s potential for risk. The next section further 
explains the current credit scoring system and how it dictates an individual’s access to varying 
payment systems.

E. **Credit Scoring Today**

Whether a consumer applied for a prepaid, secured, or credit card, all consumers were 
subjected to the credit scoring system in recent years. FICO continued to manage the current 
credit scoring system, and scores were available through the three major credit reporting 
agencies: Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion (Avery, Braveport & Canner, 2010). These three 
agencies also maintained a database of the consumer's payment history, credit utilization, and
credit history. In recent years, credit scoring was proprietary and little was known about the calculations involved. Only 35% of the calculation was based on whether the consumer made payments on time, which meant 65% was based on unknown factors. Recent literature suggested that credit scoring was not strictly a numbers game, and some lenders relied on information that was not related to financial behavior. Malheiros et al. (2012) alleged that creditors used information such as the consumer's success in personal relationships, childhood relationship with their parents, and body mass index as indicators of self-control.

The credit scoring system dictated a consumer’s access to affordable housing, transportation (through auto loans), education (through education loans), insurance, and even employment. Half of employers admitted to factoring in a consumer’s credit score when making an employment decision (Traub, 2013). Credit scores were also considered when a consumer applied to open a savings or checking account, and many Americans in recent years were rejected from banks. The FDIC (2012) estimated that 29% of Americans were unbanked or underbanked, had limited or no access to the mainstream banking system, and relied on Alternative Financial Services (AFS) such as cash checking operations, pawn shops, or prepaid cards. Such consumers were also unable to write a personal check for monthly rent or deposit a paycheck into a secure account. Thus, credit scores impacted daily life.

FICO scores ranged from 300 to 850 points. In July 2012, the current national average was 689 (MyFico, 2012). Most credit scores ranged from 600 to 750, and a score of 700 and above was considered good (Experian, 2012). Consumers with good credit who sought a credit product aimed at consumers with a higher score might have received access to the product but at a greater cost. The best interest rates were given to consumers with a score higher than 770 although FICO considers 660 and above as "good" (Wozniacka & Sen, 2004). The system was
competitive, and lenders compared consumers against each other when determining rates. The system was also fluid, and the meaning of the score changed over time. For example, a consumer might have consistently maintained the same score (e.g. around 750), however, the meaning of that number could change along with the larger consumer environment and the worth might increase or decrease (Demanyanyk, 2010).

The meaning of credit scores changed in the recent recession. Following the economic collapse in 2008, banks were forced to tighten lending standards and even consumers with high credit were rejected from home, education, and auto loans (Duke, 2010). Many consumers turned to alternatives from the traditional credit card in order to rebuild credit, participate in the credit/debt economy, or function outside the mainstream banking system. Two alternatives – the prepaid and secured card – are detailed in the next section.

F. Alternatives to Credit

Credit companies began offering secured credit cards in the late 1980s to low-income consumers who did not meet income requirements for a traditional credit card (Geisst, 2009). Called “the card of last resort,” secured cards required a full deposit and were specifically marketed toward consumers who needed to build their credit scores. Secured cards were aimed at participants in the mainstream banking system, and some card companies required consumers to first open a savings account with the security deposit in order to apply for a card (Posner & Cronin, 1992). The cards had a clear purpose in that they reported to the three major credit bureaus and were intended to help consumers with bad credit increase their score and prove their credit worthiness. The expectation was that consumers built credit and eventually qualified for a traditional, non-secured card. Although the cards did have the potential to benefit consumers,
critics expressed concern that many consumers were previously shut out from credit and were just happy to have some sort of credit card. These consumers were more likely to have a revolving account that accrued interest, and they were less likely to expect the security deposit to be kept in an interest bearing account (Ritzer, 1995).

The recession in the early 1990s increased secured card usage after many Americans emerged from the economic crisis with damaged credit. By 1994, almost 1.2 million secured cards were in circulation – an increase of one million cards in just six years (Ravo, 1994). Although the recession in the early 1990s led to a boom in secured credit cards, the most recent recession did not produce the same effect. Secured cards were not see as profitable to companies, and the focus shifted toward prepaid cards (McFadden, 2009). Prepaid cards were first introduced in mass in 2003, but were not used extensively until after the 2008 economic crisis. The recession increased the number of Americans either excluded from credit or looking for checking account alternatives, and prepaid card transactions doubled between 2009 and 2012 (Wilhusen, 2012). The drive behind prepaid card use varies. In February 2014, Pew Charitable Trust conducted an extensive survey with prepaid card users to determine how and why the cards were used by consumers. Although this dissertation does not involve survey research, it is helpful to briefly review the Pew findings. This is because the current study examines promotional materials in order to understand the advertisers’ suggested uses and how a diverse economy is represented in such uses. Therefore, the following insight into prepaid card users contributes to a baseline understanding of who used prepaid cards and what motivated such use.

In regard to who used prepaid cards, the Pew study found consistencies in terms of income and savings, but variations in terms of age and race. For income and savings, the average cardholder had a household income of $30,000, which was about $21,000 less than the
U.S. median. In addition to having smaller wages, 42% of survey participants reported having no emergency savings. Another similarity among prepaid card users was education level, and 91% reported not having a four-year college degree. The survey found variations in terms of race and age. Almost half of the cardholders were white, and a quarter were black. Age also varied, although consumers ages 30-49 were the largest (46%), followed by 18-29 (27%), 50-64 (21%) and over 65(5%). The varying ages might be partly explained by the increasing number of government agencies and corporations who saw prepaid cards as a cost-effective alternative for distributing paychecks, government benefits, social security payments, and food assistance. (Wilhusen, 2012).

The study findings indicated the prepaid users shared a similar socioeconomic status, and this status was not limited to disenfranchised consumers rejected from the mainstream banking system. Instead, 59% of cardholders reported having active checking accounts. The study authors described this finding as “striking” and “counterintuitive,” particularly because study participants said a prime reason the cards were desirable was to avoid fees. Participants also cited a desire to avoid debt and control spending. However, this desire by prepaid card users to avoid fees and to use the card as a budgeting device fit within the current understanding of how payment cards were framed and promoted to consumers in recent years. In a content analysis of 319 card advertisements and communication, Blankson and Kalafatis (2007) found that 79% of promotions used a “functional” approach that described the uses and money saving features of the card. The functional approach was one of several approaches the authors identified, including symbolic and experiential. The authors concluded by recommending that marketers using the functional approach for card advertisements focus on the “value for the money” as the key component of the communication.
The benefits driven motivations of prepaid card consumers was reflective of a post-recession economy in which many consumers felt both unsecure about their personal finances and angry towards the financial institutions that caused such instability. The next section further considers credit in the post-recession economy and highlights how advertising campaigns were cognizant of a tense cultural climate.

G. Credit in the Post-Recession Economy

As the 2008 recession deepened, much attention was paid to the “top 1%” of wealthiest American households who owned 50% of the nation’s wealth (Wolff, 2012) and seemed to profit from the collapsing economy. Protestors in the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement argued that the “top 1%” of wealthy households had become too rich and did so at the expense of working Americans who were struggling in the faltering economy. Through this protest, the OWS movement provided Americans with a new identity, that of the “99%” (Welty, Bolton, Nayak, Malone, 2013). In addition to challenging the “1%” who profited at others’ expense, the OWS movement also challenged the banking system that brought the U.S. economy to near financial ruin. Gitlin (2012) described how the movement spread at an unprecedented rate. Whereas protests in the 1960s took three years to build momentum, Gitlin described OWS as powerfully surging within three weeks: “At warp speed, all kinds of people felt that they needed to have opinions about the movement, what it was doing and saying, and what it ought to do and say” (pg. 5). OWS started in late September, 2011, and quickly spread to other cities such as Philadelphia and Chicago where protestors descended on financial institutions and trading centers. Gitlin described this focus on financial institutions as symbolic, and driven by the human need to put a face and a name on the borderless and intangible investments that brought down the
global economy. The investors, Gitlin argued, were symbolic of corporate greed, the type that rewarded the “1%” with bonuses and a lavish lifestyle – at the expense of American workers.

Although the mortgage crisis was primarily to blame for the 2008 economic collapse, credit cards providers were also subject to public and political scrutiny during and after the recession. Many of the banks that issued failing mortgages were also credit card providers, and the American public was increasingly concerned about a lack of transparency regarding fees and rates (Creamer, 2008). Credit card companies were also subject to criticism because they responded to the economic collapse by lowering existing credit limits, increasing application rejections, and even closing accounts (Banjo, 2009). For example, American Express approached problematic cardholders with an offer of a $300 prepaid gift card if the consumer paid and closed the account by April of 2009 (Pilon, 2009). At a time when many Americans might have felt powerless in a declining economy, credit card companies furthered the uncertainty by limiting many consumers’ credit access. As a result of these changes to the credit market, advertising of credit cards and financial services also changed in the post-recession economy.

Advertising reflected this growing distrust by consumers, and banks attempted to promote savings products, improved customer service, and greater transparency (Bulik, 2009). Some credit card companies responded by limiting advertising in the early months of the recession, and those that continued used a different approach than prior years. In early September 2008, as the recession reached a boiling point, credit card companies such as Discover and Capital One diminished their TV advertisements by 24% compared to the year prior (Nielsen, 2008). The following year, measured media in the credit card category dropped by 50% (Parpis, 2009). Other credit card companies changed the focus of the advertising and promoted a message of savings. The shared theme among these advertisements was that the consumer maintained
control of his or her own account (Parpis, 2009). In a content analysis of financial service
advertisements in personal finance and general interest magazines, scholars found that
advertisers transitioned from a transformational to an informational approach from 2005 to 2009.
In this transition, the focus of the ad was away from spending and debt and toward investment
and savings. The authors concluded that advertising provided consumers with market
information and such information was determined by economic conditions (Lee, Taylor, and
Chung, 2011).

The economic conditions observed in the content analysis of financial advertisements
were also articulated in the aforementioned Pew study on prepaid card uses. In this study, many
prepaid card users revealed they did have access to the mainstream banking system but chose a
credit alternative in order to disassociate with large, financial institutions. These participants
revealed an animosity toward banks and the credit/debt economy through statements such as “I
don’t believe in credit cards” and “I want to avoid banks” (pg. 13). This hostility reflected a
larger post-recession consumer sentiment regarding American banks. According to a 2014 study
by Harris Interactive and Kasasa, 78% of Americans blamed big banks for the recession and 66%
were still angry. Half of study participants admitted to feeling guilty when bringing business to a
big bank. This animosity followed an era of lending in which banks delivered the loose credit
consumers needed to fulfill lifestyle and consumer aspirations. As the next section explains,
connecting consumers to credit and credit alternatives increasingly became an online transaction.

H.  Obtaining Consumer Cards

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, online banking was still in the early stages of
development. Most banks did not yet have the infrastructure to support online bill pay, account
viewing, or the opening of new accounts. As a result, only 10 million U.S. customers used online banking in 2000 and credit card originations were described as "not radically transformed" by the Internet (Clemons & Hitt, 2000). Consumers still applied for cards in person or through the mail, and American households received between 35 and 75 solicitations per year (Manning, 2000). Many of these offers promised consumers they were pre-approved (Lee & Hogarth, 2000) in order to expedite a process that still took weeks.

E-commerce was still developing, and only 39% of U.S. banks had fully functioning Internet banking in 2000. (O’Brien, 2000) Of course, fully functional Internet banking had a different meaning at the time. Consumer credit card application web sites were not spaces to apply for a card and receive an instant response. Visa.com, for example, explained the benefits of the card to consumers and listed about fifty banks where consumers could apply in-person for a Visa card. By 2002, some of these banks, such as First USA, offered online applications but did not offer instant decisions (FirstUSA.com, 12/7/2002)\(^1\). Consumers’ comfort with banking increased as the decade progressed. In 2000, only 10 million Americans banked online (O’Brien, 2000), even though 42% of Americans had an internet connection at home (Newberger, 2001). However, the numbers increased steadily as the years progressed.

Although consumer credit card application web sites were still in the beginning phases during the early 2000s, these sites were proving to be valuable resources to lenders. The internet at this time increased consumer convenience and was viewed as a source of product information for consumers (Litan & Rivlin, 2001). The internet also provided significant gains to the credit card industry because credit cards were previously sold through branches or paid agents which

---

\(^1\) An internet archive search engine, Way Back Machine, was used to access bank web pages from 1999-2008 and observe the differences between current and past card applications. The descriptions provided are based on these observations.
meant redesigning the system brought significant savings (Litan & Rivlan, 2001). Instead of employing bankers to promote and process credit card applications, an online system provided instant and inexpensive results.

By 2002, Pew Research Internet Project estimated that 32% of Americans used the internet for online banking – more than double the amount than two years prior (Fox, 2002). The number of Americans using online banking soared again between 2004 and 2006 from 32 to 43% (Fox & Beirer, 2006). However, the middle of the decade saw a flattening in growth among consumers interested in online banking. Fears of identity theft and hacking increased, and such paranoia caused many consumers to choose non-electronic options. Only 5% of survey respondents in 2005 said they used the internet to apply for a new credit card (Ipsos, 2005). Such concern dissolved in the following six years and 81% of credit card applications originated online by 2011 (ComScore, 2011).

Online card applications offered consumers the convenience of an instant decision. These applications took mere milliseconds to process (Fish, 2012), which meant many consumers received an approval within 60 seconds of completing the application (Choundry, 2012). Prior to instant online applications, consumers waited several weeks to receive a decision, and reasons for rejections took up to 60 days (Byrne, 1997). Consumer card application web sites also provided consumers with the ability to comparison shop by simultaneously viewing promotional material on multiple web sites.

Communication scholars built an understanding of these web sites and why they were valuable to both consumers and companies. Consumer card application web sites were considered a type of “corporate advertising web site” which Patsioura, Vlachopoulou and Manthou (2009) described as helpful in building brand image and influencing a consumer’s
purchase intention (pg. 374). However, the promotional materials on these web sites and how aspirations were framed by the card companies had yet to be examined in communication research. It was unknown whether these web sites connected lifestyle and material goods aspirations similar to past credit instruments or if the ability to obtain credit was still reflective of lifestyle achievement. The next chapter introduces how these card application web sites will be studied by establishing the theoretical framework for the study.
III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RELATED LITERATURE

Framing research "consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text" (Entman, 1993, p. 51). From news articles to blog posts, framing has been used extensively to explain social and political phenomena. Communication scholars also use framing to explain advertising and promotions. Communication regarding the consumer experience is a natural extension to the current body of literature which examines political communication, power, and public opinion. This dissertation seeks to understand how socioeconomic groups are framed visually and textually in consumer card web sites. Using aspiration as a lens, this study also seeks to understand how the American dream was encapsulated and enabled through these lender frames.

This chapter reviews framing as the theoretical foundation for the inquiry into consumer card application web sites. The review begins with a definition of framing theory and its origins, and then describes how framing is used in advertising research. Because advertising relies on complex visual and textual cues to communicate a distinct brand experience in a competitive market place, interpretive packages are reviewed as the approach most appropriate for a frame analysis of card web sites. Following the review of interpretive packages, the chapter further considers visual frames, advertising and emotion, the role of advertising in framing social class, and the advertising of consumer cards.

A. Framing

Entman (1993) described framing as the process of highlighting specific aspects of an issue or an event in order to promote a particular interpretation. The intent to construct a frame and promote a preferred interpretation might be deliberate or unconscious (Gamson, 1989).
Deliberate framing suggests a type of media manipulation, but framing does not necessarily carry a negative connotation. Framing serves a utilitarian purpose for mass communication, and frames are actively set in the mass media as a type of reference point for discussing and suggesting ways to interpret public events (Tuchman, 1978). Frames are essential tools for efficiently presenting complicated issues to lay audiences in an accessible, pre-packaged, and easily understood manner (Scheufele, 1999). Further, frames are an unavoidable reality in a public communication process such as mass media (Nisbet, 2010).

Reese (2001) describes frames as organizing principles that are socially shared, persistent over time, and manifested across several domains of mass communication such as news and public discourse. Reese also references Entman (1991) and his idea that frames can be communicated in a particular way in order to promote a specific interpretation and moral evaluation. This suggests that frames have the ability to shape how we view and respond to an issue, as well as how we discuss the issue and influence others. The key premise of framing literature is that frames more or less predictably guide audience members' understanding of an event or issue and provide researchers with predictable conclusions (Gross, 1998). Through numerous studies, framing scholars successfully established that frames regarding an event or issue possess the capability to shape public opinion (Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2006; Druckman, 2001; Lawrence, 2008; Nelson, Clawson, Oxley, 1997). These studies demonstrate how framing researchers identify frames in existing mass media texts and observe how these frames reflect the desires of a particular group, deliver insight into current ideology, or simply help people better understand a complex issue.

Predictability has been a reoccurring theme in framing research from the beginning. Bateson (1955) developed the concept of framing to suggest a boundary was placed around an
event or activity in order to provide a consistently predictable context for those involved. Bateson called this information "premises," which told the viewer not to use the same type of thinking or logic that might be used outside the frame. In this sense, frames were conceptualized as metacommunicative because they provided the receiver with instructions or aids on how to understand the frame. Goffman (1973) furthered Bateson’s work by applying framing to interpersonal interactions. Goffman suggested that frames simplified complex communication by helping people exclude unnecessary information and focus only on the current "strip of activity" in order to truly understand "what is going on here?" (p. 25). In this sense, Goffman's work first established the utilitarian nature of frames to effectively communicate complicated issues such as social interactions in which there were possibilities for numerous interpretations. Goffman's treatment of Bateson's work was considered the most extensive (Tannen, 2009) and advanced the concept of framing to a concept that explained social behavior.

Framing research shifted from interpersonal communication to mass media frames in the 1980s due to a rising interest in discourse analysis (Tannen, 1993). Mass news media became the focus for framing research, and scholars such as Iyengar (1991) revealed how public discourse held the power to mold or dilute political consciousness. Other scholars such as Tuchman (1978) examined framing as routine communication in the mass media. Although Tuchman did not reference Goffman nor his notions of framing, she suggested a type of framing occurred with her notion of typifications. According to Tuchman, news reports had different types of news (e.g. spot, developing) which served as a frame for reporters on how to approach the assignment and also provided audiences with an understanding of how to interpret the story. As such, her work furthered the understanding of frames as routine but essential tools for communicating complex processes.
As framing research evolved, scholars applied framing to news coverage of specific events or issues in order to identify frame consistencies and the resulting response in public opinion. Gitlin’s (1980) examination of Vietnam War protestors is regarded as a pivotal work in the advancement of framing research. In examining coverage of Vietnam War protestors, Gitlin (1980) identified how framing devices were used in news narratives and highlighted specific aspects about the protestors and their actions but ignored other pertinent factors. The limited portrayal undermined the protestors and encouraged the public to consider the movement as disorganized and lazy. Gitlin (1980) further argued that framing made the reporting of these types of stories seem natural: "Frames are principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tactic theories about what exists, what happens and what matters" (pg. 6).

Other scholars also examined framing of specific events or issues such as the coverage of nuclear power (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989); missile hits on passenger air planes (Entman, 1991); and drug use as a social problem (Reinarman, & Levine, 1995). Scholars such as Lawrence (2004) described news frames as existing on a continuum that shifted based on public discourse and sentiment. In her study of two decades of newspaper coverage, Lawrence (2004) identified competing frames which placed responsibility for obesity on either the individual or the environment. She also found the prominence of these competing frames shifted over time and that such a shift reflected possibilities for public policy. Her work confirmed other framing scholars’ assertions that news content was the product of media organizations and their established routines. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argued that news agencies were economic entities driven for profit, and Reese (2008) further asserted that framing acknowledged the “impossible goal of perfect representation” in reporting and brought an understanding of a
“more complex shared cultural understandings that media professionals develop as a function of their work and share with others in society” (pg. 2989).

In recent years, framing research continued to follow the same path and primarily focused on how news media framed issues and events and how audiences predictably reacted to such frames. In terms of economic framing in news, the current body of research focused on how economic issues and events are framed and how audiences predictably react to such frames. For example, research revealed how frames and sentiment developed in relation to the 2008 financial collapse (Malhotra & Margalit, 2010); sentiment towards tax dividends (Bullock & Fernald, 2005); and bad and good economic news frames (Lowry, 2008). Similarly, there were insightful literature regarding frames and economic foreign policy (Bleich, 2007; Limbert & Bullock, 2009; Tamir & Davidson, 2011; Busby, 2007; Winter, 2006; Valenzano, 2009; and Schwalbe, Silcok & Keith, 2008).

Economic frames in news are consistently intertwined with politics. Reese (2001) observes how framing is useful for understanding the media's role in political life. It is also arguable that framing is useful for understanding the media's role in consumer life. The label media is broader than just news reporting, and Reese (2001) also notes that framing research has expanded past news analysis and into the fields of communication, sociology, and political science. Similarly, Johnson-Cartee (2005) argues that framing theory is just as important for those engaged in social influence or influence research such as advertisers or marketers. Currently, there is an exciting opportunity in framing research to take the established method of frame analysis and apply it to new forms of advertising such as consumer card application web sites. These web sites serve as the starting point for the consumer’s online brand experience (OBE), and initiate what the company intended as active engagement between the consumer and
the brand (Bart, Shankar, Sultan, & Urban, 2005). The OBE is designed to evoke a product’s personality and performance (Thomas & Veloutous, 2013), and is created as information rich and distinctive in a crowded market environment (Simmons, 2008).

In designing the OBE, the creators were cognizant that the consumer lacked the physical cues found in an offline environment which caused heightened uncertainty (Kollman & Suckow, 2008). In this sense, the OBE of consumer card application web sites relied on frames to communicate the intended uses and target audience. As the next section discusses, framing research has been used to analyze advertisements, promotions and public relations campaigns. But it has yet to be applied to advertisements proceeding online applications such as consumer card application web sites. Examining the content on online applications applies framing as Kendall (2011) suggested by identifying how such frames unfold a story that organize experience, bring order to our worlds, and help us understand where we fit.

B. Advertising Frames

There are strong similarities between the study of news and advertising frames, and scholars studying frames in advertising rely on the same body of literature as scholars studying media frames. As a result, the current understanding of framing in advertising runs parallel with the current understanding of news media framing. Marchand (1992), for example, observed that advertising establishes frames of reference which defined the boundaries of public discussion and determined relevant factors in a situation. These frames developed through images and slogans which worked into America's common discourse through repetition, bold display and ingenuity. Marchand's observation fit well with Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) definition that a
"frame is a central organizing idea… for making sense of relevant issues, suggesting what is at issue" (pg. 3).

Similar to how audiences turn to news to make sense of current events or issues, scholars studying advertising frames also find that consumers turn to advertisements for meaning and information (McCracken, 1987). In both advertising and news, meaning emerges in relationship to the frames (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). In news stories, frames do not arise organically and are constructed by social interests and political institutions. Such frames have the power to shape discourse and opinion, but are subject to news media acceptance and sponsorship (Lewis & Reese, 2009.) Likewise, framing in advertising limits a message’s range of meaning and directs how consumers think about a product, brand, or entire corporation (Hallahan, 1999). In this sense, framing narrows a consumer’s viewpoint on how to approach an advertisement, and framing produces more focused consumer judgment about products and brands (Edell & Staelin, 1983). Such a filtered viewpoint is also seen in news framing, and Entman and Rojecki (1993) described the “framing judgment” used by journalists to evaluate elements of a story such as extremism, group rationality, power, or unity.

Part of the meaning or information that consumers gain from advertisements is a more clear understanding of a brand, product, or corporation and its perceived role in the consumer’s life. Framing enables advertisers to evolve brands into what Ahern, Bortree, and Smith (2013) described as “personalities” that represent meaningful social values: “… advertising downplays or ignores product features altogether and turns instead to narratives and symbols that directly or indirectly communicate what the brand should mean to consumers” (pg. 481). What the brand should mean to consumers is an emotionally complex message that is connected to consumer identity. In a study of environmental messages in women’s magazines, for example, Smith
(2011) found the advertisements supplied important signifiers regarding the consumer’s green identity. This green identity was a complex message regarding self-definition which Smith (2011) ascribed to “prestige cycle” (pg. 83). In referencing Veblen’s (1899) concept of conspicuous consumption, Smith described how magazine advertisements framed environmental messages as an elite consumer act that supported an ongoing green self-identity and could be emulated by middle-class women.

Advertisements – such as the ones that Smith (2011) found in women’s magazines which defined the consumers and placed them into the prestige cycle – are not incidental. Advertisements almost always include a framed message (Shimp, Urbany & Camlin, 1988). These intentional frames are communicated both visually and textually and advertisers strategize on how to have the frames reinforce each other. In reinforcing the preferred meaning through both visual and textual information, the advertisement reduces distraction and increases the probability the consumer will be able to recall the advertisement and its intended message (Shimp et. al, 1988; Edell & Staelin, 1983).

Not only are advertising frames intentional, but marketers rely on framing research to better manipulate a message. Scholars studying advertising frames extensively examine how a message could be strategically manipulated to focus on a consumer’s goal of achieving a positive state or avoiding a negative state by using a specific product or brand (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990; Shiv, Edell & Payne, 1997; Chandy, Tellis, MacInnis, Thalvanich, 2005. Levy, 2006). Framing literature also informs marketers on how messages can be manipulated based on a consumer’s prior experience with the brand, product, or company. This body of work runs parallel with news framing literature in which it is understood that frames often proceed and sometimes shape experience. In both news and advertising frames, audiences might be exposed
to a frame prior to having an experience with the event, issue, product, or brand. In news framing, some scholars suggested that a lack of previous knowledge strengthened the effect of the frame (Zucker, 1978). Others suggested that framing was not just reserved for the naïve or uninformed (Iyengar, 1989; Krosnick & Schuman, 1988), and people with great knowledge or concern for an event or issue might have been more susceptible to framing effects because they are able to receive and understand but possibly not refute the message (Nelson et. al, 1997; pg. 227).

In advertising, framing scholars established how framing has the possibility to expose consumers to the advertiser's preferred interpretation prior to the consumer having any experience with the actual product or brand (Braun-LaTour, Pickerell, & Loftus, 2004.) This enables advertisers to promote a particular frame in which consumers focus on specific aspects of the experience (such as a Visa card being *convenient*, or an American Express card making a *good first impression.*) Framing in advertisements also occurs after the consumer is exposed to the product, and such framing serves to direct consumer recall towards specific aspects of using the product or brand (Braun-LaTour, et al., 2004; Braun-LaTour & LaTour, 2005).

The need to direct consumers’ attention to specific aspects of using the product or brand reflects the complexity of advertisements. Advertisers use readily recognizable symbols and phrases in order to be understood by as wide of an audience as possible. Advertisers also embed layers of deeper meaning to target consumer longing and aspiration. As a result of these complexities, this dissertation uses Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach to frame analysis, interpretive packages. An interpretive package considers the multiple layers that communicate a frame, and this approach is most appropriate for examining advertisements which use a
combination of visuals and texts to communicate a core viewpoint. The next section further explains interpretive packages as an insightful tool for frame analysis.

C. **Interpretive Packages**

The current body of framing research utilizes multiple definitions and approaches to media frames. This dissertation uses Gamson and Modigliani’s (1987, 1989) approach to frame analysis – interpretive packages. The underlying premise of interpretive packages is that cultural issues are “contested in a symbolic arena” through culturally available elements and symbols that are readily recognized by the public (1987; p. 376). Such elements and symbols are not communicated individually. Rather, such elements and symbols are clustered together to communicate a larger interpretation.

The elements and symbols clustered together to construct an interpretive package include: catchphrases, consequences, depictions, exemplars, metaphors, roots, and appeals to principle. The catchphrases are the commonly used slogans, words, or phrases repeated in media discourse to signify the presence of the frame. For example, an interpretive package about the welfare system that positions recipients as freeloaders might use the catchphrase “workfare, not welfare” to communicate that individuals should earn monthly benefits. In communicating quickly understood slogans, the media might draw from their own ideas or language to create “their own clever catchphrase,” but they are working within a larger, preexisting structure of shared meaning (1989, p. 3).

Depictions are the specific examples regarding key players that are presented to illustrate the issue or event. Gamson and Lasch (1983) described how “packages have certain principle subjects that they characterize in a particular fashion” (p. 400). Depictions may involve
metaphors or exemplars to demonstrate who are the people involved. However, it should be stressed that depictions and exemplars are not interchangeable. Rather, depictions illustrate or demonstrate an individual performing an action that supports the core position. Returning to the example of welfare recipients as freeloaders, such a depiction would visualize a welfare recipient as a lazy, repulsive person who is capable of work but chooses to freeload instead (Gamson & Lasch, 1983, p. 402). Exemplars also supply examples of the issue in real life, but give past or present instances in order to support the core position. An exemplar for the welfare example might include past new stories in which investigations found corrupt welfare recipients driving Cadillacs.

Metaphors are the comparisons made between the issue and a comparable, recognizable equivalent. The attributes of the comparable, recognizable equivalent attach to the issue and enhanced the understanding of how to view the issue. Gamson and Lasch (1983) identified two types of metaphors – dynamic and single-valued. In dynamic metaphors, there are two or more entities in the subject that are compared against each other. For example, the interpretive package of welfare recipient as freeloaders has more than one entity who are the focus of the package. One entity is the public-aid recipient who supposedly cheats the American public by receiving benefits he or she does not truly need. A second entity is the lazy, disinterested bureaucrat who does not stand up to the demanding welfare recipient. These two can be contrasted against each other in dynamic metaphors that position both as harmful to the American public. The single-valued metaphor focuses on the attributes of a particular subject.

Roots serve to provide a simplified explanation for the cause of the complex issue. Roots provide a historical understanding of what led to the issue or event developing meaning for the American public. In the example of the interpretive package of welfare recipients as freeloaders,
Gamson and Lasch (1983) found the root of the issue stemmed from bloated welfare rosters in states which had lengthy lists of individuals applying for public-aid, and it was assumed that many of these individuals were able-bodied and capable of work.

Consequences suggest how the issue might play out – either negatively or positively. These consequences may be short or long term, depending on the issue. These consequences develop in the media discourse as the issue is analyzed and aftereffects are projected. For example, the interpretive package that frames welfare recipients as freeloaders would consider the consequences to a benefits program and how it would impact the individual, economy, and larger culture. The short-term consequences might suggest a welfare recipient would demand an increased benefit which the long-term consequences might assume would have a drain on the larger economy.

The appeals to principle connect the issue to a greater sense of morality (Gamson & Lasch, 1983). In the example of the interpretive package of the welfare recipient as a freeloader, an appeal to principle would contrast the idea of free handouts with the American work ethic and belief in meritocracy in order to support the core position that public-aid is problematic: “Packages rely on characteristics of moral appeal and uphold certain general precepts” (pg. 400).

Working together, these condensing symbols communicate the viewpoint. At the core of the viewpoint is the essence of the issue, or the frame. The frame is the viewpoint as to how the issue or event should be interpreted. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) used Gitlin’s (1980) definition of media frames as central organizing ideas that are “largely unspoken and unacknowledged” and used to suggest what is at issue. (p. 7). This suggestion as to what is at issue creates meaning but Gamson and Modigliani (1989) argued it does not directly change public opinion. Ideas toward social issues such as welfare or nuclear power, for example, are not
directly changed by media coverage. Rather, the media discourse is reflective of the process in which individuals construct meaning toward the social issue:

We suggested earlier that media discourse can be conceived of as a set of interpretive packages that give meaning to an issue. A package has an internal structure. At its core is a central organizing idea, or frame, for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue (1989; p. 3).

These interpretive packages are determined by cultural resonance, sponsor activities, and media practices (Gamson & Lasch, 1983). Cultural resonances acknowledge that not all symbols have the same potency, and some frames have a natural advantage over others. Sponsorship refers to the frame supporters who promote the frame intentionally to further their own interests. Media practices are the evolving working norms for journalists which may influence how the interpretive package is communicated (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Gamson and Modigliani’s (1987, 1989) approach to frame analysis was intended to identify and examine how cultural issues were communicated in media discourse. In their work on public opinion and nuclear power, the authors saw a gap in understanding how media discourse contributed to public opinion. They analyzed four decades of media coverage regarding nuclear power and sought to understand the changing culture of opinion. The authors found seven distinct frames regarding nuclear power in media discourse, and also found that such frames were not always for-or-against an issue. Rather, some frames provided the foundation for how to view or understand the issue. The study on nuclear power also identified how some frames had a natural advantage over others because they resonated more deeply with the surrounding culture. A frame might have a natural advantage due to an overlapping with the larger system of cultural values. Or it may have a natural advantage due to the familiarity or
naturalness in which the story is told. For example, an energy independence frame regarding nuclear power benefits from a larger cultural value of American self-efficiency and a desire to end foreign dependence. Such a frame also benefits from a familiar storyline in which the Middle East is seen as a threat to the American way of life. However, this familiar storyline will ebb and flow as the culture changes and may not be as resonate during other time periods.

Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach to frame analysis connected media discourse and public opinion. Currently, there is an exciting opportunity in communication research to take this established method and apply it to new forms of advertising such as consumer card application web sites. These web sites are part of an OBE that communicates complex messages both visually and textually in a competitive market environment, and often serve as the starting point of the consumer’s interaction with the product. Thus the remainder of the chapter reviews the literature related to important elements in advertising – visual frames, emotions, and aspiration.

D. Visual Frames

As noted in the section on interpretative packages, the internal structure includes elements that may be visual or textual. Gamson and Lasch (1983) explain how depictions use visual metaphors to communicate a readily understandable message, and they provide the example of political cartoons as visual metaphors that serves as “compelling” devices (pg. 402). Similar to depictions, exemplars can also be visual or textual, and both elements demonstrate the issue or event in a real-life context. Gamson and Lasch’s (1983) as well as Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) inclusion of visuals in news framing is important because of its unique quality. Visual frames are not well studied by framing scholars, partly due to the difficulty to
achieve intercoder reliability (Coleman, 2010). Although some images present manifest content that can be subject to quantitative analysis, latent content that provides deeper meaning is more difficult for researchers to measure (Neuendorf, 2002). Thus, images may seem difficult to code when visuals lack a clear definition and instead present layers of meaning which can be subject to various interpretations (Faux & Kim, 2006).

Analyzing visual frames may be subject to a researcher's interpretation, but such interpretation can lead to great insight. For example, Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston (2006) followed their seminal work on the news frames associated with the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at the Abu Grahib prison with an examination of the associated photographs that framed the event (2008). Their first study demonstrated how frames function in a news environment, and how a powerful entity such as the White House administration is able to push a preferred frame into public acceptance. In their second study, the authors considered how photographs of the actual torture in progress framed the event and removed the capacity for government or military officials to attempt to frame the incident. In another example, Bennett et al. referenced the videotape of Rodney King being beaten by police officers in 1991. The authors suggested this video framed the event without manipulation from police officials and shaped the public outcry.

Visual frames are also not considered well-studied because many scholars who examine visuals are attracted to the same topic such as the war or terrorism (Fahmy, Kelly & Yung Soo, 2007), or natural disasters (Phillips, 2004). This means that certain subject areas such as the Haitian earthquake or Afghan war are more apt to be studied by scholars than other subject areas such as credit cards. The result is a strong set of literature regarding topics such as Hurricane Katrina but little inquiry into other subject areas. This is why Phillips (2004) argued there is a
need to consider images outside the shock and awe because visuals have the ability to shape history and build public memory.

In considering visual frames, advertising research typically examines how visual images promote a particular viewpoint to consumers. Zaltman and MacCaba (2007) emphasized the importance of visuals in revealing the underlying metaphor and the true intention of an advertisement. Advertisers also use images to convey information about a brand, depict its uses, suggest who are the users, and create a personality for the brand (Runyon, 1979). Such representation of the key features of the product may be realistic or fantastical (Scott, 1994), and are constructions by an advertiser which simultaneously assumes to know what a consumer desires and also suggests what is worthy of fantasy.

Schmitt and Simmons (1997) refer to visual framing as "framed pictures" (p. 156) which connect the verbal message of the advertisement to an image in order to promote a selected viewpoint that can be recalled long-term by the consumer. It is understood that the visual element plays an important role in which the text (or verbal) message and picture mutually reinforce (Shimp, Urbany, & Camlin, 1988). However, visuals in advertising are not a guaranteed benefit to the advertiser. Lurie and Mason (2007) suggested that visuals can indeed increase customer satisfaction and loyalty, deliver new insights and help improve the efficiency of the message. But the authors also cautioned that visuals can distract the consumer and refocus the consumer's attention on image, not the text.

Consumer card companies use images to connect consumer desire for specific, culturally valued products through a practice called fusion in which a photo of the credit card is fused with a desired product. Hesteroni (2011) gave the example of a Discover card advertisement that fused the image of the card with a computer keyboard to connect to the consumer desire for
high-end electronics. Similarly, Bowen and Offer (1997) observed a unique relationship between advertisements and credit cards: "Desire is stroked by advertising and facilitated by credit" (p. 246).

Visual frames have the power to depict emotions such as desire, anxiety, or pride. These emotions are particularly relevant to this dissertation because prepaid, secured, and credit cards are directed at competing consumer groups with distinct experiences in the post-recession economy. In Messaris' (1997) exploration on the three major roles that visual images play in advertisements, emotions were a key component. In the first major role, advertisements elicit emotions by supplying a real person or object which suggest the possibilities we can have as consumers. In the second major role, images in advertisements also serve as photographic evidence. And third, images establish a link between the product and an unrelated idea or object. For example, an American Express Gold Card advertisement shows theatre goers sitting next to a large gold card which Messaris argued was an unrelated but upscale connotation meant to connect American Express with an upscale status.

Thus, visuals in advertisements, particularly credit card advertisements, serve to enhance or support a frame. Emotion is a message that is frequently manipulated by advertisers in order to encourage a particular action. The next section explores the role of emotions in advertisement, and how emotions are used by advertisers.

E. **Advertising and Emotions**

The strength of a frame and how it resonates with the public may be based on the underlying values that mirror larger collective values. Or it may be due to the familiar and natural way in which the frame is communicated (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Emotion is an
important element in advertisements, and advertisements capitalize on universal emotions that are familiar, universally understood, and communicated naturally. Zaltman and MacCaba (2007) argue that even advertisements that appear utilitarian in nature are in fact emotional and that such consumer emotions are revealed in the metaphors used to frame the advertisement: “Emotional framings that underlie thought and behavior are normally dressed up in rational clothes” (p. 149).

In advertisements, emotions are strategically exploited to direct consumers to a specific response. For example, fear is a successful emotional appeal in advertising when an advertisement is designed to evoke an anxiety that already exists within society or an individual (Carducci, 2009). Advertisers then emphasize the negative aspects of a situation that can be solved or prevented by using the advertised product. For example, personal hygiene products such as toothpaste, deodorant, mouthwash, and soap present a risk of social disapproval if a person is not properly groomed. Ewen (1976) described how these concerns are communicated through a new language which creates and then describes the social inadequacies or risks associated with not using the product. Similarly, insurance products are also based on fear of the unknown or fear of catastrophe (Smith, Frankenberger & Kahle, 1990).

Although advertising does rely on negative emotions such as fear to sell products, the overwhelming goal of advertising is to create a positive emotion for customers with the promoted brand or product. As a result, advertising intentionally uses emotion to elicit positive feelings from consumers and enhance the consumers' positive feelings towards the brand or product (Edell & Burke 1987; Miniard, Bhatla, & Rose 1990). Advertising also uses fear to sell products in which the commodity provides a solution. Bauman (1990) suggested that advertising is a framework in which consumers are presented with the informed voice of the marketer who provides the information needed for a consumer to make an informed decision. In this sense,
advertising assuages anxiety, including class anxiety. Cronin (2000) argued such class anxiety is not drawn from actual concerns, but rather how advertisers – who consider themselves as cultural intermediaries – perceive class distinctions and anxieties. For example, she suggested the working class are perceived and presented by advertisers as possessive of both working-class values and "street-wise savviness" (p. 49). The middle class are perceived as having "aspirations for a more culturally valued and sophisticated 'savoir faire'" (p. 49).

For those aspiring for a higher class status, there is a knowledge that must be built on understanding which goods are socially and culturally valued "and how to use them appropriately" (Featherstone, 2007, p. 19). These aspiring groups include the "new" members of the working, middle, or upper class who learn from the media how to manage "property, relationships, ambition" and how to construct a fulfilling lifestyle (Featherstone, 2007, p. 19). Thus, an anxiety builds as consumers understand that status is performed, and information on how to perform such a status is needed. Advertising serves to deliver the information needed while reflecting and reinforcing the class anxiety.

The use of fear or anxiety to sell products causes some critics such as Leiss, Jhally and Klein (1997) to criticize advertising as a manipulative tool that invents false problems in need of solving. Advertising critics also argue that advertising create a false reality (Marcuse, 1972; Williams, 1980; Leiss, Klein, Jhally & Botterill, 2005). For example, Featherstone (2007) complained that "lifestyle" was a word currently in vogue, thanks to a consumer culture informed by media and advertising. Lifestyle suggests both individuality and self-expression: "One's body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc. are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer" (p. 81).
Knowing that an individual's possessions reflects who they are as a person as well as their class status sparks an anxiety, or a need, in many people to purchase items that support their self-constructed image. Jhally (1990) argues that advertising creates false desire in people to consume items for which they have no real need. He calls such needs false because they are based on the needs of the manufacturer, not the consumer. Consumers only need items for survival such as food, clothing, and shelter but the majority of products are advertised as items we must have. In this promotion of false needs, Jhally observed how "advertising integrated the consumer within a rich and complex web of social status and symbolic meaning" (p. 3). Thus, examining advertisements might essentially be an examination of false reality. Advertisements are dreams (Croteau, Hoynes & Milan, 2011), and advertisements are promises (Fourie, 2001). Therefore, the meaning behind an advertisement is not connected to any real event or persistent issue, it is connected to a consumer desire.

This desire, however manufactured it may be, is worthy of study. Pipher (2001) observed how these desires are very real, even if the advertisements are pure fantasy: "Advertisers exploit our very real human desires for connection, calmness, respect and excitement" (p. 12). Nowhere is this more apparent than the very real emotion of desire for a better life, and the selling of aspiration for better material goods and lifestyle achievement. The next section considers how aspiration is powerful and persuasive, and is important to include in the literature review because it establishes the cultural and media environment in which advertising frames are communicated. As Gamson and Modigliani (1989) argue, the media do not create frames but instead work within culturally relevant and recognizable symbols. Thus, it is important to establish for this study what scholars currently understand about the cultural and media environment related to consumer cards, aspiration, and advertisements.
F. **Selling Aspiration**

In considering aspiration as powerful and persuasive, it is first helpful to include a reminder of what is aspiration. Aspiration is a goal we hope to achieve and work hard to achieve (Sherwood, 1989). Aspiration may be an intrinsic and pursued for personal satisfaction, or extrinsic and can be praised by others (Kasser, 2005). Extrinsic aspirations may take the form of acquiring a new material good or a particular lifestyle (Plangol & Easterlin, 2008; Barry, Chaney & Chaney, 2011). There is a relationship between material good and lifestyle aspirations, as noted in Featherstone's (2007) observation in the previous section – our commodities reflect ourselves and our status. This dissertation seeks to examine and understand how aspirations are framed on consumer card web sites, and how different frames deliver insight into a divided post-recession economy.

It has long been understood that media play an important role in establishing and reinforcing class boundaries. Bourdieu (1984) explains how cultural knowledge contributes to cultural boundaries, and such knowledge is communicated by a society's cultural intermediaries who he described as "… all the occupations involving presentation and representation…” (p. 359). The news media serve to reinforce what it means to belong to a certain class (Newton, Dunleavy, Okrusch, & Martinez, 2004), and news media coverage is overwhelmingly shaped by elites (Grabber, 1997; Soley, 1992; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Entman, 1989; Druckman, 2001) but promotes a middle class perspective on events (van Dijk, 2001).

Although news stories rely on a middle class perspective, advertisements are aspirational and promote the idea of class ascension through consumption. The U.S. does not have fixed social hierarchies and commodities serve as an indicator of social status (Potter, 1958). As a result, our possessions are extensions of ourselves and contribute to how we self-identify and see
ourselves in the world (Tuan, 1980; James, 1980; Belk, 1988). Acquiring certain commodities, particularly those that are identified as representative of a specific social class, allows us to reinforce our self-constructed class identity and believe we are successfully communicating this identity to others.

Glennie (1995) argued that the association of specific consumptive practices with certain lifestyles had deep historical roots. He observed that although lesser and working class consumers in the nineteenth century did not have access to the consumer goods enjoyed by middle and upper class consumers, the poorer classes still had knowledge of these goods. Fashion, for example, was a consumer good that not all people could afford. But Glennie argued the poorer classes still understood the value of the fashionable clothing and associated it with a better lifestyle.

Lury (2001) argues that all advertisers accept advertisements as fundamentally aspirational – that the purchase of a new product is somehow an improvement over those currently held by the consumer. Buying a new shower curtain, for example, has little reflection on a person's status or style. But it is an improvement on the old shower curtain which was worn and perhaps unhygienic. However, Lury also argues that not all products can be sold under the pretense of aspiration: "People on the whole quite simply do not 'aspire' to soap powder, canned soup, microwave snacks, or a current account that pays interest….they may appreciate differentiated offerings, but do not see the purchase of a microwave snack as intrinsically aspirational" (p. 93).

Not all products can be sold under the pretense of aspiration because they are not status symbols and cannot be associated with a higher social class. This is important to note because this dissertation examines advertisements for three card types – two of which are associated with
consumers who operate primarily outside the mainstream banking system, some due to choice, and others due to exclusion. Although not all products can be associated as status symbols, products can be framed as representative of a certain socioeconomic class and its experiences (Lury, 2001).

This advertising practice of stratifying products by class association has deep historical roots. Veblen (1899) wrote of his observations in the changes of elite consumption patterns from private to conspicuous to distinguish themselves from those below them. The upper classes conspicuously consumed "the best in food, drink, narcotics, shelter, services, ornaments, apparel, weapons and accoutrements, amusements, amulets, and idols of divinity" (p. 190). Advertising quickly reflected the desire for the lesser classes to emulate the elite experience through consumption and Marchand (1985) observed how dish soap, cold cream and yeast advertisements from the 1920s all relied on references to European nobility in order to associate the products with social eminence. None of these products could be sold under the pretense of aspiration but they could do as Veblen (1899) observed was so highly desired – allow the lesser classes to imitate the tastes of those in the classes above.

Of course, a product or item loses value to the upper class when it becomes available to the masses. Travel is an example of a commodity that was once reserved for those who could afford a plane ticket, but is now an industry that depends on mass consumption. Urry and Larson (2012) explain how the travel industry has become, and continues to be, a stratified industry that serves to demonstrate who a person is and the status he or she holds based on their travel purchases: "Holiday merrymaking is a form of conspicuous consumption in which status attributions are made on the basis of where one has stayed and that depends in part upon what other people are like who also stay there" (p. 40). Yet, this observation is not as straightforward
as it seems. Credit interrupts this hierarchy and connects a person's lifestyle aspiration with the credit needed to demonstrate (or feign) access to particular commodities. However, many consumers cannot or choose not to access credit. The next section further explores how aspiration relates to varying socioeconomic groups with distinct experiences and consumptive needs.

G. Framing Social Class

Because consumer goods can be used to communicate class membership, consumer goods are communicators, and not just utilities (Featherstone, 1990). People receive a steady stream of information about other people just by evaluating their consumer goods. This means we believe we have an understanding of a person's style, personality, or lifestyle based on the products they purchase. The information or understanding on what it means to belong to a certain socioeconomic class and the aspiration to advance to a higher socioeconomic status might be reflected in card advertisements and promotions as well as the actual cards. This makes the inquiry into consumer cards application web sites necessary to study. There are several ways in which prepaid, secured, and credit cards stratify consumers based on credit score and frame who is the target audience and how the card should fit into their lives.

The card issuers structure their offerings within the existing hierarchy established by the larger economy as well as the credit scoring systems. Manning (2000) argued that a hierarchical system was established within credit cards in order to maintain the social order. This was due to the mass introduction of credit cards in the 1960s which threatened class distinction by enabling consumers of varying backgrounds to purchase goods previously associated with the elite and upper middle classes. Thus, card companies created a hierarchy with "preferred" and "prestige" cards in order to distinguish between those who did need credit and those who did not (p. 25).
Card companies operate within the existing structure of social class to frame who is entitled to which type of card and how the card will add significant value to their lives. Mandell (1990) argued that the varying card colors such as platinum, gold, and black were created as a way to distinguish elite card holders with greater access to membership perks. Lewis (1991) also observed how card companies promoted socioeconomic hierarchy through a classification of different card types. American Express, for example, has its own class system that is color coded to demonstrate the stratified levels of membership. Green is the most basic level of membership and allows the consumer to become a cardholder but offers limited perks. The next level, gold allows consumers access to privileges such as concierge services or rewards points. Platinum enables access to airport clubs and travel privileges such as no foreign transaction fee. Black is the mysterious, invitation only card marketed as an elite card for the super affluent: "American Express markets its card as a badge that says, *I am a financial success*, like pulling out a fat wad of c-notes in a silver money clip from your breast pocket, only not as gross" (p. 130).

Similarly, the enforcement of the established socioeconomic hierarchy enables card companies to frame the cards as a tool to demonstrate achievement of a particular social class. Kendall (2008) examined the framing of social class and argued that the American Express slogan, "Membership has its benefits" strategically frames the card as an instrument of the upper class. She suggested the motto does three important things to frame the card as elite. First, membership provided individuals with a variety of scarce resources that were not available to the masses. Second, membership delivered a sense of personal ownership to local entertainment establishments (i.e. – let's meet for drinks at *my club*). And third, membership increased prestige and social standing. Kendall's observation is particularly insightful for this dissertation as it opens space to consider how other slogans reinforce social class.
Card marketing is influenced by economic conditions as well as cultural behavior on how to display status (O'Guinn, Allen & Semenik, 2012). For example, the introduction of affinity cards in the 1980s demonstrated the U.S. cultural behavior on how to display status. An affinity card is a prepaid or credit card that is associated with an organization, charity, or institution. Langley (2008) explained how affinity cards represented a partnership between a credit card company (e.g. Visa) and a special interest group that projected a particular sense of self or class status (e.g. the University of Illinois alumni club). Consumers prefer affinity cards associated with non-profit organizations (Woo, Hock & Foo, 2006), and consumers prefer programs that grant a preferred member status or preferential treatment within the special interest group (Gruen, 2000).

The marketing of such cards was shaped by the cultural behavior on how to display status, and analyzing past campaigns provides insight to who we were as consumers and how we evolved. Similarly, there is great benefit in analyzing the advertising on consumer credit card application web sites in order to have a sense of the current cultural behavior on how to display status, how it might be influenced by economic conditions, and what this might indicate about shifting consumer norms. The next section prepares such an analysis by considering how the literature on how consumer cards are advertised.

H. Card Advertisements

Advertising researchers have identified two main categories of advertising strategy – informational and transformative approaches (Lee, 2011). With informative approaches, the advertiser seeks to persuade the consumer by providing information and facts about the brand or product that will make the consumer feel educated and more confident about their purchase (Puto
& Wells, 1984). In contrast, transformative approaches persuade the consumer by focusing on the experience they will have during consumption or by purchasing the brand (Puto & Wells, 1984; Deighton, Romner, & McQueen, 1988).

In examining a different area of financial services, Lee (2011) conducted a content analysis of magazine advertisements for mutual funds and found the preference for transformative or informational approaches was variant on the economic climate. During 2007, a time of prosperity, about 65% of the advertisements were transformative and suggested how a mutual fund connected the consumer with a desirable experience. After the 2008 economic collapse, the approach shifted to favor an informational strategy and the text primarily explained how the mutual fund functioned as well as the benefits of opening a mutual fund with a specific financial institution.

Although the literature regarding consumer card advertisements is still building, several scholars have conducted textual or critical analysis of credit card advertisements to provide a general understanding of the context in which credit cards are marketed. Klein (1999) analyzed print and television credit card advertisements and found that credit cards were marketed as a facilitator of dreams and that such advertising was directly linked with the desire for symbolic goods in a competitive society. Klein's analysis enabled him to examine how credit cards were marketed and he determined that the major credit card companies focused on specific consumer groups and advertised their products as somehow maximizing the consumer's lifestyle. His insight connected with the observations by Cronin (2000) that advertisers see themselves as a type of cultural intermediary who construct, reflect, and communicate consumer lifestyle and class membership. In Klein's analysis, for example, MasterCard focused on the average consumer and family living which suggested the MasterCard advertisers were communicating to
consumers what they believed it means to be middle class. This was communicated in the advertisements through the various storylines as well as the slogan, "For everything else, there's MasterCard," which positioned the card as a tool for helping consumers reach their fullest, middle-class potential.

Similarly, Klein (1999) found Visa focused on travel and self-actualization, which connected to the early observations by Urry and Larson (2012) that the travel experience was stratified by class and those interested in obtaining or maintaining a high status used travel to signify their distinction from the mass consumer. Klein (1999) also observed how American Express focused on the business traveler, an individual who was traveling with a purpose, or a higher meaning. However, it is important to note that although MasterCard advertises the middle class experience, it does offer several secured credit card options. Because these cards are often the only option available to consumers with poor or limited credit, there is a possibility the middle class experience and association is being advertised to lesser class consumers.

Klein's analysis examined the advertisements that were communicated through the mass media towards consumers of most socioeconomic levels. Building on the understanding presented by Klein and other advertising scholars, this dissertation takes a more narrow focus and examines the frames advertised toward consumers of specific socioeconomic levels who are seeking consumer cards with distinct uses. Consumers of varying socioeconomic levels have different experiences and interests in the post-recession economy and the aspirations associated with these advertisements may lend insight into these experiences.

Other scholars have contributed to the understanding of card advertising by noting the use of celebrities to advertise credit cards and how these celebrities represent a select viewpoint for interpreting the card and the social class it represents. American Express uses a steady stream

Inquiry into card advertisements allowed scholars to understand that it was rare for financial institutions to step away from aspiration. In the early 1990s, US Bank ran a series of television commercials ridiculing the excesses of the 1980s in which the actors mocked the typical credit card clichés that present a purchasable world of pleasure. Goldman and Papson (1996) described the strategy as presenting US Bank on the side of the consumer, disgusted by the same cliché and concerned about responsible credit card use. Consumer groups appreciated the ad campaign but it was never replicated by other companies and US Bank did not continue with the strategy.

Scholars examining credit card advertisements have also noted the distinct language used in credit card advertisements. This distinct language stratifies consumers and promotes a desire for an improved socioeconomic standing. Language is strategically used in credit card advertisements to identify credit worthy individuals and reinforce that they are members who are valued, pre-approved, preferred and select (Williams, 2005). The language used to communicate appreciation to certain customers is a sharp contrast to the language used to describe those who are meant to be declined, or worthy of penalty and exclusion (Williams, 2005; Burton, 2008).

The language – penalty, elite, or otherwise – will be analyzed further on the 20 consumer card web sites to identify the distinct consumer experiences in the post-recession economy that emerged from the consumer card application web sites. In addition to analyzing the language that identifies and reveals distinct consumer experiences, this dissertation uses Gamson and
Modigliani’s (1989) approach to frame analysis to identify and examine the prominent frames regarding material and lifestyle aspiration. Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach to framing provides insight into the internal structure of the prominent frames which communicate a larger meaning about card ownership in the post-recession economy. The next chapter further details the method of analysis to identify the prominent frames on consumer card application websites.
IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

Consumer card application web sites strategically promote prepaid, secured, and traditional credit cards, start the application process, render an instant decision, and commit the consumer to card ownership. Thousands of consumer card application web sites exist. Consumers primarily apply for cards online (ComScore, 2011), and many search engines such as Google Advisor cater to card seekers. These search engines enable consumers to self-identify their credit score and find available cards based on their current score. Clearly, the possibilities for examining such application web sites are vast. This chapter includes the questions driving this dissertation, details how the sample was obtained, and explains how the web sites were analyzed.

A. Research Questions

Framing is the process of highlighting specific aspects of an issue or event in order to promote a particular interpretation (Entman, 1993). Frames are actively set in the mass media as a type of reference point for discussing and suggesting ways to interpret public events (Tuchman, 1978). In advertisements, visual frames reinforce the frames presented in the text and contribute to long-term recall (Schmitt & Simmson, 1997). These images may leave the first impression (Rodgers & Thorson, 2000), and have the power to evoke emotion (Messaris, 1997). These powerful symbols derive from culturally available ideas and understanding, which are readily recognizable by an audience (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Using a frame analysis to identify and examine the frames present on these card web sites, this study asks:

RQ1: What frames emerge from the visuals present on consumer card application web sites?
This question seeks to understand how the card companies visually frame the experience of card usage and ownership, the aspirations included in these frames, and how such frames vary by card type. The literature has established that advertisements almost always include a framed message (Shimp, Urbany & Camlin, 1988), communicate visually and/or textually, and are designed to reinforce each other. In reinforcing the preferred meaning through both visual and textual information, the advertisement reduces distraction and increases the probability the consumer will be able to recall the advertisement and its intended message (Shimp et. al, 1988; Edell & Staelin, 1983).

In addition to supporting frame interpretation, visuals in advertisements strategically communicate emotion. Emotion is frequently manipulated by advertisers in order to encourage a particular action, yet visual frames are consistently understudied (Coleman, 2010). Therefore, the first research question seeks to further understand the visual framing in advertisements and contribute to future research on advertising frames. Phillips (2004) called for more scholarship outside the “shock and awe” of natural disasters and war that has dominated visual framing studies. In examining the visuals present on consumer card application web sites, this research question seeks to understand the intended message regarding a ubiquitous payment device and determine how these frames lend insight into the experience of varying consumer groups in the post-recession economy.

Next, framing in advertising limits a message’s range of meaning and directs how consumers think about a product, brand, or entire corporation (Hallahan, 1999). In this sense, framing narrows a consumer’s viewpoint on how to approach an advertisement, and framing produces a more focused consumer judgment about products and brands (Edell and Staelin, 1983). Marchand (1992) suggested that advertising establishes frames of reference which
defined the boundaries of public discussion and determined relevant factors in a situation. These frames developed through images and slogans that worked into America's common discourse through repetition, bold display and ingenuity. Marchand's observation fit well with Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) definition that a "frame is a central organizing idea… for making sense of relevant issues, suggesting what is at issue" (pg. 3). Such scholarship prompts the following research question:

RQ2: What frames are prominent in the promotional text on consumer card application web sites?

The second research question seeks to determine how the card companies frame the experience of card usage and to identify how such frames are presented toward the varying consumer groups who apply for cards with distinct purposes. Scholars accept that advertisers use readily recognizable symbols and phrases in order to be understood by as wide of an audience as possible. Advertisers also embed layers of deeper meaning to target consumer longing and aspiration. The goal of the second research question is to examine the entire “package of discourse” as established by Gamson & Modigliani (1987; 1989) that convey the frames’ substance.

In examining the “entire package of discourse” present in the promotional text, the second research question seeks to further understand the varying consumer experiences in the post-recession economy. The 2008 economic collapse deepened the fractured American dream in which many Americans’ financial security and access to the credit system was diminished (Pew, 2010; Ratcliffe, McKernan, Theodos & Kalish, 2014; FDIC, 2012), while a select few saw their prosperity grow (Wolff, 2012). In studying the promotional material on consumer card application web sites, this dissertation seeks to identify how socioeconomic groups are framed
and uses aspiration as a lens to determine how the American dream is encapsulated and enabled through these lender frames.

Lastly, card marketing is influenced by cultural behaviors on how to display status (O’Guinn, Allen & Semenik, 2012). Socioeconomic stratification requires consumers to maintain and reinforce their status through consumption (Manning, 2000). Several scholars argue that credit cards intentionally mimic the existing socioeconomic hierarchy in order to not threaten the social order, and language is used in credit card advertisements to stratify customers (Klein, 1999). Consumers with good and excellent credit ratings are positively addressed through word choices such as valued, pre-approved, preferred and select. Consumers with poor or limited credit are negatively addressed through word choices such as declined, penalty, exclusion (Williams, 2005; Burton, 2008). Similarly, Kendall (2008) argues that credit card mottos such as American Express’s *Membership has its benefits* are used to strategically position the card as an instrument of the upper class. Manning (2000), Mandell (1990), and Lewis (1991) argue that the color system used by companies such as American Express is used to reinforce a socioeconomic hierarchy. Therefore, there is opportunity to question if the card promotional material supports and communicates such stratification. Using a discourse analysis to more deeply scrutinize the text, this prompts the following question:

RQ3: What ideas of hierarchy or elite markers emerged from the consumer card application web sites?

The goal of the third research question is to more deeply consider what the language reflects about the distinct, competing consumer groups and their varying post-recession experiences. In particular, this question seeks to further consider the cultural climate in the post-recession economy and the varying responses consumer groups have to the mainstream banking
system that caused the turmoil of the 2008 collapse. It has long been understood that media play an important role in establishing and reinforcing class boundaries (Bourdieu, 1984; Newton, Dunleavy, Okrusch, & Martinez, 2004). Advertisements are aspirational and promote the idea of class ascension through consumption (Potter, 1958; Tuan, 1980; James, 1980; Belk, 1988), and advertisers accept advertisements as fundamentally aspirational (Lury, 2001). Because consumer goods can be used to communicate class membership, consumer goods are communicators, and not just utilities (Featherstone, 1990).

Card companies operate within the existing structure of social class to frame who is entitled to which type of card and how the card will add significant value to their lives (Mandell, 1990). Scholars have found that credit cards promote a larger socioeconomic hierarchy through classification of card types (Lewis, 1991); elite language (Manning, 2000); membership associations (Kendall, 2008); and partnerships with non-profits (Woo, Hock & Foo, 2006), universities (Langley, 2008), or organizations that provide special or preferred treatment (Gruen, 2000). Therefore, the third research question seeks to determine how the card web sites communicate socioeconomic status and privilege in order to further understand the consumer experience in the post-recession economy.

**B. Method**

This dissertation used a two-part method of analysis that began with a frame analysis to address the first two research questions and determine which frames emerged from the consumer card web sites and how these frames varied by card type. This was followed with a discourse analysis to address the third research question and further examine the card communication and
how the consumer experience was communicated. This section begins by describing how the sample of cards analyzed in this study were obtained and then details the method of analysis.

1. **Sample**

I created a list of credit cards after searching prominent online card databases compiled by credit card/personal finance web sites such as Credit.com or CreditCards.com. These databases were located through a Google search due to the fact it is the most popular search engine used by American adults online (Purcell, Brenner & Rainie, 2012). Card names and web addresses were added to a directory, and duplicates were deleted. Only consumer card application web sites directed at consumers with high or low credit were included in order to create a point of comparison. Excluding cards directed at all or average consumers was due to the decreasing percentages of consumers who fall into a middle ground (FICO, 2012; Horwich, 2010; White, 2012). The search resulted in the identification of 97 credit, secured, and prepaid cards directed specifically at consumers of high or low credit. Next, a list by the Federal Reserve Board of the 50 largest bank holding companies was retrieved online (Federal Reserve Board, 2012). Each bank web site was reviewed and four new cards were added to the list.

The search resulted in a total of 101 cards; 38 were directed at consumers of bad or limited credit; 63 were directed at consumers of good or excellent credit. Next, the card list was further narrowed to 20 cards in order to limit the sample and enable a deeper, qualitative analysis. A list of the six most popular card brands (US Census 2010) was used to select one card from each brand until 20 cards were identified. The final sample did not contain an equal number of cards by brand or card type. As detailed in the following table, the sample included five prepaid, five secured, and 10 traditional credit cards:
TABLE 1: FINAL SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Card Name</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Card Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>iBankUp Visa Prepaid Card</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>Prepaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>First Progress Premium Elite MasterCard</td>
<td>MasterCard</td>
<td>Secured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Matrix Credit Card (Discover)</td>
<td>Discover</td>
<td>Secured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ace Elite Visa Prepaid Card</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>Prepaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Walmart Money card MasterCard²</td>
<td>MasterCard</td>
<td>Prepaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Upside Visa Prepaid Card</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>Prepaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>BuyRIGHT Prepaid MasterCard</td>
<td>MasterCard</td>
<td>Prepaid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>US Bank Secured Visa</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>Secured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>First Premiere Bank Credit Card</td>
<td>MasterCard</td>
<td>Secured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>AeroMexico Visa Secured Card</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>Secured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Bellco Platinum Rewards Visa Card</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Chase Freedom MasterCard</td>
<td>MasterCard</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Discover It Student Card</td>
<td>Discover</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>American Express Gold Card</td>
<td>AmEx</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Citi Thank You</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Capital One Cash Rewards - Excellent Credit³</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Barclaycard Rewards Master Card – Excellent Credit</td>
<td>MasterCard</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The Platinum Card from American Express</td>
<td>AmEx</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>United MileagePlus Explorer Card</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Capital One Platinum Prestige Credit Card</td>
<td>MasterCard</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Unit of analysis

The study of card application web sites required perimeters on what content or links would be included in the analysis. The unit of analysis for this study was the consumer card application web site. The term *home page* was defined as the first screen of the card application web site. All content on the home page including fine print, photos, and other visual content was analyzed. Home pages included content boxes with multiple tabs that provided

---

² The Walmart Money Card is a prepaid card offered by Walmart. It is not a store card that can be used only at Walmart. It is a checking alternative card that can be used at any retailer.

³ Later in the summer of 2013, the card name was changed to the Capital One QuickSilver Cash Rewards Card. The data collection and analysis was completed before the change.
additional information but did not lead the consumer away from the home page. The examination
of the different texts and images was consistent with Orgad’s (2008) observation that online
qualitative inquiry should cast a broad net. She suggested that "mapping the landscape" of web
sites did not mean "focusing on one single thing" (p. 34).

*Second level page* was defined as a link from the homepage to related promotional
material about the benefits, costs, fees, financial literacy, services, or rewards. The second level
page included pop up boxes or chat boxes. The second level page was not a link to a different
card, other financial instrument such as checking accounts, corporate information, site map, or
site tools. The second level page also was not a link to card member agreements that apply to all
cards issued by the bank. This study did not go past the home or secondary pages due to the
understanding that online shoppers are increasingly abandoning web sites in which the shopping
process is too lengthy (Feather, 2000; Moore & Mathews, 2008; Mulpuru, Hult, Freeman Evans
& McGowan, 2010; ComScore, 2011.)

3. **Data collection**

   Multiple copies exist of the card application web sites. These copies varied in
length and appearance and change based on how the web site was accessed. There were three
primary ways to locate the card web sites: 1) Through a link on a card database web site; 2) By
typing the card name into Google; 3) By directly visiting the bank web site and clicking through
to prepaid, secured, or credit card options. This dissertation used the longer versions found
through the second route, a Google search, because these copies were the most extensive and
provided the most material to analyze. The longer version found through the Google search was
also the method most representative of the consumer experience. The 2011 ComScore study
found that more than one-third of credit card shoppers began the process with a Google search. Of these Google users, 75% went on to submit an application.

The data collection involved a three-part process, and a Microsoft Word file folder was created for each card web site. Each file folder contained three documents – one for the image bank, one for screen shots, and one for text. Each homepage and all the secondary level pages were visited in order to collect these three types of data sets. After the data was collected, a one week period was designated to determine if there were changes to the web sites based on changes in time or day. Studies indicate there are days and times when consumers favor online shopping, and I was interested to determine if the card web sites changed in appearance during peak times (Tuttle, 2012; Clifford, 2011). There were no changes to the text based on time or day for all 20 of the card application web sites.

4. **Method of analysis**

This study used a mixed-method approach to examine the 20 consumer card application web sites. A frame analysis was used to examine the first two research questions, and a discourse analysis was used to address the third research question. This section begins by describing frame analysis and details how the method was used in the inquiry. Then, a description of discourse analysis is provided as well as a detailed account of how the third research question was addressed.

Creed, Langstraat, and Scully (2002) describe frame analysis as a process in which the elements that hold a text together are scrutinized for meaning. The purpose of the analysis is to understand the larger meaning produced by the packaged elements. Similarly, Pan and Kosicki (1993) define frame analysis as the process of examining a system of organized elements that signify the promotion of a specific idea. Both definitions share the understanding that smaller
elements are intentionally utilized to create a larger meaning. This is consistent with other framing scholars’ description on the purpose of frame analysis. Reese (2007) observes how frame analysis considers both the larger message as well as the cultural context that surrounds the text. And Van Gorp (2010) suggests “the heart of a framing analysis is to identify the framing and reasoning devices and to relate them to a condensing symbol, which is part of a shared culture” (p.92).

Examining both the cultural context as well as the role of emotion is crucial, according to Entman (2010). He criticized framing research that was “strikingly apolitical” and divorced framing “from its use as a tool for exerting power in a system of relationships” (p. 332). He continued to suggest that studies merely analyzing a text for systematic bias weren’t actual framing studies or even properly conceived as framing studies. Rather than testing frame manipulations with a small sample of study participants, Entman (2010) encouraged framing scholars to examine texts for “enduring patterns of framing” (p 334).

According to Gamson (1992), framing was primarily studied through content analysis in order to determine how key players characterize events and issues. Krippendorf (1980) defined content analysis as a “research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context” (p. 21). In his definition, Krippendorf (1980) intentionally removed elements from previous definitions that he found restrictive. More specifically, previous definitions had limited content analysis to quantitative research, and Krippendorf argued that qualitative methods had proven successful because “messages do not always have a single meaning” (p. 22). In contrast, quantitative content analysis identifies key categories within a particular message set and takes a systematic approach in determining which categories are most meaningful (Neuendorf, 2002).
As a qualitative process, frame analysis requires the researcher to read through all the content or view all the images and determine how an issue is framed. The researcher might use existing literature in order to understand how to approach the text, but scholars typically identify the frames during the analysis (Charmaz, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The process involves organizing the text and photographs so that careful readings can observe prominent themes and reoccurring patterns. The strength to such a process is that insight can result from such deep readings. However, such insight lacks objectivity, and Kuypers (2010) observed that a weakness to the qualitative approach to frame analysis is how subjectivity is incorporated into the final product. Although the analysis is weakened by subjectivity, there is benefit to such an openness to the inquiry. Kuypers (2010) noted that quantitative frame analysis comes with more rigid research questions or a hypothesis that is subject to testing. Qualitative frame analysis, such as this study, uses more vague questions to open the inquiry to a broader interpretation.

The first research question asked which frames emerged from the visuals present on the consumer card application web sites. To answer this question, the visuals for each card web site were organized into separate Word documents. Visuals included photos, logos, graphs, illustrations, maps, and videos. Each image was viewed individually and then compared with the all visuals for the particular card. Screen shots were also observed and notes were taken on the size and placement of each visual as well as notable colors or shapes used in the design. Banning and Coleman (2009) argued that placement, prominence, and other visual cues are part of framing and must be included in a visual frame analysis.

For visuals that included depictions of people, notes were taken about the models’ gender, race and age. The setting for each of these images was also noted as well as the models’ activities. Additionally, the models’ general appearance (e.g. clothing) was noted, and their
facial expressions were observed and recorded. Facial expressions convey different meanings and can be strategically manipulated to communicate a preferred interpretation (Coleman & Banning, 2006; Coleman & Wu, 2006). Coleman (2010) further argued that images of people draw the viewer in emotionally and also provide rich information in a familiar and predictable manner. Additionally, scholars have found that images of people with positive expressions help create a sense of credibility, particularly if the people have relaxed body orientations and friendly expressions such as eye contact and smiling (Burgoon, Birk, & Pfau, 1990).

During the analysis, I also noted structural features such as camera angles, distance, spatial arrangements, and other manipulative elements. Scholars such as Grabe (1996), Moriarty and Popvich (1991) have argued that such manipulative features change perception and are not neutral elements. Additionally, I also observed whether the photographs had realistic qualities. Messaris and Abraham (2001) describe photographs as unobtrusive and capable of imitating the appearance of the real world, which makes visuals an effective framing tool.

Visuals for each card were scrutinized, beginning with the first card on the final sample list. The prepaid cards were analyzed first, then the secured cards, and lastly the traditional credit cards. Each card was analyzed individually and then compared with others in the category. Distinguishing features and patterns emerged within and across each card category to determine which similarities and differences existed. Through the course of the analysis, prominent frames emerged and indicated multiple frames by the card companies as to how consumers should picture the experience of card ownership and usage. These frames were analyzed within each card category as well as the three card categories.

The second research question asked which frames emerged from the promotional text on the 20 consumer card application web sites. To answer this question, a Microsoft Word
A document was created for each of the 20 card web sites. The promotional text was copied, pasted, and saved in the corresponding document. Promotional text including all text such as captions, headlines, and slogans. Transcripts for videos were created and included in the saved text. Additionally, the promotional text was reviewed for information regarding costs, services, fees, or fines, and each card’s corresponding document included this information organized into a quick reference. The word counts for each card was noted and notable differences in word count by card type was recorded. Similar to the visual frame analysis, screen shots were available for each card web site and were used as a point of comparison to note the placement and size of passages.

The frame analysis for the promotional text began with an online word frequency counter. The promotional text for each card was pasted into the frequency counter. Prominent words for each web site were recorded and set aside. The purpose of using the frequency counter was due to Entman’s (2004) advisement that words making up a frame are “more noticeable, memorable, and emotionally charged” (pg. 6). Although some highly resonant words might not need repetition, he suggested that “magnitude taps the prominence and repetition of the framing words and images” (p. 6). Therefore, the frequency measure was followed by a manual textual analysis in which prominent words were highlighted in the document and the context and position were observed.

In analyzing the promotional text for prominent frames, I paid attention to the “package of elements” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; 1989) such as catchphrases, metaphors, exemplars, or depictions. I took notes on the use of reasoning devices as Van Gorp (2010) suggested and related how these devices were a condensed symbol that was part of a shared culture.

---

4 http://www.writewords.org.uk/word_count.asp
considered the cultural context in which these framing devices occurred and questioned how these devices formed a larger message – that was as Reese (2007) observed – part of the cultural contest that surrounded the text. In examining the package of elements that formed a larger meaning, I also scrutinized the text for references to lifestyle or material goods aspirations, and general descriptions on how card usage could improve the consumer’s lifestyle or financial well-being. I took notes on these elements and remained mindful of Entman’s (2010) argument that frame analysis must take account of emotion as well as power.

Wood and Kroger’s (2000) definition of discourse included all spoken and written forms of communication, which would apply to both the text and the images found on the 20 consumer card application web sites. Discourse analysis identifies the common themes and patterns within a text, and exposes the relationship between language and the exercise of power (Fairclough, 1995). Although definitions and approaches to discourse analysis vary, the key premise in the literature is that discourse must be examined within the surrounding social and cultural context. Van Dijk (1985) observed there is an interdependence between the text and social and cultural context, and he further argued that discourse should be examined “not only as form, meaning and mental process, but also as complex structures and hierarchies for interaction and social practice and their functions in context, society and culture” (1997, p. 6). Discourse analysis is criticized for being subjective and lacking scientific rigor (Hope, 2010), particularly because only one coder is used and reliability is not tested. However, this method is also interpretive, explanatory, and mindful of history (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

A discourse analysis was used for the third research question in order to create a deeper articulation of the frame analysis. The discourse analysis considered both the visual and textual promotions, and used the findings from the frame analysis to understand the preferred
interpretations of card usage and how such frames varied across the card categories. The
discourse analysis also relied on the existing literature regarding credit card communication for
examples of elite markers and ideas about hierarchy. Scholars such as Manning (2000) and Klein
(1999) identified that a color system was used in order to create a recognizable hierarchy.
American Express, for example, has an entry-level card, the standard green card, and then the
more elite gold and platinum cards. Ideas of hierarchy are also communicated through slogans
such as American Express’s “membership has privilege” (Kendall, 2008). Therefore, I began the
discourse analysis by examining the card names, color schemes, and slogans. Each card’s
information was compared within and across the card categories. In this examination, I also
considered each card’s affinities, partnerships, or other associations with organizations that held
elite associations or delivered special treatment as a result of the partnership.

Next, I considered the use of penalty and prestige words in the promotional text.
Williams (2005) observed that card companies were more likely to address consumers with a
lower credit score with penalty words such as fees or costs. In contrast, consumers with higher
credit scores were more apt to be addressed with words of privilege. To determine the usage of
penalty and prestige words, I first used an online word frequency counter to establish the
presence of such words for each card type. The promotional text for each card was entered into
the counter and I made note of the most frequently occurring words. I then used a manual
process to highlight the words within the text, consider the placement, and the context in which
the words occurred.

The promotional text was reread multiple times and notes were taken on the tone and
language use. I looked for repetitions, patterns, and redundancy in the card communication. I
considered the ways in which the current credit system was structured as a hierarchy and how the
text reinforced or challenged the existing economy. I also considered the ways in which the experiences of various consumer groups in the post-recession economy were addressed, ignored, or described by the card communications. Lastly, my notes were organized and analyzed with regard to credit access, socioeconomic status, and credit as an indicator of lifestyle aspirational achievement. The results of my inquiry begin in the next chapter with my findings for the first research question.
V. VISUALIZING CONSUMER CARDS

The first research question asked which prominent frames emerged from the visuals present on consumer card application web sites. The question sought to understand how the card companies visually framed the experience of card usage and ownership, the aspirations included in these frames, and how such frames varied by card type. The goal of this question was to identify the overarching frames which the advertisers perceived were effective in persuading a diverse target market. A qualitative frame analysis was used to identify and examine the prominent frames found on the 20 card web sites. The frames identified in this chapter served to inform the discourse analysis in chapter seven, which further examined how the advertisers utilized separate discourses that operated within the shared frames identified in this chapter.

This visual frame analysis first considered the individual, packaged elements that produced a larger meaning when considered as a whole. Framing scholars have argued that smaller elements were a part of an organized system that promoted a specific interpretation (Creed et al., 2002; Pan & Kosicki, 1992). Guided by Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach to framing, interpretive packages, this study’s visual frame analysis examined the multiple elements that structured a greater meaning to the message. This approach also considered the placement, prominence, and other visual cues typically considered in a visual frame analysis (Coleman & Banning, 2006). During the analysis, I accepted that each card web site might produce numerous frames. As a result, the visual frame analysis found multiple prominent frames present within each card category, and one frame was even shared across two card categories.
These shared frames, however, did not present the same preferred reading. Rather, the intended message had a different meaning when interpreted within the cultural context specific to the targeted consumer group. These varying messages offered insight as to how distinct socioeconomic groups were framed, the suggested aspiration for these competing consumer groups, as well as how the American dream was encapsulated and enabled through these lender frames. These frames also offered insight as to how the advertisers broadly approached a fractured target market and amalgamated their motivations and experiences based on their participation in the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems. Advertising frames have the ability to deliver a unified message to disparate groups, and the discourse analysis in chapter seven further examines the separate discourses which operate within these shared frames in order to appeal to distinct audiences. The goal of the current chapter is to examine the broad, shared frames and to determine which frames were used to construct a unified message that was persuasive to a diverse audience.

In order to clearly unpack and consider these varying frames and competing messages, this chapter presents the findings to the first research question by detailing the results by card type. For each card type, the section begins by explaining the notable visual elements and how the frames were identified. The section advances into a further description of how the frames were presented and the greater meaning of the message. The results begin with prepaid cards, followed by secured cards, and then traditional credit cards. For the shared frame found in two of the card types, a brief description was provided to explain how the frame was present in the visuals marketed to other consumer groups and how the meaning was distinct and reflected the experiences of competing consumer groups. This comparison enabled a greater understanding of
how the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems directed consumer limitations and choices, and informed the discourse analysis for chapter seven.

A. **Visual elements – Prepaid Cards.**

The prepaid card web sites had 151 images that included photographs, graphics, illustrations and logos. The frame analysis identified several shared elements in the visual presentation, beginning with the most notable visual element – the presence of people. The five prepaid cards included 55 identifiable individuals posed in varying situations. An identifiable individual was defined as a person who was the clear focus of the image and whose age, race, and gender was decipherable. The model might have been in a static pose, looking directly at the camera, or photographed in a dynamic shot intended to appear candid (e.g. shopping, dining). Images of identifiable individuals did not include photographs of crowds (e.g. a crowded restaurant) in which the people were unrecognizable and the intended focus was of the ambiance or scenery. Although images of ambiance or scenery were also important and helped imitate the appearance of the real world (Messaris & Abraham, 2001), visual framing scholars found latent meaning in images of people. Burgoon et al. (1990) found that images of people help create a sense of credibility, and Coleman (2010) described images of people as capable of providing information in a rich and predictable manner. Based on this literature, the strong presence of identifiable images on prepaid card web sites might have indicated the card company web sites intended to create a sense of credibility and familiarity regarding prepaid cards.

On the prepaid card web sites, the 55 individuals appeared alone, in couples, or groups, and the total number of images with people for the five prepaid card web sites was 30 (20%). The identifiable images of people were the most prominent visual on the prepaid card web sites,
and four of the five (80%) card web sites featured identifiable individuals in large pictures on the home pages. iBankUp, ACE Elite, UPside, and BuyRight all had identifiable individuals positioned as the focal point of the homepage, and only the Walmart Money Card did not include any images of people. On the four card web sites that included images of identifiable individuals, these pictures all appeared on white backgrounds so that the eye was quickly drawn to the image and the people depicted in the photographs. The practice of placing identifiable individuals on the home pages was unique to the prepaid cards. Only two of the 10 traditional cards (20%) included identifiable individuals on the home page, and only one of the five (20%) of the secured cards did the same. Identifiable individuals were a prominent part of the prepaid card home pages as well as the secondary pages. On the prepaid card web sites that featured people, the images of identifiable individuals were always positioned as the largest visual on the page. For example, a secondary page for the ACE Elite card detailed the varying features of the card. The middle of the page was lined with 13 small images that visualized the varying features (e.g. cash in an envelope visualized the direct deposit feature; a piggy bank represented savings.) When the user clicked on the image, the text beneath the line of images changed to describe the feature. On the right, a larger version of the selected image appeared next to the text. If the user scrolled further down the page, a section devoted to “anytime alerts” was visualized with a photograph of a young Black male looking at a BlackBerry phone and smiling. The image was the largest and most notable on the page. In contrast, the smaller images of the piggy bank or cash filled envelope were about the size of the man’s hand.

The prominence and placement of identifiable individuals was unique to the prepaid cards. The secured cards, in contrast, only had 13 identifiable individuals which was 52% of the sample (n=25). It should be noted that 84% of the images of identifiable individuals on the
secured card sites appeared on just one card web site, First Progress, and did so on a sliding panel. Whereas the prepaid cards such as UPside had prominent images of people on the home page and throughout the secondary pages, First Progress only had a sliding panel on the home page that changed every five seconds so that only one person was visible at a time. The 10 traditional cards had a stronger visual presence than the secured cards, but identifiable individuals were not as prominent as the prepaid cards. The traditional cards had 42 identifiable individuals in 22 images which was 7.5% of the sample (n=295).

The visual analysis found the presence of identifiable individuals to be a key element on the prepaid card web sites. Most importantly, a central finding emerged from this element – the overrepresentation of people of color, particularly Hispanics. According to the Pew Research (2014) study on prepaid card users, almost half of the card users were white and about a quarter were Black. On prepaid card web sites, however, the identifiable individuals were primarily people of color. Of the 55 people, 18 (32.7%) were white; 17 (31%) were Hispanic; 13 (23.6%) were Black; four (7%) were Asian; 2 were mixed race (3%) and one was South Asian (1.8%). Race on the traditional card web sites will be addressed later in the chapter, but for now it is important to establish that the people who appeared in the images for the traditional cards were almost all white. The high depiction of people of color on the prepaid card web sites but not the traditional card web sites was somewhat unexpected. It was assumed the creators of these promotions would be more mindful in creating racial representations that did not overtly visualize the cards’ distinct target markets. However, the prepaid cards’ relied primarily on images of consumers of color and the traditional card web sites preferred images of white consumers. In doing so, both cards communicated the target markets were distinct by both socioeconomic and racial boundaries.
Age was another demographic boundary that was visualized in the prepaid card sample pages. According to the Pew (2014) study of prepaid cards, 46% of prepaid card users were ages 30-49, and 27% were ages 18-29. About 26% were ages 50 and older. The visuals in the prepaid card sample pages almost exclusively portrayed consumers in the 18-29 and 30-49 age groups. Forty-one (74.5%) of the identifiable individuals in the sample pages were ages 18-49, and 14 (25%) were children or young teens. No identifiable individuals older than age 50 were included.

Three of the five cards in the sample (60%) included identifiable individuals who appeared under the age of eighteen. The iBankUp and BuyRight cards each included an image of children with their parents, which visually represented the family serviced by the product. The other 12 images of children or young teens all appeared on the UPside sample pages. The UPside sample pages visualized the product’s fractured target market, which was directed at multiple groups including young adults ages 18 and older, and parents who funded or managed the card for minor or young adult children. Both consumer groups were primarily portrayed in domestic situations along with the technology used to manage the account (e.g. mobile phones, lap tops). The discourse analysis in chapter seven further explores the distinctions between the age groups and the fractured markets served by promoted product, as well as how the card companies communicated to these disparate audiences. For the current chapter, the goal was to identify the shared narratives within the visuals that unified and persuaded a diverse audience. The visual analysis confirmed the prepaid card companies in my sample were addressing a disparate audience which included consumers of varying ages and races. The visual frame analysis also observed a key visual element which indicated a shared narrative used to unify and
persuade a disparate audience. The key visual element was the consistent depiction of identifiable individuals in domestic situations.

The prepaid card sample pages consistently depicted consumers in domestic situations. Regardless of age, gender, or race -- only 13 of the 55 (23%) identifiable individuals were depicted outdoors or not at-home. Two of these images depicted people at work, one showed money management on the go, and the three images visualized families together in an outdoor setting. On the prepaid card web sites, the photographs overwhelmingly visualized the models at-home or in a nondescript space. (A nondescript space was defined as a background that did not indicate the model’s setting.) The aforementioned image on the ACE Elite card web site, for example, depicted a young Black male checking the alerts on his Blackberry device and smiling. The picture was cropped tightly around the model and there was no sense of whether he was at home, work, or a third-space such as a restaurant. In such a nondescript setting, there was no distraction in focusing on the model and the visualization of his consumer experience.

The visualization of money management was another important element observed in the images on prepaid card web sites. Three of the five web sites included images of people using a computer or a mobile phone to manage the account remotely. The UPside card web site, for example, had several images of the mobile money management possibilities. One image featured a man of South Asian descent sitting on a long beige couch with his laptop. He appeared to be in his apartment and a tall book shelf filled the background. He smiled at the screen as if writing personal checks online was a satisfying experience. (The caption for the picture indicated a feature of the card was writing personal checks online). Similarly, another picture depicted a young Hispanic woman walking down a tree-lined urban street. She wore a plaid, Burberry type jacket and focused her attention on the Blackberry device in her hand.
The images of people remotely managing the account were reinforced with smaller images and illustrations of computers, laptops, and mobile phones. All five of the prepaid web sites included these smaller images to visualize the remote element. The BuyRight card, for example, had a secondary page, entitled “Why BuyRight?” that promoted the various features of the card. At the top of the page was an image of a laptop pulled up to the BuyRight home page. The same secondary page also included three-image illustration of an arrow pointing toward a drawing of a bank positioned alongside a stack of cash. Together, the three images communicated how the card could serve as a type of bank card that enabled the consumer to deposit or withdraw cash.

Of the five prepaid cards, the Walmart Money Card used the most images of remote money management to visualize the experience of card ownership to consumers. One secondary page used eight images of a flip-phone to visually walk a consumer through the process of sending a text to locate a refill station or inquire about the balance. The site also used five smaller illustrations on various pages that used lightning bolts or arrows to depict the rapid transfer process between the bank, the card, and an electronic payroll check. These images, when considered as a whole with the other notable visual elements, create a larger meaning about the experience of card usage. The next section on visual frames further examines this greater meaning.

B. Visual frames – Prepaid Cards.

Gamson and Modigliani (1987, 1989) describe frames as the core position packaged within the symbols and language that communicate the primary viewpoint. Such frames are natural, unconscious, and communicated through larger, pre-existing shared structure of
meaning. As a result, card advertisers were not creating new viewpoints but instead working within a readily recognizable view that suggested how consumers should view the product or brand. The visual frame analysis found three frames that communicated a larger, pre-existing structure of meaning and suggested how consumers should view the product as well as his or her position in the post-recession economy. The self-reliance frame was the most prominent frame and was identified in 75 (50%) images. This frame worked in tandem with the facilitation and exculpation frames. These frames amalgamated the target demographic by their unbanked or underbanked status, and suggested how the consumer should view the promoted product and approach the card experience based on his or her participation in the credit/debt system.

This section examines the overarching frames that connected the experiences of a diverse target market. In doing so, the visual frame analysis identified what the card advertisers perceived were the unifying experiences among the diverse target market. The three primary frames described in this section – self-reliance, facilitation, and exculpation – served to inform the discourse analysis in chapter seven. These visual frames did not preclude any individualistic frames observed later in this study, rather these visual frames provided insight as to how the advertisers simultaneously addressed the motivations of a fractured target market. Although specific motivations among this fractured consumer group were not broadly framed, the visuals did provide insight into the varying motivations, which are addressed in this chapter’s conclusion.

1. **Self-reliance**

   The self-reliance frame communicated the sense of control that prepaid card usage gave a consumer over his or her daily money management, and that such independence from the mainstream banking system was both desirable and liberating. In doing so, the card
companies acknowledged a desire among the prepaid card web sites to avoid the mainstream banking system which suggested a continued mistrust among the prepaid consumer group in response to the domestic disruption caused by the recent recession.

Gamson and Lasch (1983) described depictions as the specific events regarding key players used to illustrate the issue or event. The frame analysis identified three key players portrayed in the visuals on the prepaid card web sites: 1) the consumer; 2) the prepaid card (as a mainstream banking alternative); and 3) the undesirable big bank. In analyzing the images, a narrative was identified in which the prepaid card web sites consistently depicted scenarios where the prepaid consumer was purposefully seen as in control of his or her own finances – assisted by the prepaid card but free of the big bank. Thus, the prepaid card was a key player in helping the consumer circumvent the mainstream banking system while still functioning with normality and convenience in the digital economy.

All five prepaid card web sites included images of consumers banking remotely through a laptop computer or smart phone which liberated them from having to visit a bank, currency exchange, or ATM. In these images, the prepaid card web sites visualized the self-reliance consumers maintained through card usage. Rather than visiting currency exchanges each week to cash a paycheck, a direct deposit electronically transferred paychecks or government benefits to the card. This feature mimicked the direct deposit that was typical of a checking account with a mainstream bank, but enabled consumers to operate outside the institutionalized banking system. The direct deposit feature was visualized on web sites such as the Walmart Money Card in which images of a paycheck and an arrow to the card communicated how the prepaid card account facilitated such a feature. Similarly, a prominent photo on the iBankUp web site depicted a Hispanic woman wearing medical scrubs and a stethoscope. She stood in front of a
calendar with two Fridays circled in red to symbolize the upcoming pay dates. An oversized phone was positioned next to the calendar and visualized how the consumer could use the phone to manage the account.

The images on the prepaid card web sites demonstrated the mobile management options and reinforced the assurance that the prepaid card was not affiliated with a mainstream bank. The prepaid card web sites did not include any images of physical locations for the card company nor images of banking representatives. ACE, for example, has locations in 35 states. Similarly, Walmart Money Card is purchasable at one of the company’s 5,000 stores. By removing the images of the physical locations and avoiding any type of depiction of the company or its representatives, there was an anonymity to the prepaid card companies. This redirected the focus onto the consumer and the control he or she would experience when operating outside the mainstream banking system. However, investigation into these cards revealed all five were owned by companies entrenched in the mainstream banking system. The iBankUP and UPside cards were both owned by Plastyc, a privately-held company located in the heart of New York City’s financial district. The Walmart Money Card was supplied by Green Dot, a publically held company on the New York Stock Exchange that boasted partnerships with 90,000 retailers. ACE Elite was also owned by a publically traded company, Meta Financial Group. BuyRight was owned by Origins Financial Services, a privately held company with several prepaid products.

The prepaid cards’ associations were important because the visuals provided the appearance that the card was a free standing entity, separate from the mainstream banking system that was responsible for consistently rejecting select consumer groups. The depiction of the mobile management options suggested the prepaid card system was made possible through
advancements in mobile communication that enabled both the prepaid card company and the consumer to circumvent the mainstream banking system. However, the prepaid cards’ associations with major financial institutions meant the consumers were not avoiding the mainstream banking system as visualized in the images.

The *self-reliance* frame also communicated to the consumer that he or she maintained a sense of control over his or her finances, and the strong prominence of this frame suggested the card companies believed this feature was desirable to the prepaid consumer group. The consistent promotion of the card as a facilitator of self-reliance offered insight into the prepaid card consumer’s post-recession experience in the sense that the card companies predicted the consumer desired or expected such a separation. Prepaid consumers previously rejected from the mainstream banking system received assurance through these images that the card was unaffiliated with big banks and an application refusal was not imminent. And consumers who desired to operate outside the mainstream banking system also received assurance that the card provided a type of do-it-yourself approach to money management.

There were limits, however, to the visualization of the consumers’ independence and agency. These images of the consumer in control of his or her account primarily occurred in indoor settings. The analysis of the visual elements found that the consumers were overwhelming portrayed in a domestic scenario or in a nondescript space. The consistent portrayal of the consumer in indoor spaces indicated the card companies were aware of the domestic disruption from the recent recession. The images on prepaid card web sites visualized a restoration of the home environment, assisted by the prepaid card. Thus, these consumers were seen in domestic spaces in which they gained command over their daily finances through prepaid card usage.
The consistent portrayal of the consumer in indoor spaces was also reflective of the current digital economy. The exemplars seen on the prepaid card web site visualized elements of the digital economy and communicated how the card should be used. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) describe exemplars as supplying examples of the issue in real life in order to support the core position. These exemplars of card usage visualized how the consumer should use technology to shop online, pay bills, transfer funds, view spending alerts, or receive government benefits or employer paychecks. In doing so, the prepaid card web sites used these exemplars to communicate that the consumer was free to operate remotely and that doing so was not an exclusion from the mainstream banking system but a natural part of the current digital economy. However, there were images on these prepaid card web sites that suggested that some consumers in this target market were still transitioning into the digital economy. The Walmart Money Card, for example, provided step-by-step instructions on how to send a text message to find out where to reload funds. Similarly, there were images on the ACE Elite, Walmart, and BuyRight web sites that provided a more concrete visual representation of how the technology functioned.

Such new access to mobile technology supported the frame’s core message that circumventing the mainstream banking system was made possible through growing possibilities for mobile money management. This message was consistent with the literature regarding public sentiment toward the mainstream banking system during and after the 2008 economic collapse. The Pew Research (2014) study found prepaid card users were either rejected from the system during the post-recession credit crunch, or felt angry toward the big banks and desired non participation. The next frame, *exculpation*, further explores how the prepaid card companies worked to disassociate from the mainstream banking system.
2. **Exculpation.**

The *exculpation* frame was the differentiation between the card company and the mainstream banking system responsible for historic inequities as well as the recent recession. This frame was identified in 60 (40%) images. This frame was only identified in the prepaid cards, and implied a strong animosity existed among consumers who carried the memory of historic exclusion, unequal access, and unfair terms. In working with the *self-reliance* frame, the *exculpation* frames sought exoneration from the injustices of the mainstream banking system while assuring consumers that the card was a way to circumvent the system.

The overrepresentation of people of color on prepaid card web sites was key in identifying the *exculpation* frame. Although the Pew Research (2014) study on prepaid card users found that half of prepaid card users were white, the identifiable individuals on the card prepaid card web sites were primarily consumers of color. Thus, the prepaid card web sites were overtly targeting specific consumer groups, and doing so, visualizing who the card was designed to serve. Targeting consumers of color was a direct contrast to the traditional card web sites.

In visualizing consumer groups previously excluded from the mainstream banking system – women, people of color (Manning, 2000) – the prepaid card companies framed the products as unaffiliated with the institutional lenders that contributed to the 2008 financial collapse. This disassociation worked with the *self-reliance* frame to communicate how the prepaid card was a device for circumventing the mainstream banking system. Together, these two frames indicated a continuing strong misgiving by the consumers within the target market for the mainstream banking system, and the prepaid card companies were seeking to capitalize on such a distrust.

The prepaid card was visualized as a middle-of-the-road alternative. The consumer did not have to participate in the mainstream banking system, but the prepaid card allevied the
consumer from having to participate in the options typically associated with the subprime market such as cash checking services, currency exchanges, or title loans. The *exculpation* frame visualized this middle ground and in doing so visualized a new experience for many middle and working class consumers in the post-recession economy. The 2008 recession pushed many consumers out of the good or fair credit score categories and into a damaged area (FICO, 2012; Horwich, 2010; White, 2012). Yet, many of these consumers previously operated within the mainstream banking system (Wilhulsen, 2012) and likely sought a checking account alternative that enabled them to continue operating in the digital economy. The consistent visualization of the remote money management options not only served to disassociate the prepaid card companies with the mainstream banking system, but also depicted how card usage was a continuance of the life that many consumers had prior to the recession but could no longer access. In the images, consumers were shown using the phone to transfer funds, check the balance, or write electronic checks.

In depicting how the consumer could maintain a financial life that resembled that of the pre-recession middle class, the *exculpation* frame visualized the aspirations the card companies assumed the fractured target market collectively shared. Unlike the traditional card web sites in which material goods and other extrinsic aspirations were visualized, the prepaid card web sites depicted an intrinsic aspiration for the security and convenience associated with a middle class lifestyle. The prepaid card emulated the middle class lifestyle by providing checking account and direct deposit services which alleviated the consumer from participating in the subprime economy but did not require them to interact with the undesirable mainstream banking system.

The visualization of the middle class experience suggested that the target audience for prepaid cards might not have been individuals who regularly used AFS such as currency
exchanges or cash checking operations. Rather, the consistent visualization of the middle class experience suggested the web sites were targeting consumers who previously participated in the mainstream banking system and desired a familiar alternative. As the Pew (2014) study found, these consumers possibly left after the post-recession economy, or they might have been rejected from participation. Whatever their source of non-participation, the prepaid images suggested these consumers did not see themselves as members of the subprime economy. Many of the individuals pictured in the images were young, twenty or thirty somethings who were possibly raised in middle class households and were unfamiliar with the subprime alternatives. Thus, the visual frame analysis found a new consumer group emerged in the post-recession economy and such a group was being addressed in the prepaid card web sites. The next frame, the facilitation frame, further examined this new consumer group and how the card companies framed their experiences through card usage.

3. Facilitation

The facilitation frame was the strategic communication of the card as a device that facilitated a middle class lifestyle and an emulation of a pre-recession lifestyle. The facilitation frame was identified on the prepaid and traditional card web sites, and it was the only frame to cross the spectrum. However, the emulation of the pre-recession lifestyle had a different meaning with each card type, and the varying depiction of life before the economic collapse reflected the distinct consumer experience in the current economy. Whereas the prepaid cards visualized a restoration of domestic stability, the traditional cards demonstrated a cheerful restart to conspicuous consumption.

For the prepaid cards, the facilitation frame was communicated through the visualization of a tranquil domestic life. The facilitation frame was seen in 40 (26%) images. On the UPside
home page, for example, a photograph of a father and son sitting at the dining room table was positioned at the top left of the screen. The two looked at a screen as the father smiled approvingly at his son. To the right, a separate text box had images of blue skies, a tree, and a green lawn in the background. Together, the two images communicated a sense of serenity toward the home life, made possible by secure finances. The blue sky text box was replicated on each of the secondary pages along with various images of families relaxing at home. Other prepaid card web sites also depicted individuals at home or in nondescript places and in doing so indicated the card companies assumed the consumers longed for a domestic tranquility in which a financial life was both comfortable and predictable.

The images of consumers relaxing on the couch, talking with coffee, or playing video games maintained the idea of the prepaid card user at home, relieved of any stresses in the larger economy. In assuming that prepaid card consumers aspired for protection against a turbulent economy, the card companies offered insight into a post-recession consumer experience in which economic instability continued to drain many Americans, and the prepaid card offered the comfort of middle class banking without the association to the big banks whose actions once devastated consumers. Thus, identifying the facilitation frame offered insight into the post-recession economy and the fluidity between the middle and lesser classes. For many consumers, socioeconomic status was not rigid and the consequence of the recession was a sudden plunge from middle to lesser class status. Such fluidity between the middle and the lesser classes was not unique to the post-recession years. Manning (2000) observed that Americans used credit cards to quietly bridge financial deficits and maintain the appearance of continued middle class status. However, the tightening of the credit markets eliminated the credit cushion for many middle class consumers (Duke, 2010), which meant a type of safety net was eliminated. In this
sense, the *facilitation* frame visualized how the prepaid cards maintained the appearance of continued middle class status, even if the consumer no longer belonged.

The aspiration for middle class status (or at least the appearance of it) as a promoted benefit was indicative of the struggle many Americans had in the post-recession year. The implication of this finding was that the American Dream, first defined by Adams (1931), remained a material American dream in which loss of status was actively concealed. Such a downfall was not temporary for many Americans, and the *facilitation* frame indicated the card companies understood the target consumer group’s continued fragility. This understanding of the target group’s continued fragility and the sample pages’ shared message of facilitation held the understanding that consumers had different motivations for turning to prepaid cards, but privileged the desire for status as the primary persuasive device. In doing so, the frame indicated the advertisers perceived the concealment of lost status as an overarching desire that connected a fractured consumer market whose motivations were distinct.

C. **Visual Elements – Secured Cards**

The five secured web sites had limited visuals (n=25). Although one card (First Progress) included 13 photographs of identifiable individuals, three of the card web sites had as few as three images. These images were typically pictures of the card or snapshots of a customer service representative. The discussion chapter will further consider why the secured card web sites had such few visuals (as well as less promotional material and secondary pages), and what might be inferred from such a lack of marketing effort. Only two secured cards had images with identifiable individuals. The First Progress card had a home page with a sliding panel that rotated through images of a dozen models posed as consumers. In each panel, the model wore
business casual clothing and stood between an oversized First Progress card and a financial chart with an upward arrow depicting improvement. The US Bank Secured card also showed images of people. On a secondary page about Credit Wellness, a video depicted a young, white male in his twenties having items repossessed by his creditor. In the video, movers packed all his personal belongings into a truck, and the man appeared indifferent until his guitar was crushed. The video was positioned alongside an image of a young woman at her laptop, arms in the air celebrating as if she just had a financial success.

The other notable element in the secured cards was the presence of symbols that depicted upward movement or forward motion. The First Progress logo, for example, resembled a compass. The web site also had imagery of arrows on the logo that ran above and alongside the company name. The symbol of upward motion and the presence of identifiable individuals were the only two consistent elements noted on the secured card web sites, and these elements were only observed on two card web sites – First Progress and US Bank. The other web sites were simple designs that favored a textual display on the home page that led to an application on a secondary page. Other than these two elements, the lack of visuals made it difficult to observe which aspirations were present on the secured card web sites, and a frame analysis was not conducted.

D. Visual Elements – Traditional Cards

The traditional card web sites had 295 images which included photographs, graphics, illustrations, and logos. Several shared elements were identified, and the most notable was the presence of material goods. Five of the traditional card web sites (50%) included such visualizations on the home page, and eight of the cards (80%) included such visualizations on a
secondary page. The only two cards to not include material goods, Capital One Cash Rewards and Capital One Platinum Prestige, favored images of cash on both the home and secondary pages. Thus, a strong current of materialism was consistent across the 10 traditional card web sites. This section first unpacks the presence of material goods, and then considers the positioning of people on the traditional card web sites. The detailing of visual elements concludes with a description of the images of reliance and connectivity between the consumer and the company.

The traditional card web sites included 138(46%) images of material goods. In contrast, the prepaid card web sites had 6(3%) images of material goods and the secured card web sites had none. For example, the CitiBank Thank You home page was a collection of material goods the consumer might receive for free after accruing points from spending with the card. The material goods included luggage, jewelry, sporting equipment, and home goods such as countertop appliances. These featured material goods were positioned in various size boxes across the screen. The backdrop was another material good, a leather travel bag, and so the homepage was a complex layering of images.

The Discover Student Card also visualized the material goods made possible through card usage. But rather than using images of the specific products, the web site used brand logos to communicate the possible reward. Other web sites such as American Express Gold, American Express Platinum, and the United Explorer card visualized the possible experiences which included dining, shopping, and traveling. The images of the material goods and experiences made possible through card ownership were consistently middle class. A clear boundary existed around the types of aspirations the card enabled the consumer to achieve. For example, both the material goods on the CitiBank page and the logos on the Discover Student Card were middle-
of-the-road selections that were neither discount nor high end options. The featured luggage on CitiBank was TUMI, an expensive brand that was neither designer nor discount. The experiences were similarly middle class. The travel images, for example, depicted the consumer in an attainable experience such as visiting Europe or taking a beach vacation. The images, however, made the consumer distinct by visualizing a unique experience. The identifiable individuals were positioned so they were the only ones in the picture, elevated from the masses. Similarly, the United Explorer card depicted a young, multi-racial male standing in an airport in the foreground, holding up his credit card as if it were a passport to special status. The other travelers in the background were smaller and blurred, which allowed the man to be the focus.

The young man in the United Explorer image was biracial, but there were few other instances in which consumers of color were seen on the traditional card web sites. Thirty-one (73.8%) of the 42 identifiable individuals were white; five (12.1%) were Latino; two (4.7%) were multi-racial; two (4.7%) were Asian; and two (4.7%) were African American. These percentages were almost the reverse of the identifiable individuals on the prepaid card web site in which 68% were non-white and 32.7% were white. The focus on white consumers on the traditional card web sites implied that distinct consumer groups were being targeted by the card companies and that socioeconomic boundaries in the U.S. continued along racial lines.

Whereas the prepaid cards depicted identifiable individuals who fit into the 18-29 and 30-49 age categories, the traditional cards in the sample had limited or no images of the young adult demographic, and instead depicted the experiences or commodities recommended for aspiration. The Discover Student Card, for example, was aimed at college students but did not visualize any identifiable individuals. Instead, the pages in the sample visualized the commodities achievable
through the rewards programs. The focus on commodities and experiences rather than identifiable individuals was a consistent visual element on the traditional card web sites.

In contrast to the prepaid card web sites, people on the traditional card web sites were not positioned as prominently on the home pages. Only one card, the United Explorer card, featured an identifiable individual on the home page. Identifiable individuals appeared consistently on the secondary pages and frequently shared the space with images of the material goods or other aspirational experiences. Another contrast between the identifiable individuals on prepaid and traditional card web sites was how the traditional card web sites primarily depicted the cardholders in third spaces. Whereas the prepaid card web sites overwhelmingly favored images of domestic leisure, the traditional card web sites depicted the consumers shopping, dining, traveling, and enjoying outdoor fitness or leisure. Only 12 (28%) of the identifiable individuals on the traditional card web sites were posed or depicted in indoor leisure. The rest were seen outside the home engaged in consumptive activities.

Another important visual element observed on the traditional card web sites was the visualization of connectivity between the consumer and the card company. Whereas the prepaid card web sites promoted a distance between the consumer and company, the traditional card web sites visualized the card company’s capabilities as a tool to protect or advance the consumer. Four (40%) of the traditional card web sites included global or domestic maps to illustrate the card’s acceptance or global reach. Similarly, four (40%) of the traditional card web sites included images of telephones or phone operators to visualize the consumer’s ability to connect with a company representative. In contrast to the prepaid card web sites, mobile technology was not prominently depicted as a means of connectivity. Only two cards (20%) included secondary
pages with images of mobile technology. The next section further examines the frames used to communicate to the traditional card target market.

E. Visual Frames – Traditional Cards

Similar to the prepaid cards, the traditional card web sites also used the facilitation frame to communicate a strategic message about how the card connected the consumer with a lifestyle experienced prior to the 2008 economic collapse. However, this frame was tailored to a consumer group more financially stable and whose recession experience might have been a mere interruption to credit access during the tightening of the markets. The facilitation frame reflected this varying consumer experience as well as the competing interests of the distinct socioeconomic groups. This frame worked with the distinction and ostentation frames to visualize the experience of traditional card membership.

1. Facilitation

The facilitation frame was the strategic communication of the card as a device to facilitate a middle class, consumptive lifestyle that the target market likely enjoyed prior to the economic collapse. The facilitation frame was seen in 205(69%) images. In addition to visualizing a return to conspicuous consumption, the facilitation frame also communicated how the card navigated the consumer through a global economy, which framed the card as a device in which the consumer could rely. Thus, the facilitation frame was a multi-dimensional frame that communicated a larger message of consumer dependence.

Several visual elements communicated a larger message of facilitation. First, the strong presence of material goods on the traditional card web sites indicated that cheerful and conspicuous consumption was readily recognizable by the target market. A segment of the U.S.
population was not financially injured during the recent recession (White, 2012), but the larger cultural climate was frugal during the recession and post-recession years (Gibbs, 2009). The visualization of material goods symbolized an end to austerity and a return to the cheerful consumption that existed prior to the recession. Whereas the prepaid card visualized a return to financial stability, the traditional cards framed card usage as a return to the casual spending that characterized the economic boom. Multiple card web sites such as Citi Thank You visualized the types of material goods obtainable through rewards points. These items were niceties, not necessities. The rewards center was not visualizing the basic needs a person requires to survive. Rather, the items were extrinsic aspirations which a consumer could use to perform a self-perceived socioeconomic identity. These items included watches, jewelry, camping equipment, and gourmet cooking appliances – purchases that many consumers forwent during the recession and the credit crunch.

In addition to visualizing specific items worthy of aspiration, the card companies also used company logos to communicate additional possibilities for a return to material life. On a secondary page for the Discover Student card, for example, dozens of logos for featured retailers were organized into neat boxes. The background of each box was white and the logo was positioned squarely in the middle. The organization provided a feel of a shopping mall which communicated how the card was a type of shopping partner. In this sense, the facilitation frame communicated a reliance on the card company and its vast network to connect the consumer to desired goods and experiences.

The reliance aspect of the facilitation frame was seen in numerous visual elements. First, several card web sites used images of maps to visualize the expansive reach of the card’s network. The Chase Freedom card, for example, had a map of the U.S. in a blue color that
matched the company’s logo. Similarly, the Discover Student Card used a global map that highlighted available locations in the company’s signature orange color. The use of the company’s color communicated the card was a key player in the consumer’s life and the card holder could expect to rely on the payment device. As consistent with Gamson and Lasch’s (1983) observation that depictions were used to identify key players and their prescribed roles, the traditional cards visuals created a narrative on how the consumer could navigate the global economy. The frame analysis identified three key players portrayed in the visuals on the prepaid card web sites: 1) the consumer; 2) the promoted credit card; and 3) the global economy. The promoted credit card served to provide the consumer with an advantage in navigating the global economy. Wherever the consumer traveled, the card was available and provided a continuation of the consumer’s financial life at home. This suggested relationship was a strong contrast to the prepaid cards in which self-reliance was communicated as a type of relief. Whereas the consumers in prepaid cards were depicted as being able to circumvent the mainstream banking system, the consumers in the traditional cards were seen as increasingly reliant on financial institutions. This reliance was positioned as a type of advantage to the consumer in that the card could connect the consumer to the material goods and experiences he or she desired, and in doing so, facilitate a return to the pre-recession years when cheerful spending was the norm.

Such nostalgia for life before the recession was also observed in the lack of mobile media depicted on the web site. There were few exemplars that demonstrated how an iPad, mobile phone, or computer could be used to manage the account. Instead, there were multiple examples of “old technology” such as photos of landline phones that were used to visualize how the consumer might connect with the company and speak with a live operator. The depiction of “old technology” on the traditional card web sites provided great insight into evolving consumer
aspirations and how they were performed in the post-recession economy. There were several images on multiple web sites (e.g. American Express Gold, Citi Thank You) in which identifiable individuals were seen traveling and were consulting a map – not a GPS system or telephone as one might expect from a member of this consumer group. The visualization of “old technology” depicted a modern problem solved through card usage. Many consumers were increasingly connected to a mobile device in which they were always reachable. The absence of mobile technology on the traditional card web sites visualized a growing desire by consumers to “unplug” or “go off the grid.”

The ability to disconnect from the stresses that arose from constant connection was depicted as a luxury experience associated primarily with travel. Mobile disconnection as a type of luxury good was reminiscent of Veblen’s (1899) observation that the elite classes were aware of what consumption made them distinct. Once the middle, working, and lesser classes were able to imitate elite consumption, then elite aspirations were required to evolve to the next level. In the visualization of mobile disconnection, the traditional card web sites revealed a new aspiration for upper class consumers. Such an aspiration was prompted by the lessening digital divide in which more consumers of all socioeconomic levels had access to mobile technology. As mobile access evolved, so did the aspirations for upper middle class and middle class consumers who wished to distance themselves. The traditional card companies visualized how the cards could facilitate such a mobile disconnection and in doing so communicated the reliance a consumer ought to expect from card membership.

2. Distinction

The distinction frame was the visualization of the special treatment the card companies promoted was part of the card membership experience. The distinction frame was
seen in 180 (61%) of the images on the traditional card web sites. The *distinction* frame reflected the growing desire by middle class consumers in the post-recession economy to be recognized as distinct individuals whose business credit card companies should compete to earn. The credit scoring system and the labeling of the traditional card market as “good” or excellent” established this socioeconomic group as worthy of additional financing, and nine of the 10 (90%) card web sites visualized a type of special treatment for the consumer. The exception was the BellCo credit card which visualized a facilitation to material goods but did not depict instances or opportunities for preferential treatment.

In visualizing the traditional card consumer as worthy of special attention, the *distinction* frame did not challenge the mainstream banking system and instead extended the reliance that was communicated in the *facilitation* frame. The *distinction* frame also did not disrupt the current socioeconomic order in suggesting that middle class consumers were deserving of elite treatment. Rather, the *distinction* frame drew a visual boundary around the middle and upper middle classes and elevated these target consumers from the masses, particularly the working and lesser classes. This was particularly evident in the images in which the identifiable individuals were seen alone in a consumptive moment, free from the intrusion of competing consumers.

The consumptive moments with special treatment were recognizable, middle class desires. Whereas the prepaid cards visualized intrinsic aspirations for a more comfortable and stable domestic life, the traditional cards visualized extrinsic aspirations for peer recognition. In these images, the cardholder was seen alone as if all others had been pushed out of the visual frame. On the American Express Gold Card web site, for example, a group of four diners were seen alone in a fine dining restaurant. In the background, white tablecloths on the empty tables
indicated the group was in a fine dining restaurant and enjoying privacy. Similarly, the American Express Platinum card depicted two travelers in a fictional Benelux city, consulting a map. The city background was likely created using a photo editing program because it placed the recognizable architecture of the Amsterdam canals next to a mountain range. In real life, Amsterdam was not remotely near a mountain range. Thus, the edited picture visualized a desire to obtain a valued material good that would be recognized by others, but also to have a unique and distinct experience that made the traveler’s purchase meaningful. Similarly, the Citi Thank You web site included multiple pictures of identifiable individuals enjoying a travel experience without the interference of other travelers. On secondary pages, there were images of a woman floating alone in a hotel pool, a man standing solo on a yacht, a couple on a scenic road viewing a map, and three cyclists approaching the end of a scenic overlook. These experiences were accessible to a middle class consumer, and the images offered insight into what the card companies viewed were a valued material good that could be recognized by others.

The valued material good in these examples were related to travel experiences, and travel was a consistent theme in the traditional card imagery. The United Explorer card’s affiliation with the airline made travel an expected theme on the web site. The home page featured a young man in the airport, holding up his credit card as if it were a pass to distinction that enabled him to navigate the airport separate from the masses. Notably, the secondary pages on the card’s web site included imagery of special events made possible with exclusive invitations from the card company. These invitations included opportunities for private dining, golf, and domestic travel – three activities associated with middle and upper class leisure. Thus, the distinction frame communicated that the consumer could expect to receive special treatment as a cardholder and
such preferential attention would provide the consumer with access to extrinsic aspirations that were readily recognized by others.

The *distinction* frame was consistent with Veblen’s (1899) observation that the middle classes were well-aware of the elite’s consumptive practices and wished to imitate the tastes of those in the classes above. Marchand (1985) found that advertising had long been aware the middle class’s desire to experience a slice of the elite’s consumptive practices, and such a desire was communicated through the *distinction* frame. The traditional card did not visualize how it could make the individual a member of the wealthiest income brackets. There were no images of mansions, private planes, or exclusive country clubs. Rather, there was consistent imagery of how the card company would recognize and elevate the individual as more worthy than others in the middle class. In doing so, the card connected the consumer to special events and experiences in which the consumer enjoyed a more meaningful middle class experience that momentarily resembled a more rich and fulfilling consumptive life. Such a frame worked in tandem with the *ostentation* frame in which the consumer’s creation of a self-perceived socioeconomic status was the basis for framing the card as a device for communicating class status.

3. **Ostentation**

The *ostentation* frame was the strategic assurance that the promoted traditional card served as a device for communicating class status. Whereas the *distinction* frame promoted the special services offered to the consumer because of his or her status, the *ostentation* frame visualized the possibilities for recognition through conspicuous consumption. The *ostentation* frame was exclusive to the traditional credit cards, and it was observed in 160 (54%) of images. In working with the *facilitation* and *distinction* frames, the *ostentation* frame visualized a lifestyle aspiration made possible through material goods and experiences which symbolized the
cardholder was indeed a member of the upper middle to upper classes. In doing so, the 
*ostentation* frame visualized how the target audience should see themselves as consumers and which material goods or aspirations were helpful in performing class status.

The *ostentation* frame visualized the American Dream of consumption in which financial success and the display of wealth communicated a person’s achievements and life status (De Botton, 2005; Artz & Ortega Murphy, 2000; Messner & Rosenfield, 1994). Advertisers have long attached the concept of the American Dream to promotions (Messner & Rosenfield, 1994), and the literature regarding credit card advertisements consistently observed the conspicuous quality of credit card advertisements. From the origins of charge cards used at dining clubs in the 1950s, credit cards have long been used to signify who a consumer was as both a financial success and a consumer (Mandell, 1990; Lewis, 1991; Kendall 2008). In having access to a traditional credit card in the post-recession years, consumers communicated their participation in the mainstream banking system, which was made possible through ongoing financial success.

The *ostentation* frame was identified in the consistent visualization of the actual card. All 10 of the traditional card home pages prominently displayed the promoted credit card. The focus on the appearance of the card was consistent with Lewis (1991) observation that credit cards were inherently stratified. He noted how the various color schemes and access to privileges such as airport lounges, concierge services, or material rewards were intended to distinguish cardholders and promote hierarchy through a classification system. Cardholders, in turn, understood their placement in the hierarchy and being able to access specific card types was a reflection of lifestyle aspiration. This was evident on the traditional card web sites, such as the American Express Platinum card or the United Explore card, in which the card’s appearance was prominently shown.
Ostentation was also observed in the visualization of the different perks associated with card membership. Four of the cards visualized travel perks (United Explorer, BarclayCard, American Express Gold, American Express Platinum). Three emphasized retail perks (Discover Student card, Citi Thank You, BellCo). And three emphasized cash rewards (Chase Freedom, Capital One Cash Rewards, Capital One Platinum Prestige). Although one reward type was not seen as more valued than the other, the various classifications enabled a consumer to select a card that fit with his or her self-created socioeconomic identity. Homes, cars, and vacations signified success (Belk, 1985; Kasser, 2002) and the available perks were visually organized so a prospective cardholder identified the perk category most helpful for performing their material life.

The *ostentation* frame worked with the *facilitation* frame to provide an assurance the card was capable of facilitating a desired lifestyle that was recognized by others. The *ostentation* frame also worked with the *distinction* frame to communicate the consumer was worthy of special treatment and that such preferential attention was conspicuous. In visualizing the possibilities for special treatment (e.g. airport lounge access, special invitations, points redeemable for free goods), distinct boundaries were drawn around the consumer experience. These boundaries were notably middle class, and they served to communicate what the consumer should aspire to achieve. These aspirations are further discussed in this chapter’s conclusion.

**F. Conclusion**

The visuals present on the 20 consumer card web sites offered insight into how the advertisers broadly perceived the promoted products’ target market and their credit or payment needs based on their participation in the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems. The visual frame analysis was crucial for understanding how the credit scoring and mainstream
banking systems constructed boundaries around consumer groups that dictated choices and limitations. The 20 consumer card web sites worked within these limitations, and the two card types in this analysis (prepaid and traditional) consistently demonstrated how the card might be used by the target demographic, and how the promoted product enhanced their choices. The boundaries established by the credit scoring and mainstream banking system were a current that ran through the visual narrative, particularly with the prepaid cards. Although the Pew (2014) study indicated there were various motivations for turning to prepaid cards, the pages in my sample visualized a collective desire for middle class status, and did not directly address the competing interests within the target market. In doing so, the visualized desire for middle class status revealed the construction of a post-recession consumer group. This section summarizes these findings, beginning with the broad frames structured by the credit/debt economy and then advancing into the distinct consumer group that emerged from these images.

Three frames on the prepaid card web sites – self-reliance, exculpation, and facilitation – communicated that the card was a device that enabled the consumer to circumvent the mainstream banking system and return to widespread pre-recession domestic stability. In doing so, the frames on the prepaid card web site communicated the payment instrument was intended for consumers who were historically excluded from the credit system and wished to enjoy the convenience of banking in the digital economy. These frames also offered insight into the consumer aspirations of a target market that either chose not to participate in the prime banking market or whose financial status made them ineligible to do so. These aspirations were not focused on material goods that would receive recognition from others. Instead, the aspiration was for the security and status of the middle class lifestyle.
The prepaid cards consistently visualized how the cards were devices capable of emulating a middle class lifestyle, which enabled the consumer to present him or herself as a member of the middle strata. The web sites included images of consumers shopping online, paying bills, transferring money, and withdrawing cash. Such aspiration for normality offered insight into the turbulence experienced by many consumers in the post-recession years. More importantly, such an aspiration for normality was presented quietly and reflected a desire for many consumers operating outside the mainstream banking system to do so discreetly.

The quiet nature of prepaid cards and how they resembled traditional cards suggested how many consumers in this target market viewed themselves as middle class, and perhaps did not have an expectation to ever operate outside the mainstream system. This discretion suggested that a new consumer group formed in the post-recession economy—the former middle class. The identification of the former middle class indicated the advertisers were aware that prepaid consumers were a fractured group whose varying experiences and past exclusions shaped their motivations for card usage. This consumer group consisted of individuals devastated during the recent recession and unable to regain footing, as well as young adults who were unable to access the middle class lifestyle their parents knew. Targeting this audience was done discreetly, which reflected the advertisers were aware of the hardships faced by many Americans as well as the desire to keep such problems private.

The limited visuals on the secured card web site meant a frame analysis could not be conducted on the images. However, the frame analysis of the traditional card web site identified several frames which communicated a vastly different experience than the prepaid card web sites.
The facilitation frame communicated the promoted card could facilitate both a return to pre-recession spending and provide needed assistance in navigating the global economy. The facilitation frame on the 10 traditional card web sites indicated the deepening fractures among the middle class and the formerly middle class. Whereas the prepaid cards visualized a return to financial stability, the traditional cards visualized a return to cheerful consumption. Such consumption provided the consumer with special privileges, and the distinction frame communicated how the promoted card recognized the target market as individuals whose financial stability or success made them worthy of special treatment. The distinction frame worked in tandem with the ostentation frame, which was the strategic assurance the card reinforced the recognition of the consumer’s socioeconomic status.

The recognition of the consumer’s socioeconomic status was consistent with advertising framing literature. Ahern et al. (2013) described how advertisements turned to narratives and symbols that overtly or subtly framed the brand’s intended meaning. They further suggested that the brand’s intended meaning was an emotionally complex message tied to consumer identity. A complex message tied to consumer identity was observed in the visual frames for the prepaid cards which communicated a shifting consumer identity involving self-reliance, autonomy from the mainstream banking system, and a desire to emulate middle class money management. In contrast, the traditional card visual frames communicated a persisting consumer identity focused on distinction, ostentation, and reliance on the card to navigate the global economy.

The traditional card aspirations were consistent with Smith’s (2011) observation that advertisements placed consumers in a prestige cycle in which the middle class emulated elite consumption patterns. The conspicuous consumption visualized on traditional card web sites supported this observation. The aspirations on the prepaid card web sites also depicted a prestige
cycle, but had little overlap with the traditional card aspirations. On the prepaid card web sites, the visuals depicted a prestige cycle in which the prepaid consumer emulated middle class – not elite – consumptive patterns. Rather than suggesting material goods or special experiences for the prepaid card consumer to emulate, the framed message was about emulating the money management behaviors of the middle class.

The visual frames identified in this chapter offered insight into the post-recession experience, and developed a better understanding of how the mainstream and credit scoring systems created boundaries around the consumer experience. For the prepaid cards, the emphasis on middle class status revealed a specific subset within the target market – the former middle class. The next chapter turns toward the textual frames to further understand how the card web sites articulated frames regarding the target market’s consumer experience, and identified further delineations among these broad consumer groups.
VI. PROMOTING CONSUMER CARDS

The second research question asked which frames emerged from the promotional text present on consumer card application web sites. The question sought to understand how the card companies textually framed the experience of card usage and ownership, the aspirations included in these frames, and how such frames varied by card type. The goal of this question was to identify the overarching frames the advertisers used in order to persuade a diverse target market. A qualitative frame analysis was used to identify and examine the prominent frames in the promotional text. Similar to the frames identified in the visual frame analysis, the textual frames identified in this chapter also served to inform the discourse analysis in chapter seven. In identifying the broad narratives used to communicate a unified message to a disparate group, I understood the frames that emerged in the textual frame analysis informed and did not refute the more targeted messages derived from the discourse analysis.

A qualitative frame analysis examined the prominent frames found on the 20 card web sites, and began by identifying the reoccurring textual patterns in the promotional text. Advertising scholars argue that promotional text relies on readily recognizable symbols and phrases in order to be understood by as wide of an audience as possible. Advertisers also embed deeper layers of meaning to intentionally target consumer longing and aspiration (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; McCracken, 1987). Therefore, the goal of the second research question was to examine the entire package of discourse as established by Gamson and Modigliani (1987; 1989) which conveyed the frames’ substance. Examining the entire package of discourse for the promotional text included consideration of the larger cultural context. Scholars such as Reese (2007) and Van Gorp (2010) advise framing researchers to consider both the larger message as well as the cultural context.
The distinct target markets for three card types meant the context was likely to be disparate. The economic collapse impacted American consumers in drastic ways, and while many consumers were devastated, others were minimally impacted (Pew, 2010). As a result, I understood that the cultural context might vary across the card categories, and even shared frames might present different interpretations. In order to clearly unpack and consider these competing messages, this chapter presented the findings by card type. For each card type, the section first explained the notable textual elements and advanced into a description of how the frames were presented. The results began with prepaid cards, followed by secured cards, and then traditional credit cards. For the shared frame found in all three card types, a brief description explained how the meaning was distinct and reflected the experiences of competing consumer groups.

A. **Prepaid Cards Textual Elements**

Promotional material was defined as the advertising copy used to describe and promote the card, and did not include mandatory disclosures regarding privacy, terms, or fees. The promotional material varied between the prepaid card web sites. One card (iBankUp), for example, used just 636 words whereas the Walmart Money Card used 6,631. (Note: The analysis of the consumer card application web sites was limited to home pages as well as the secondary pages that linked from the home page). The following table describes the word frequency for the prepaid cards.
The following table describes how the number of secondary pages was more consistent between the prepaid card web sites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The frame analysis identified several shared elements in the promotional text. The most notable element was direct deposit references. All five cards promoted a direct deposit feature. The prepaid cards’ promotional text in my sample made 92 references to the direct deposit feature, and 18% of the prepaid card sample text (3,004 words) was devoted to direct deposit descriptions. These descriptions fit with the Federal Trade Commission’s definition of direct deposit as the electronic transfer of government benefits (e.g. security, veterans, unemployment) or payroll from the payment source to the payee’s prepaid card account (Federal Trade Commission, 2012). Although the phrase direct deposit might have seemed merely utilitarian and not reflective of a larger frame, Entman (2004) finds that the words making up a frame are “more noticeable, memorable, and emotionally charged” (pg. 6). Sixty percent (3) of the cards
emphasized the phrase direct deposit with capitalization. Additionally, 80% (4) of the cards drew attention with the all capitalized word FREE. The emphasis of the phrase ‘FREE direct deposit’ suggested the consumer should feel an excitement toward the product feature, and was consistent with the emotional charge Entman (2004) described.

Descriptions of the direct deposit feature were prominent on the prepaid card web sites. Eighty percent (4) of the prepaid cards promoted the direct deposit feature on the homepage. iBankUp, for example, promoted the direct deposit feature in large, red font. The all caps text read: “Receive your salary or benefits directly and at no cost!” The Walmart Money Card was the only card to not promote direct deposit on its homepage. However, Walmart devoted 25% (1635 words) of its promotional material to direct deposit. Walmart was not unique in devoting a notable quantity of text to direct deposit. Ace Elite used 44% (477 words). The other cards used between 5 to 11% and included explanations that direct deposit was a free or low-cost option and brought preferred card member status.

The direct deposit feature was promoted as a benefit that enhanced the consumer’s money management experience. These descriptions were placed prominently above other options such as ATM or retail reloading. One representative example was from a BuyRight secondary page which explained how to load funds. The text was positioned at the top center of the page, and compared the direct deposit feature to other money management options:

Don’t spend Friday evening in line at the bank or expensive check-cashing store. Get moving with free direct deposit. Access your cash faster, and securely. No checking account is required and you'll never have to deal with any check cashing fees again, ever!

In addition to enhancing consumers’ money management experience, direct deposit was advertised as a source of special status. Four (80%) of the prepaid cards offered reduced
monthly service fees for direct deposit users. Premium plans all required direct deposit participation, but provided rewards and incentives not available to non-participating cardholders. The ACE Elite card, for example, all but eliminated the purchase transaction fees for direct deposit users whose monthly deposits surpassed $500. Rather than paying $2 per purchase transaction, direct deposit users paid a flat $5 monthly fee. The other prepaid cards offered similar preferred rate schedules. Additionally, the five prepaid cards also offered at least one of the following perks for direct deposit users: reduced monthly fees; reduced annual fees; reduced reload fees; cash-back rewards; purchase cushion; life benefits; healthcare discounts; discounts on cellular minute purchases; and more prompt availability of transferred funds.

There was a prominent pattern of stratification within the direct deposit text. All five cards communicated a preference for direct deposit users. Three cards (60%) further expressed this preference through tiered levels of membership. Such stratification among the prepaid cards was interesting to note because the literature regarding other AFS such as cash-checking operations or pawn shops (Williams, 2005; Manning, 2000) did not identify any tiers among the various services. The Federal government defines prepaid cards as an AFS (FDIC, 2009), and the consumer card application web sites confirmed stratification is unique to the prepaid cards, but similar to the tiered structure the literature identified in credit cards (Klein, 1999; Kendall, 2009).

The direct deposit textual element complimented the second textual element – the disparagement of big banks. Direct deposit was positioned as a helpful alternative for avoiding big banks. With direct deposit, cardholders managed money remotely, transferred funds when needed, and paid bills online. The word “check” was used 87 times on the prepaid card web sites to describe how the promoted card was a low-cost or hassle-free alternative to checking
accounts. The word credit was used 77 times to explain how no credit check was required, and how prepaid card usage was a safe alternative to credit cards. UPside, for example, repeated on several secondary pages how the card did not charge an APR, did not accrue debt, and was “safer” than credit cards.

In disparaging the mainstream banking system, the prepaid cards used the word “bank” 49 times to promote how prepaid cards were less expensive, more efficient, and more inclusive than big banks. Four of the five prepaid cards (80%) disparaged the mainstream banking system (the exception was the Walmart Money Card). One representative example of the disparagement came from the iBankUp web sites, and suggested banks were intentionally deceitful: “Some banks who charge $35 per overdraft transaction probably do not want you to know your actual balance. We do, and we do not even have overdraft fees!” BuyRight also described the banks as problematically slow in reporting account information: “Unlike with most banks, all transactions are posted in real time, offering an up-to-the-minute overview of all activity on the account.”

Other web sites described checking accounts as expensive, unnecessary, and even “a hassle.”

The third textual element was the negative depiction of subprime options. All five of the prepaid cards negatively depicted typical money management practices of the unbanked or underbanked. These depictions included: paying fees; cashing a check at a currency exchange or cash checking; carrying around dangerous amounts of cash; paying bills with cashier’s checks or money orders; waiting in line for services; borrowing funds from family or friends. The promotional material offered desirable alternatives such as online bill pay, direct deposit, or person to person transfers. The following text from BuyRight was representative of how the prepaid cards described subprime options:
No more writing checks, no more stamps, and no more standing in line for money orders. Pay your utility bills, cable, rent, car payment—even pay a friend—using our fast and secure online Bill Pay service.

Don’t spend Friday evening in line at the bank or expensive check-cashing store. Get moving with free direct deposit. Access your cash faster, and securely. No checking account is required and you’ll never have to deal with any check cashing fees again, ever!

Lastly, the analysis found the prepaid card text lacked any reference to material goods, with the exception of utilitarian descriptions regarding car rental, hotel reservations, restaurant charges, or online shopping. The next section further considered these elements and the larger message about card ownership communicated through the text.

B. Prepaid Card Frames

According to Gamson and Modigliani (1987, 1989), elements and symbols cluster together to construct an interpretive package. These elements and symbols include: catchphrases, possible consequences, depictions, exemplars, metaphors, appeals to principles, and descriptions of the issue’s roots. Working together, these condensing symbols communicate the viewpoint. At the core of the viewpoint is the essence of the issue, or the frame, which suggests interpretation. Using Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach to frame analysis, this study found two prominent frames, progress and upgrade. The progress frame was the most prominent and was identified in 34% (5,703 words) of promotional text. Similar to the visual frames, the textual frames were broadly directed toward a consumer group who either could not or chose not to participate in the mainstream banking system. These broad frames were
structured by the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems and offered greater insight into
the post-recession experience for unbanked or underbanked consumers.

1. **Progress**

   The *progress frame* communicated the sense of personal progress and the
financial improvement possible through card ownership. For the prepaid cards, the *progress*
frame did not promote advancement within the credit scoring or mainstream banking systems.
Rather, the *progress frame* worked with the *self-reliance* visual frame to communicate the
benefits of self-maintained money management. The *progress frame* derived from the American
cultural desire for continuous improvement. Americans have long supported individual pursuit of
advancement (Adams, 1931), and scholars have argued that progress is a crucial emotional need.
Schor (1991) explained how consumers with a sense of material progress had a higher sense of
satisfaction and well-being, and the expectation of advancement was a condition of our
aspirations: “Faith in progress is deep within our culture. We have been taught to believe that
our lives are better than those who came before us” (pg. 10).

   The *progress frame* was shared across the three card types, but the interpretations were
distinct. For the prepaid card, the personal advancement related to success in daily money
management, but not a larger picture of advancement in the credit/debt economy. In contrast, the
secured cards’ message of personal advancement was attached to greater financial health made
possible through improvement within the credit scoring system. And the traditional cards framed
progress as aspirational achievement that reflected status. Within each card type, progress was
depicted as a type of advancement in which the consumer moved to the next level. This shared
definition reflected the same cultural desire for forward advancement, but the different content
reflected disparate post-recession consumer experiences.
On the prepaid card web sites, progression to the next level was observed through depictions of the card as a type of improved subsistence outside the mainstream banking system. Gamson and Lasch (1983) described depictions as the specific events regarding key players used to illustrate the issue or event. The visual framing analysis for the prepaid cards found three key players consistently represented: 1) the consumer; 2) the prepaid card (as a mainstream banking alternative); and 3) the undesirable big bank. The textual framing analysis found a similar narrative but also observed a fourth key player – the digital economy.

All five prepaid cards referenced the digital economy in which prompt payment was the new norm and electronic options such as fund transfers and automatic payments were essential for successful money management. Several web sites compared the new options to outdated modes of payment such as sending checks via the U.S. postal service, getting money orders from a currency exchange, or operating in cash. These methods were described as not only inconvenient and costly, but possibly risky. Scenarios further warned against paying late fees due to slow mail service or having to explain to a landlord why the rent check was late. These exemplars represented the increased time pressures in the digital economy that were alleviated through prepaid card ownership, and also suggested a sense of personal advancement was found in the transition to a modern mode of money management.

The progress frame worked with the self-reliance and facilitation visual frames to promote the daily money management features that were indicative of personal progress. The text reinforced the visual portrayal of consumers as independent from the mainstream banking system and capable of managing their accounts via mobile technology. For example, the iBankUp home page described its direct deposit features in red letters in the top, center of the page. The all-caps caption boasted: “Receive your salary or benefits directly at no cost!” The text
appeared as a text bubble for a young Latina woman. In the photo, she wore scrubs and a stethoscope to indicate she was a medical professional and stood next to an iPhone displaying the iBankUp app.

The promotion of free direct deposit or other reduced fees was consistent throughout the prepaid cards and framed the products as a type of improvement over expensive AFS or banking products. There were costs, however, associated with prepaid cards. The five prepaid cards charged as many as fourteen fee types. The BuyRight card, for example, was representative of the different fee types charged by the prepaid cards. The BuyRight card had twelve fee types that began with a $9.95 card activation fee. Cardholders were also charged $14.95 each month as a type of ongoing maintenance fee. There was also a fee applied to every type of possible transaction. Shopping at a retail store cost $1 per PIN or signature transaction; reloading the card cost $2.50; and using the ATM cost $1.95.

Although these costs were mitigated through direct deposit participation, none of the five prepaid cards were free to use or maintain. The design of prepaid cards involved an infinite cycle of fees for uploads, ATM usage, purchases, balance checks, customer service calls, fund transfers, or even letting the card sit unused. Despite claims from companies such as iBankUp that the product provided “good banking for all,” services were for a fee, which was not an actual advancement over traditional checking accounts or AFS. However, the progress frame communicated the cards were indeed an improvement and employed a consistent depiction of smart money management in order to support the message of personal advancement. ACE Elite, for example, promoted the $10 spending cushion offered to direct deposit users as a type of assurance against overspending. Similar to the ACE Elite spending cushion, the other prepaid cards contrasted the promoted product to checking accounts and presented the fees as far more
manageable and fair. On the iBankUp home page, for example, a text box at the bottom of the screen claimed the card collectively saved users more than $83 million in checking account costs. A link to a fee calculator encouraged consumers to calculate how much they would save in checking account fees through product usage. In doing so, the text framed the fees as more reasonable than mainstream banking options and indicative of the sense of progress possible through prepaid card usage.

A second notable representation of fees within the progress frame was the lack of fees associated with online shopping. Prepaid cards had the sixteen digits and expiration dates needed in order to make noncash transactions. Whereas shopping in a store and paying with a PIN or signature transaction resulted in a fee, there was no mention of costs associated with online purchases. For unbanked or underbanked consumers, the prepaid cards provided an advancement into the digital economy. This was particularly true for direct deposit participants who enjoyed limited fees and reduced transaction costs. For such consumers, the cards were a plastic payment device usable for online shopping, at pay terminals, and in other instances in which cash was not accepted. For consumers who were ineligible or uninterested in participating in the mainstream banking system, prepaid cards advanced the consumer into the digital economy. This sense of progress worked with the upgrade frame, a frame that demonstrated an embedded, deeper meaning that targeted consumer longing and aspiration.

2. Upgrade

The upgrade frame communicated how the promoted product empowered the consumer to break socioeconomic boundaries and experience a temporary status upgrade. The frame was present in 22% (3,759 words) of the promotional material, and was rooted in the emulation of elite consumptive practices identified by Veblen (1899). Advertisers have long
exploited what Packard (1959) described as the “upgrading urge” and the desire for a person to continuously “upgrade himself, or herself, at least in his own mind, by adopting the consuming patterns of people in higher classes” (pg. 308). Packard (1959) further argued that advertisers were purposely unrealistic about the boundaries separating social classes, and intentionally used messages that stirred up status consciousness.

The upgrade frame was identified in the persistent disparaging of big banks, which may have been intentionally positioned to stir up the enduring negative emotions many Americans felt toward the mainstream banking system (Harris Interactive & Kasasa, 2014). There was opportunity within this larger cultural sentiment for the prepaid cards to be framed as an upgrade away from the entities that damaged the economy and cared little for consumers. One card, iBankUp, even claimed that banks intentionally charged fees and “probably” did not want consumers to know. In contrast, the card promoted no overdraft fees as a product standard, as well as tracking alerts and real time account updates. Other cards warned that bank products such as credit cards were “risky” because of the possibility to incur debt.

The upgrade frame was also observed in the third textual element – the negative depictions of AFS such as cash-checking stores or currency exchanges. These options were portrayed as threats to the consumer’s leisure time because of the need to “spend Friday night waiting in line” to cash a paycheck. AFS were also criticized for having hidden fees and unpredictable check hold times. All five prepaid card companies promoted their services as a vast improvement over AFS, and described the card features as a lifestyle upgrade. In doing so, the prepaid cards followed what Veblen (1899) observed in that the cards encouraged consumers to emulate elite consumptive patterns by replicating the middle class convenience of participation in the digital economy.
The *upgrade* frame was further observed in the tiered-membership programs offered by the prepaid cards. All five prepaid cards promoted special privileges for direct deposit participants. The special discounts and features provided the upgrade urge and replicated the sensation of preferred status the typical prepaid consumer likely did not receive in the mainstream banking system. Whereas the promotional text described traditional checking accounts as charging fees or rejecting applicants, the prepaid cards offered a premium status and emulated the treatment banks reserved for elite consumers. In doing so, socioeconomic boundaries might have felt temporarily shattered. The *upgrade* frame worked with the *exculpation* visual frame, which depicted consumers historically excluded from the mainstream banking system and visualized how the promoted card was culpable. The *exculpation* frame in the visuals implicitly communicated the card was inclusive while the *upgrade* frame overtly described the product was geared towards consumers who were either rejected or chose not to participate in the mainstream banking system. The upgrade frame indicated the advertisers were cognizant of the distinct consumer groups within the target market, but relied on the shared, negative experience within the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems in order to communicate a recognizable message to a wide audience. In the next section, the secured card textual elements, desired participation in the credit/debt economy was a prominent theme. This shared theme also relied on a perceived common experience in order to communicate a core message with a diverse audience.

C. **Secured Card Textual Elements**

The following table describes how the five secured cards used the least amount of promotional material in the home pages and secondary pages included in the sample:
### TABLE 4
SECURED CARD WORD FREQUENCY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word count</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6,634</td>
<td>1,326.8</td>
<td>751.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The secured card web sites also used the least amount of secondary pages although there was a greater consistency in the amount used by each card company.

### TABLE 5
SECURED CARD PAGE COUNTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The frame analysis identified several shared elements in the promotional text. The first textual element was the reference to the credit scoring system, an element seen in all five cards’ promotional text. The text made 77 mentions of the credit scoring system, and 22% (1,488 words) of text in the sample referenced the credit scoring system.

The persistent presence of the credit scoring system was consistent with Marchand’s (1992) observation that advertising defined the boundaries of public discussion and determined relevant factors in a situation. The references established the credit scoring system as relevant to secured card applicants, and did so in ways that were not present in the prepaid or traditional
cards. Whereas the traditional card web sites offered to protect the consumer from credit fraud, the prepaid cards made occasional mention to how a credit score was not needed to apply. In contrast, the secured cards reinforced the credit scoring system and defined why it was relevant to the target audience.

All five of the secured cards referenced the credit scoring system prominently on the home page, and three (60%) of the cards devoted ample text to credit references. The First Progress card devoted 38% (947 words) to describing the credit scoring system. First Premiere used 37% (129 words), and US Bank used 17% (315 words). The following passage from US Bank was representative of how the cards described the importance of credit:

Throughout your life, it's important to maintain good credit. It makes life easier in a variety of ways. Even if you're someone who doesn’t use credit cards much or anticipate needing a loan, good credit opens doors. You don’t have to be a millionaire to have good credit. Just a little knowledge.

The secured cards also used different fonts and headline sizes to emphasize the card’s ability to rebuild or establish credit. The First Progress card, for example, placed the words “Start rebuilding your credit” in white on a blue background, positioned in the center of the page in large letters. Lower on the page, a subhead written in blue and gold bolded font read, “Everyone needs credit.” The subsequent paragraph supported the card’s primary purpose:

Today good personal credit is more important yet more difficult to build and preserve than ever. The rate paid or the very availability of a mortgage, a car loan, or a credit card often depends on credit, and credit scores are routinely evaluated by prospective employers, landlords, and even insurers.

Other cards also described the credit scoring system as vital to consumers’ financial well-being. For example, on the First Premiere home page, the promotional text stated: “Life without a credit card can be a real pain. That’s why we want to offer you the First PREMIER® Bank
Credit Card - the card designed for those with less than perfect credit.” Similar to the First Premiere card, all five cards identified on the homepage how the card was for consumers with “less than perfect” credit who needed to either establish credit for the first time or rebuild a blemished history. Matrix promoted the card as, “Custom fit even if you have poor, limited, or no credit history!”

The second textual element was the description of the card company as a type of partner. All five cards promoted their services as directed towards consumers with no or poor credit who wished to rebuild or establish their credit and participate in the credit/debt economy. In doing so, 17% (1,142 words) of the promotional material described the card as a type of partnership, and 36 references were made to rebuilding, establishing, or helping the consumer develop credit worthiness. These descriptions occurred on secondary pages such as a page about the company or within a list of frequently asked questions. First Progress, for example, described the product as both a credit-building device but also a brand-name experience:

The First Progress Platinum MasterCard® Secured Credit Card is a full-feature Platinum MasterCard® with a credit line based on a security deposit rather than on a credit score. The card is designed to advance the accumulation of new information in a credit file by reporting account activity to all three of the major national credit bureaus every month. And because it’s a full-feature Platinum MasterCard®, the card provides the protection, convenience, and prestige of the worldwide MasterCard® system.

Both the US Bank and AeroMexico cards also described the products as a type of brand name experience which enabled the consumer to participate in the card company’s expansive network while building a credit profile. The Matrix and First Premier cards also promoted the secured card products as a resource for credit building. First Premier, for example, positioned the card as a type of altruism: “As a national market leader, First PREMIER Bank focuses on individuals who have less than perfect credit but are actually still creditworthy. We take pride in
offering a transitional credit card to help our customers nationwide develop better credit habits.”

Matrix’s description also capitalized on the concept of exclusion:

The company specializes in providing credit products and services to consumers who are largely overlooked by traditional credit card issuers and local banks. As a consumer finance company, with a state of the art consumer lending platform, we are able to provide a variety of services to our customers when other financial institutions will not accommodate them.

The second textual element described a possible partnership between the consumer and the card company in which the card company provided access to a credit network and monthly reports to the credit reporting bureaus. However, there was a consistent pattern of language regarding the consumer’s responsibility to use credit wisely. The third textual element was references to personal responsibility and self-control. Four (80%) of the cards made explicit references to personal responsibility, and about 8% (557 words) was devoted to such text. First Premier, for example, described the product as dependent on the consumer’s ability to not overspend: “Our products may be able to help build, rebuild, or reestablish credit history if on-time minimum payments are made with all creditors and account balances are maintained below the credit limits.” Similarly, First Progress warned how it reported to the three major credit bureaus, but any “poor payment performance” was reported and negatively impacted credit history.

US Bank depicted the consequences for poor self-control with a video of an aspiring rock star in the midst of repossession. The video appeared on a secondary page about credit wellness, and included dialog in which the man admitted he spent too much and ruined his credit. He believed his credit issues would be irrelevant once he became a famous musician. His dreams were metaphorically crushed as a mover smashed his prized guitar. At the end of the video, the announcer asked: “Spending like a rock star? Think again.” However, not all of the references to
responsibility or self-control were negative. The AeroMexico described the rewards of responsible card usage: “When you've managed all of your credit obligations responsibly consistently for 12 months, you'll be well on your way to a strong credit standing, and we may be able to move you to an unsecured credit card product.” The next section further considered these elements and the larger message about card ownership.

D. **Secured Card Frames**

Frames are communicated in a particular way to promote a specific interpretation and moral evaluation (Entman, 1991), and are socially shared, persistent overtime, and stretched across multiple forms of mass communication (Reese, 2001). The frame analysis for the secured cards identified two frames, the *progress* and *boundary* frames, which were also observed in other card types. The *progress* frame was identified in all three card types, and each type held a distinct interpretation of advancement. Similarly, the *boundary* frame was identified in both the secured and traditional card web sites, and also presented varied interpretations as to the confines surrounding each target group’s experience.

1. **Progress**

The *progress* frame communicated the personal growth possible through card usage. Whereas the prepaid and traditional card *progress* frames worked with visual frames to communicate a message of advancement, the secured card web sites lacked visuals and there was no imagery to reinforce the message. Thus, the *progress* frame on the secured card web sites was more overt than with the prepaid or traditional card web sites, and the frame was observed in 3,100 (47%) of the sample text. Similar to the prepaid cards’ *progress* frame, the secured card version was also rooted in the American cultural desire for advancement (Adams, 1931; Shor,
The prepaid card web sites encouraged consumers to turn away from the reckless and exclusionary mainstream banking system and take control of their personal progress through the remote money management. In contrast, the secured card web sites encouraged consumers to reenter the mainstream banking system by improving their credit score and qualifying for other credit products. This encouragement indicated the card was designed for short-term use and intended to advance the consumer into a non-secured credit product. The short-term nature also indicated the consumer’s personal progress was tied to their ability to perform well with the promoted product, improve their credit score, and advance within the larger credit/debt economy.

The progress frame was identified in the consistent references to the credit scoring system. All five cards described credit as a crucial part of daily existence and a requirement for accessing necessities such as housing, transportation, insurance, and employment. Matrix described life without credit as a “pain;” First Progress recommended “everyone needs credit,” and AeroMexico suggested credit made life “easier.” Both First Premiere and First Progress provided quick exemplars as to when credit was an evaluated factor and a good score was mandatory. The progress frame was also identified from the second textual element in which the card companies were self-described as a type of guiding service that connected the consumer to the credit scoring system. All five cards explicitly described the cards as designed to help consumers establish or rebuild credit by reporting each month to the three credit bureaus, which helped the cardholder establish a positive record. Several cards described the product’s purpose as part of a larger philosophy of helping “creditworthy individuals” bridge into the credit scoring system and pursue the personal advancement. The Matrix card company description, for example, was representative of the other cards’ text and described the product as serving “overlooked” consumers who were not accepted at other financial institutions.
The progress frame for the secured cards was unique in that it communicated the product was intended for short-term use. Consumers were meant to use the card, improve their credit scores, and then transfer to an unsecured product. Several of the card companies such as US Bank and AeroMexico had non-secured alternatives for which the consumer might eventually qualify. Similarly, the Matrix card offered both full and partially secured cards. All these options, however, were described under the condition that progress was not immediate and advancement might take months or years. The AeroMexico card, for example, advised that establishing credit might take at least twelve months.

The references to the credit scoring system indicated the progress frame was about the successful navigating the credit scoring system and the adherence to the terms established by the card companies as well as the three credit bureaus. The progress frame for the secured cards focused on the individual’s contribution to his or her own advancement, and did not acknowledge the extenuating factors within the credit scoring system. Only 35% of a consumer’s credit score was based on his or her ability to make payments on time, the debt-to-income ratio, and recent credit history (Malheiros et al, 2012). The other 65% was considered proprietary, and critics argued it was based on discriminating factors such as race, geographic location, age, occupation, and income (Malheiros et al., 2012). Although the contents of the other 65% were unknown, critics argued that discriminating factors were evident in the lower credit scores among consumers of color (Ruetschlin & Asante-Muhammad, 2013; Garcia, 2010). Economists have also found that lower-income workers as well as residents of low-income neighborhoods disproportionately represent higher-risk credit scores (Federal Reserve Board, 2007). The promotional material ignored these inherited privileges, and instead presented the credit scoring system as a type of meritocracy in which hard work, discipline, and ability were the only factors
needed for advancement. This was evident in the third textual element in which the card companies referenced personal responsibility through budgeting, on-time payments, and maintaining the card in good-standing.

In doing so, the progress frame was consistent with Cullen’s (2003) observation that the American Dream was a type of collective ownership which held the assertion that anyone could get ahead. He described “boosters” of “universal enfranchisement” who reaffirmed these beliefs, and questioned why such affirmations needed “obsessive” repetition (pg. 60). When applied to the secured card promotional text, Cullen’s (2003) conceptualization of the American Dream positioned the card advertisers as a type of booster. The advertisers reaffirmed the belief of universal enfranchisement, but also suggested upward mobility was only possible through the credit scoring system. The promotional text consistently depicted such affirmation from the credit scoring system as desirable, and the boundary frame further defined consumers aspirations.

2. **Boundary**

The boundary frame communicated the confines of the target consumer’s material potential, and also identified the consumer’s place in the larger socioeconomic structure and made clear demarcations as to what was considered a position above or beneath. The boundary frame was identified in 1,715 words (25%) of the sample text and was also identified in the traditional card promotional text. Both the secured card and traditional card boundary frames presented similar interpretations, although the two consumer groups were portrayed as being at different places within the larger socioeconomic structure and that such placement was dictated by credit score and access to the credit/debt economy. For the secured cards, references to the credit scoring system described a larger structure to which the target consumer was excluded.
The exclusion from the credit scoring system, combined with the suggested aspiration for participation, also implied the target applicant operated in an indeterminate state. The *boundary* frame presented a clearly defined status made possible through card ownership, and in doing so, created a confine around what the secured card consumer should aspire to achieve.

The third textual element, references to responsibility, involved a consistent reminder that the consumer should practice self-control over his or her spending. Unchecked aspirations and the poor use of credit were presented with warning. The US Bank secured card, for example, had a secondary page about credit wellness which included the video about the aspiring musician and the warning to not “spend like a rock star.” The video depicted a reckless consumer who was the victim of his own aspirations, and in doing so, drew a boundary around what other consumers should expect was within their reach. Boundaries were also drawn through a portrayal of the target market as vulnerable to larger economic forces. One card, the First Premier provided several exemplars such as divorce, illness, or unemployment as to why a consumer might have lost a good credit standing. The promotional text also outlined the negative consequences of such a loss – denial of credit and higher interest rates. The same passage also suggested the card helped consumers “develop” better credit habits, and in doing so, reminded the consumer of the his or her place within the larger credit system.

The secured card *boundary* frame shared the same viewpoint as the traditional card *boundary* frame in that both card types identified where the consumer fit within the larger socioeconomic hierarchy and described aspirations that fit within the confines of that social standing. The demarcated place for secured card applicants was lower in the hierarchy but potentially improvable through product usage. The traditional card consumer’s boundaries were
defined differently, and the next section further addressed the traditional card frames, beginning with the textual elements prominent in the text.

E. **Traditional Card Textual Elements**

The ten traditional card web sites were analyzed together, although some of the cards were categorized as products for consumers with good/excellent credit and others were aimed at those with excellent credit. Good credit is typically considered a score 660 and higher, although the best rates are usually reserved for consumers above 770 (Wozniacka & Sen, 2004). However, the meaning of that number changes along with the larger consumer environment and the worth increases or decreases (Demanyanyk, 2010). This means consumers with high credit scores oscillate from one rating category to the next, even as their numerical score remains consistent. Thus, there is an innate fluidity among credit scores, and collapsing the ten cards into one category allowed for greater latitude in understanding the post-recession experience for consumers with strong credit scores.

The following table describes the word frequency for the 10 traditional card web sites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 6: TRADITIONAL CARD WORD FREQUENCY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15,983</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As demonstrated in the table below, the traditional cards varied in the amount of secondary pages used, but did have the highest mean among the three card types.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 7: TRADITIONAL CARD PAGE COUNTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The frame analysis identified several elements in the promotional text, beginning with the most notable – descriptions of the cards’ rewards programs. Nine of the 10 cards (90%) promoted a rewards program, and the exception was the Capital One Platinum Prestige which advertised a low interest rate. At the time of data collection, the average for a low-interest rate card was 10.46%, about 4.5% lower than the national average (Dilworth, 2013). The traditional cards’ sample text made 451 references to the rewards program. According to the FDIC, a rewards program is a rebate system arranged through a co-branding agreement between the card company and other partners such as retailers or airlines. Rewards include rebates in the form of points redeemable for cash, airline miles, or retail spending points (FDIC, 2007). The traditional cards’ focus of the rewards programs was consistent with Hallahan’s (1999) observation that advertising frames limited a message’s range of meaning and directed consumers how to think about a product, brand, or entire corporation. Edell and Staelin (1983) also found framing produced a more focused judgment about the product or brand. For the nine cards promoting a rewards program, the amount of text reserved for program descriptions indicated the card
companies wanted consumers to think about the product through the lens of a rewards program. The traditional cards devoted 40% (6,502 words) of text to the rewards programs.

Descriptions of the rewards programs ranged from 95% of a card’s promotional text (BellCo, 587 words) to 27% (BarclayCard, 230 words). Of the nine cards that promoted a rewards program, all did so on the homepage. These promotions included both informational descriptions of how the program functioned and the earnings potential, as well as aspirational presentations. Three of the nine cards (33.3%) used the aspirational approach, and six (66.6%) took the informational approach. BellCo, for example, placed a description of the earnings potential on the homepage. In blue and grey text set on a white background, the text described the triple-point bonus program. In smaller font, a subhead read: “You are unique. Shouldn’t your Visa be? Earn triple Scorecard Bonus Points. 3x Points.” Charts were positioned below these subheads and listed the retail partners eligible for triple points. With the exception of a few internet providers, the retail partners were providers of outdoor equipment or other leisure gear.

Similarly, the Discover Student card promoted its rewards program through a chart positioned on the front page, highlighted in the company’s signature orange. On a secondary page, a type of company philosophy regarding the rewards was explained: “We believe in doing right by our customers with better value and generous rewards.”

Another approach was the presentation of possible aspirations. The Citi ThankYou card, for example, had a homepage that resembled a catalog. Images of goods along with the point value needed for redemption were displayed. A caption suggested, “Treat yourself with rewards on sale.” At the top of the page, a sliding panel rotated images of redeemable goods while a background image showed a father and son in a camping situation. An all-caps headline read, “Time together makes memories forever.” Similarly, the United Explorer card also took an
aspirational approach and promoted the rewards program as a type of status upgrade. On the home page, the text read: “Get treated like an insider at the airport and beyond with the MileagePlus Explorer Card.” In bold font, the text further explained how opening the card granted the cardholder 30,000 bonus miles. Other traditional cards also put the system within the context of earning, and there were 83 mentions of earning or redeeming through the rewards program.

The second notable textual element was the presence of aspirations in the sample promotional material. A material aspiration was defined as a commodity the card companies suggested the consumer should own. There were 310 specific mentions of brand name goods (e.g. KitchenAid Mixer, Swiss Army Watch), and 114 mentions of unspecific goods (e.g. camping equipment). The promotional text used 2,876 words (18%) to describe material goods aspirations. Lifestyle aspirations were defined as the special status or recognition given to the individual based on who he or she was as a person. These aspirations also included special, purchasable experiences such as travel or access to exclusive events. The sample text used 2,591 words (16%) to describe the lifestyle aspiration possible through card ownership. Additionally, 60% of the traditional cards promoted specific VIP treatment, exclusive access, or concierge services.

All ten cards promoted either material or lifestyle aspirations on the home or secondary pages. Several cards such as Citi Thank You, Chase Freedom, and Discover Student promoted both the material and lifestyle aspirations made possible through card ownership. The Citi ThankYou card, for example, visualized commodities redeemable through the rewards program along with the headline, “Your wish fulfilled.” On a secondary page, the travel rewards were described as a special adventure made possible through card ownership: “When you’re ready to
experience the world, let Citi ThankYou Rewards help send you on a bon voyage.” There were also programs described on the secondary pages as providing VIP treatment, “special amenities” and ways to “make it special.” This sense of distinction associated with the material and lifestyle aspirations was consistent throughout the 10 traditional cards. Even the Capital One Platinum Prestige, a card without a rewards program, offered concierge services and global assistance.

Concierge services was a consistent presence in the promotional material for the 10 traditional cards. These services ranged from basic planning assistance to high-end arrangements such as American Express Platinum’s special limousine concierge for airport travel. On a secondary page, American Express Platinum described how consumers “share an exclusive level of benefits” and included the testimony of a cardholder, Jeff Beyda. Next to his picture, the text stated: “My favorite feature is the hotel upgrades & the extra amenities you get when you’re traveling, & also being able to access international travel agents 24 hours a day is a great convenience.” In addition to concierge or VIP services, half of the cards (50%) also offered access to special events or premium tickets. Capital One Cash Rewards described the special treatment on a secondary page about the benefits: “Your Visa Signature card gets you special access and preferred seating at popular sporting events, premier golf outings, and concerts.” Similarly, Chase Explorer provided “access to exclusive events” that were promoted as “once-in-a-life-time” American Express Platinum also promised access to “once-in-a-lifetime events.”

The third textual element was the descriptions of protection programs. Ten (100%) of the traditional cards offered protective programs, and the word protection was used 52 times and insurance was used 25 times in the sample text. These programs included: fraud protection; security protection; warranty programs; additional insurance; privacy protection; liability
protection; accidental damage protection; travel protection (primary auto insurance, purchase protection). Additionally, the cards boasted a type of protection through global assistance programs for cardholders who were traveling. These programs included: Medical transportation, travel and legal assistance, doctor referrals, English-speaking lawyers, and customs information. For example, both the American Express Gold and Platinum cards offered a global assist program which enabled the consumer to “travel with confidence.” The Gold card included a depiction in which the card offered protection: “You're in another country and your passport has gone missing, you have been involved in an incident or worse. Take a deep breath. Global Assist® Hotline is ready to help when you're traveling 100 or more miles from home.” The protection element was unique to the traditional cards.

F. Traditional card frames

Similar to the secured cards, the traditional cards also used the boundary and progress frames to communicate a strategic message about how the card connected the consumer with an aspirational, middle class lifestyle that was within the boundaries of both the credit scoring and mainstream banking systems. However, the traditional card frames were directed at a group who enjoyed participation in the credit/debt economy as well as greater financial health than the secured card target market. The boundary and progress frames reflected these varying consumer experiences, particularly because the progress frame was the primary frame for both the prepaid and secured cards, but a tertiary frame for the traditional cards. Among the traditional card promotional text, the boundary frame was the most prominent and observed in 9,589 words (60%) of the sample text. This frame worked with the authenticity and progress frames.
1. **Boundary**

The *boundary* frame communicated the limitations which confined the consumer’s material potential, but also identified the consumer’s place in the larger socioeconomic structure and made clear demarcations as to where the consumer belonged. The *boundary* frame worked with the *facilitation* visual frame, and promoted the card as a type of resource for maximizing the consumer’s middle class experience. For the traditional cards, the *boundary* frame was rooted in the American dream of consumption (Artez & Ortega Murphy, 2000) in which consumers satisfied a need for prestige (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005), signaled wealth (Bagwell & Burnheim, 1996), satiated anxieties as to where the consumer stood in the socioeconomic pecking order, and affirmed whether such status was recognized by others (De Botton, 2005). The secured cards created a boundary that placed the consumer as neither lesser nor middle class. In contrast, the traditional cards’ *boundary* frame communicated the target applicant as middle or upper middle class and defined how the consumer should direct his or her aspirations. Such aspirations were an authentic pursuit of maximizing and appreciating the middle class experience, and the visuals present on the web site reinforced that such aspirations were actively being obtained by others within the same social class.

The *boundary* frame was observed in the first textual element – the consistent presence of the reward programs. The rewards programs were structured as a type of meritocracy in which strategic spending entitled the consumer to points, miles, or cash applicable to fulfilling material goods aspirations. The card companies provided specific examples of commodities or experiences made possible through spending, and in doing so, set boundaries around middle class achievement. The BellCo card, for example, offered triple bonus points if the cardholder shopped among select retail partners. Similarly, Discover Student and Chase Freedom both
offered rotating programs with select partners. During the first quarter of the year, for example, consumers earned 5% cash back at restaurants or gas stations. During the second quarter, the offer rotated to home improvement stores such as Home Depot. The structured meritocracy of the rewards program is important to note because it is consistent with De Botton’s (2005) argument that meritocracies are a central cause of status anxiety. According to De Botton (2005), U.S. consumers are anxious about importance and achievement, and feel content when compared favorably to others within the same status. The rewards programs on the traditional card web sites supplied ideas on what other middle class consumers were doing, which served to create envy and build aspirations.

The boundary frame was also observed in the advertisers’ reconceptualization of the American Dream as that of material achievement. Critics have argued that advertisers corrupted the American dream by refocusing it on material, not personal achievement (Nickerson et. al, 2003; Belk, 1985; Kasser; 2002). The traditional card home and secondary pages consistently supplied ideas on how the promoted product connected the cardholder to experiences that were reflective of the consumer’s ability to obtain the American dream of consumption. On the Citi ThankYou home page, for example, the headline “Time together makes memories forever” was positioned between a catalog of redeemable rewards and the image of a father/son camping trip. The headline worked with the visuals to depict a maximized middle class experience in which happiness, security, and contentment were guided by commodities. Similarly, Capital One Cash Rewards cards promoted its cash-back rewards program in which consumer spending was validated through special bonuses. In redeeming the rewards, cardholders chose between cash, gift cards, or an account credit. Although the options were directed choices that were pre-determined by the company, the presentation of the text provided the sensation of abundance.
Each option was highlighted in red font and then briefly described, and it was placed beneath a graphic that involved images of plus signs and stacks of cash. The text and the visuals depicted a fulfilled socioeconomic status in which the card connected the consumer to material achievements. Such achievements in the traditional card web sites were consistently presented to the reader as both accessible and worthy of aspiration. The obtainable element of the boundary frame connected with the authenticity frame to communicate how the American dream of consumption was a crucial component of middle class status.

2. **Authenticity**

The authenticity frame was the strategic assurance that the promoted product supported the consumer’s self-created identity and reinforced the authenticity of their socioeconomic affiliation. The authenticity frame was the second most prominent frame, and observed in 5,783 words (36%) of text. This frame was rooted in the disparate consumer responses to the 2008 economic collapse in which many consumers were devastated (Pew, 2012; Ratcliffe et al., 2014), but others experienced little disruption (Pew, 2012), and post-recession financial wellness served as an indicator of socioeconomic status. In the post-recession economy, consumers increasingly moved into high or low credit rating categories (FICO, 2012; Horwich, 2010; White, 2012), and post-recession life was dictated by credit access (Duke, 2010; Experian, 2012).

The authenticity frame was identified from the second textual element – aspirations. More than one-third of the sample text (5,457 words) listed or described the material goods or lifestyle aspirations made possible through the rewards programs or the ancillary services. Whereas the material goods suggested commodities achieved by other middle class consumers, the lifestyle aspirations presented ideas for distinction that authenticated the cardholder’s self-
created consumer identity. The *authenticity* frame was observed in lifestyle aspirations which promoted a VIP or special access status, elevated the consumer from the masses, and delivered unique privileges. Capital One Platinum Prestige, for example, encouraged applicants to: “Get a card as unique as you are: Express yourself with your Capital One credit card.” Similarly, BellCo asked, “You are unique. Shouldn’t your Visa be?”

The *authenticity* frame created a type of membership experience for cardholders in which acceptance connected the consumer into a larger network of financial and personal opportunities. American Express Platinum card, for example, promoted how the card enabled the applicant to “share an exclusive level of benefits.” A testimonial offered further evidence of the type of person who used the card – a business owner who appreciated the hotel upgrades, amenities, and international travel agents. The other traditional cards also prominently showcased how the card added value to the consumer’s life and described ancillary services such as auto insurance rental, concierge access, or travel agent assistance. In doing so, the promotional text was consistent with credit scholars’ assessments that card companies operated within the existing structure of social class and created further classifications in order to reinforce hierarchy. These delineations constructed the best cards as a type of membership experience that consumers wore as a badge of honor (Mandell, 1990; Lewis, 1991; Manning, 2000).

The notion of the credit card as a badge of honor served to communicate that the consumer’s self-constructed identity was authentic. In the past, credit card types were more simply categorized (e.g. store card; charge card; general purpose), and the introduction of prestigious gold or platinum cards transformed credit cards into “image driven financial instruments” (Burton, 2008, pg. 102). However, cards not directed at elite customers eventually mimicked gold and platinum cards in both color and name in order to advance in a competitive
market (FDIC, 2007). Card companies servicing elite consumers could no longer rely on colors or prestigious sounding names, and deeper delineations surfaced (Burton, 2008). The traditional cards in my sample confirmed the presence of complex groupings in which the consumer selected a card based on the reward types, perks and protective services that best authenticated their self-created consumer identity. The authenticity frame was supported by the ostentation visual frame which illustrated how the cards connected the consumer with the extrinsic aspirations readily recognizable by others. The authenticity frame also worked with the progress frame to communicate how acquiring such aspirations was indicative of a new and better material life that reflected the consumer’s personal progress.

3. Progress

The progress frame was the strategic communication that the aspirations and depictions of the material life made possible through card ownership was indicative of the consumer’s personal progress. This material life was notably rooted in leisure and the conspicuous performance of the consumer’s access to leisure. The progress frame was seen in 4,155 words (26%) of the sample text, and worked with the visual distinction frame to communicate how the card elevated the individual from the masses and provided a sense of personal advancement. Of the three card types, the traditional card placed the least emphasis on financial progress and instead framed advancement through a consumptive leisure context. For the traditional cards, the progress frame was observed in the second textual element – the material goods and lifestyle aspirations the consumer should aspire to achieve. Whereas the material goods were examples of the types of commodities other middle class consumers already obtained, the lifestyle aspirations were extrinsic upgrades in status for specific leisure situations. The promotional text depicted improved status at airports, hotels, or spectator events. Such text was
placed around images of people enjoying cruises, foreign travel, dining, shopping, and outdoor leisure. Capital One Cash Rewards, for example, described ancillary services which enhanced consumptive experiences: “Your Visa Signature card gets you special access and preferred seating at popular sporting events, premier golf outings, and concerts.” Similarly, the Citi ThankYou card promoted its ancillary travel services and rewards program as a way to connect the consumer to experiences he or she might not have considered or been able to access otherwise: “When you're ready to experience the world, let Citi ThankYou® Rewards help send you off on a bon voyage.”

Together, the text and the images framed the experience as a type of advancement. In doing so, the progress frame fit with Klein’s (1999) observation that credit cards were marketed as the facilitator of dreams and an authentic maximization of the consumer’s lifestyle. Such dreams, however, were increasingly stratified and not accessible to all consumer groups. Leisure in the U.S. is increasingly a luxury good accessed by higher-income workers not obligated to work two jobs or seek overtime. Higher-income workers are also more apt to have greater vacation time and disposable income to devote to leisure. In contrast, both the quality of leisure time and money spent on leisure has decreased for lower-income individuals since the 1960s (Sevilla, Gimenez-Nadal, & Gershuny, 2012).

The promotional text for the traditional cards’ home and secondary pages provided examples on how the consumer might access recreational experiences that conspicuously communicated the cardholder’s access to the luxury of leisure. The emphasis in the promotional text on leisure activities fit with Veblen’s (1899) observation that leisure is a defining symbol of socioeconomic status and personal achievement:
Conspicuous abstention from labour therefore becomes the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement and the conventional index of reputability; and conversely, since application to productive labour is a mark of poverty and subjection, it becomes inconsistent with a reputable standing in the community (pg. 19)

The sample text portrayed conspicuous leisure as a primary focus of the card, and the *progress* frame organized the multitude of leisure examples into a streamlined focus on progressive material advancement as indicative of class status. The *progress* frame also communicated the need for the consumer to protect his or her material accomplishments. This was observed in the third textual element, the descriptions of protection. All ten cards provided a list of protections and insurances that guarded the consumer from increased risks in the digital, global economy. These protections included purchase protections (against faulty products); car rental insurances; special rates on travel insurance; fraud protection; and privacy protections. Additionally, the cards were promoted as omnipresent resources accessible during emergencies. Cards such as Capital One, Discover Student, BellCo, and American Express assured the consumer that account access was available online “wherever you are” and that the cards’ services go “wherever” the consumer traveled. This sense of constant protection was vastly different from the prepaid cards’ promotional text in which progress was seen as independence from the mainstream banking system. For the traditional cards, the constant protection was presented as a type of necessity (guarantees against fraud or loss), as well as a type of asset (insurance products and warranty services). In this sense the *progress* frame for the traditional cards depicted the advancement in the consumer’s material life, and reinforced the importance of safeguarding these material accomplishments. Such aspirations for material goods or lifestyle achievement were either absent or reframed in the secured and prepaid card web sites. The next section further considered the differences between the card types.
G. Conclusion

The promotional text on the 20 consumer card web sites’ home and secondary pages found insight into distinct consumer groups’ post-recession experiences as well as a greater understanding of how the card companies foresaw future possibilities for these groups, based on the perimeters of the credit scoring and mainstream banking systems. The frames present on the prepaid card web sites – progress and upgrade – communicated the card was a device that enabled the consumer to circumvent the mainstream banking system while responding to the demands of the digital economy. The promotional text supported this depiction, but also introduced an overt hostility towards the banking system. The warnings found in the promotional text for the consumer to not trust big banks was reflective of Cronin’s (2000) observation that advertisers saw themselves as a type of cultural intermediary that constructed, reflected, and communicated consumer lifestyle and class membership. For the prepaid cards, the advertisers communicated a persisting vulnerability and potential for future victimization.

The secured cards promotional text was also geared towards consumers with poor or limited credit, but the credit scoring system and the consumer’s place in the economy was framed for a different interpretation. The secured cards progress and boundary frames constructed the consumer’s place in the economy as possessing potential, but not worthy of high aspirations. The progress frame was rooted in the American desire for personal progress and also the larger belief that success in the U.S. was based on merit. The progress frame ignored the inherited privileges granted to many consumers with good credit as well as the extenuating circumstances afflicting consumers with poor credit. Instead, the progress frame presented improvement within the credit/debt economy as possible through secured card ownership, and
that such participation within the credit system was a requirement. The progress frame worked with the boundary frame to create restrictions on what the consumer might hope to achieve within the larger economy. Aspirations were limited to mainstream banking participation, and more secure access to middle class comforts.

The American dream of consumption was reserved for the traditional cards. The boundary frame defined how the consumer should direct his or her aspirations and capitalized on consumer anxieties regarding socioeconomic recognition. The boundary frame connected with the authenticity frame and the assurance that the card authenticated socioeconomic status either through material good or status acquisition. Such access to the material aspirations was framed as a type of personal progress in which the consumer was advancing in his or her aspirations, specifically consumptive leisure – a luxury good increasingly unavailable to lower-income Americans.

The frame analysis for the sample text identified three distinct cultural behaviors on how to display status. These statuses were manufactured by the card companies and indicated how the companies foresaw each consumer group’s current and future statuses. These statuses were distinct, but all shaped by access to the credit scoring system. There was also a consistent similarity in how the varying future statuses were a maintenance of the status quo. The next chapter further examined the card web sites through a discourse analysis in order to drill deeper into the visual and promotional materials.
VII. COMMUNICATING THE CONSUMER EXPERIENCE

-- A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The first and second research questions asked about the visual and textual frames that emerged from the consumer card application web sites. The frame analyses revealed how the card web sites utilized broad frames that connected to overarching motivations and experiences for each card type’s disparate target market. The third research question was informed by these findings and sought to further understand the fractures within and across the card categories, and how the card companies addressed disparate audiences with distinct needs. In asking which ideas of hierarchy or elite markers emerged from the consumer card application web sites, the third research question sought to further understand consumer limitations and choices, and how the advertisements simultaneously addressed a target market with a spectrum of experiences. 

Thus, the discourse analysis connected to the frame analyses, which suggested central narratives and experiences. In doing so, the discourse analysis enhanced and did not refute the findings from the previous two chapters. The discourse analysis delivered a more rich understanding of each card type’s fractured target market, and it offered opportunity to further investigate the overarching themes which were used to amalgamate these motivations.

Wood and Kroger (2000) define discourse as all spoken and written forms of communication. In analyzing the common themes and patterns that emerge from such communication, Fairclough (1995) argues that the opacity of wider social and cultural structures are exposed. Fairclough (1995) further argues that discourse analysis examines the discursive practices that produce and sustain systems of power. Both Fairclough’s (1995) definition and approach to discourse analysis are particularly relevant to this dissertation because of the existing
literature regarding hierarchy and the credit scoring system, as well as my interest in understanding how the card web sites communicate the target applicant’s position in the socioeconomic structure.

The discourse analysis for the third research question was also informed by the existing literature regarding credit card advertisements. Since the 1960s, credit cards have been marketed through a color coding system which stratifies consumers and limits access to specific products (Klein, 1999; Manning 2009). In addition to visual cues such as a color coding system, scholars have also identified how the language in credit card advertisements varies by consumer group. Williams (2005) found that credit card advertisements used distinct language to address various audiences. Cards directed at consumers with lesser status used greater penalty language whereas cards directed at middle or upper middle class consumers used elite language. Kendall (2011) further argued that socioeconomic status was framed through literature regarding membership and expertise.

Guided by the existing literature regarding credit card advertisements, I began the discourse analysis by examining the card names, color schemes, and slogans. Each card’s information was compared within and across card categories. I also considered relevant affinities, partnerships, or associations that delivered special treatment or elite status as a result of the partnership. In this process, I maintained an understanding that the cards might be structured as scholars have previously found to resemble the larger socioeconomic hierarchy. I also maintained the possibility the cards might sell the appearance of high status and provide consumers with what Packard (1959) described as a temporary shattering of socioeconomic boundaries.
The literature regarding credit card advertisements also prompted me to examine the promotional text for the usage of penalty and prestige words. Williams (2005) described the language of debt in which consumers with good credit are addressed as “valued, preapproved, preferred, creditworthy, select customers, or members, ‘worthy’ of relationship banking…” (pg. 56). In contrast, penalty language focuses on the fees, costs, and other expenses associated with card usage, and is typically directed at consumers with low credit ratings. Williams (2005) argued that both penalty and prestige words are part of a larger industry language that suggests card users have personal choice and convenience.

I used an online word frequency counter to establish the presence of such words for card type, and I made note of the most frequently occurring words and the context in which they occurred. The promotional text was reread multiple times and notes were taken on the tone and language use. I looked for repetitions, patterns, and redundancy in the card communication. I considered the ways in which the current credit system was structured as a hierarchy and how the text reinforced or challenged the existing economy. I also considered the larger, post-recession cultural climate and whether the varying economic experiences were addressed, ignored, or described by the card communications. Additionally, I reflected on the findings from the visual and frame analyses, and considered each card type’s overarching themes regarding the target market’s shared experiences based on their participation in the credit/debt system. Lastly, my notes were organized and analyzed with regard to credit access, socioeconomic status, and credit as an indicator of lifestyle aspirational achievement.

Gamson and Modigliani’s (1987, 1989) approach to framing, interpretive packages, served as a guide for examining the promotional material. The underlying premise of interpretive packages is that cultural issues are “contested in a symbolic arena” through
culturally available elements and symbols that are readily recognized by the public (1987; p. 376). Such elements and symbols are clustered together to make sense of relevant issues. Advertisements, including consumer card applicant web sites, are a text in which elements and symbols are clustered together to make sense of relevant issues such as credit, personal finance, socioeconomic status, consumption, and aspiration. Consumers turn to advertisements for information (McCracken, 1987), and meaning emerges in relation to the frames (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). The next three sections each describe the meaning that emerged from the promotional material for the 20 cards’ home and secondary pages. The results for each card type are presented separately, and any shared similarities across credit cards are addressed in the conclusion. In consistency with the previous results chapters, the next section begins with the prepaid cards.

A. **Prepaid Cards**

The visual frame analysis for the five prepaid cards in this study’s sample found the advertisers used the *self-reliance, exculpation, and facilitation* frames to communicate a complex message directed at a diverse group whose shared experience was exclusion or avoidance from the mainstream banking and credit scoring system. In these broad frames, the consumer was encouraged to maintain a state of financial displacement and view the mainstream banking system as a threat to personal financial security. The visuals reinforced the textual frames of *progress* and *upgrade* to communicate the card as a comprehensive solution to disenfranchisement and economic unpredictability. These frames revealed how the advertisers perceived the formation of a new socioeconomic class in the post-recession years – the *former middle class* – and structured a series of anxieties, desires, and angsts assumed to be part of this
target market’s experience. Communication to other target markets was also present in the five prepaid cards’ home and secondary pages. This section identifies the various narratives which emerged when these distinct groups and their motivations were addressed. The consistency of the messages directed as these distinct groups reinforces the literature regarding the pervasiveness of the credit scoring system.

Cronin (2000) explains how advertisers construct socioeconomic classes in an attempt to demonstrate insight into the target market they are paid to reach. She describes socioeconomic anxieties as interpretations by advertisers which are reflections of how they perceive class distinctions, desires, and angsts: “Individuals in agencies promote themselves as cultural intermediaries who can deliver expert knowledge of the ever-changing formulations of identity” (pg. 49). Cronin further argues that advertisers understand how deep fractures persist within varying socioeconomic groups, and the notion of streamlined consumptive practices within a target market is a fabrication. However, she notes that advertisers contend such a fabrication is productive, and many in the industry argue that consumers turn to advertisements for information and instruction on how to manage consumer choice. The discourse analysis considered the fractured target markets for the prepaid cards and identified a streamlined notion of the consumptive practices of the prepaid card users. This section begins by detailing the varying consumer groups present in the sample pages. Then, the two themes which emerged in the discourse analysis are each presented.

1. Prepaid card users – distinct motivations

The five prepaid cards home and secondary pages’ addressed varying consumer groups who were either excluded from the mainstream banking system (due to credit history), ineligible for participation (due to age or lack of credit), or chose not to affiliate for political
purposes or as a budgeting strategy. Different factions emerged among these varying groups. The UPside card, for example, was directed at two distinct consumer groups. Parents applying for the card on behalf of a child were the first category. Young adults ages 18 and older were the second category. On the parents’ page, the cards’ purposes were further delineated:

For high school students, it’s a great alternative to cash allowances that are unsafe, offer no spending control and often require trips to the ATM. It’s also a great educational tool to learn about financial literacy.

For college students, it’s a convenient way to manage their money, track spending in real-time and stay away from credit cards. College students can receive occasional funds from their parents, receive a pay check directly onto the card and even write checks online (For cardholders 18 or over)

The sample text for the other five prepaid cards were not as overt in defining the target markets. The iBankUp card, for example, was described as a product that was “for everyone” because it did not require a credit check nor an active checking account as a condition of approval. In a description of the company’s service, the card was described as a money saving, budgeting device that served as an electronic alternative to mainstream banks:

We help Internet-connected consumers keep more of their money and spend it more responsibly. Plastyc Inc. is a privately held US corporation with a principal office in New York. Our mission is to provide payment and money management services to anyone with Internet access who would rather not drive to a bank and wait in line there.

The above description presented the card as a type of replacement for mainstream banking practices that reproduced consumer services in an electronic environment. This statement streamlined the consumers’ varying motivations for applying for the card into a singular notion that the card was a virtual substitution for mainstreaming banking. On an
iBankUp secondary page with frequently asked questions, for example, the card was further described as “an online virtual check book” with many “one-of-a-kind services:”

You can receive funds through direct deposit, cash loads at more than 50,000 retailers nationwide, check cashing, and credit or debit card. Because it's prepaid, your spending is limited to the amount of money received on the account.

The promotion of the card as a virtual checkbook that replaced affiliation with a bank was a consistent message on the prepaid card web sites, regardless of the target market. The BuyRight homepage also described the promoted product as a “safe, easy, low-fee alternative to traditional checking accounts!” The accompanying text also explained how “No Checking Account is required!” and there was “no credit check.” In describing how participation in the mainstream banking system was not required, the BuyRight promotional text on the home and secondary pages identified a target market that was either excluded or ineligible for banking participation. The card’s promotional text supplied an alternative by presenting the product as a money management device that both served as a budgeting tool and a form of economic resistance against the mainstream banking system: “Shop as soon as you get paid, and with real-time text alerts, never lose track of your spending. Pay Bills. Forget the checkbook, BuyRight MasterCard allows you to enroll in fast, free, online bill pay.” The next section describes how the streamlined consumer motivations presented a theme of increased control.

2. Increased control

The first theme observed in the five prepaid cards’ sample pages was the consistent message that the card increased control, in both an individual context and also as a device for navigating freely in the larger credit/economy. The shared message suggested the advertisers perceived the varying motivations for using a prepaid card were rooted in a desire for control – over time spent on AFS or banking transactions; tracking money; or teaching children
consumptive behaviors. Representations of control were overt on the five prepaid cards’ home and secondary pages. Ace Elite, for example, promised on its home page, “You control your money,” and further explained how the card’s time and money saving resources enabled the consumer to direct his or her own experience:

Get your balance and other account details, no matter where you are. Free Anytime Alerts give you 24/7 access. Find out the minute your paycheck is available, or see a list of the closest reload locations. You can also get daily and weekly alerts via text or email, so you're always in control.

On UPside site, the parents were promised “full financial control” over their child’s account, which is positioned as a learning opportunity for children to more fully understand how money is a scarce resource:

For high school students, it’s a great alternative to cash allowances that are unsafe, offer no spending control and often require trips to the ATM. It’s also a great educational tool to learn about financial literacy. For college students, it’s a convenient way to manage their money, track spending in real-time and stay away from credit cards. College students can receive occasional funds from their parents, receive a pay check directly onto the card and even write checks online.

The UPside passage referenced the digital economy, checks, ATMs, and remote money management. These were consistent representations on the five prepaid cards’ home and secondary pages. As noted in the previous chapter, the frame analysis found the cards prioritized descriptions of the cards’ direct deposit features and created a membership tiered system that gave preferential treatment to direct deposit users. In doing so, the direct deposit features were positioned as the ultimate tool for financial control. The following text from a Walmart Money Card secondary page demonstrates the immediacy of direct deposit as well as the savings element that were positioned as a form of increased personal control:

Direct deposit
Reload for free using Direct Deposit
Save time and money – enroll in Direct Deposit

Automatically deposit pay to your Card for free

Enroll in recurring Direct Deposit of your payroll or government check to your Walmart MoneyCard
Fast: Money is immediately available on payday.
Free: Save money on check cashing and reload fees.
Secure: Avoid lost or stolen checks.
Flexible: Deposit all or part of your paycheck. You decide.

Deposit Payroll, Government Checks & More

If you receive any of the following, you can enroll in Direct Deposit to your Card:
Employment paychecks.
Federal government benefits (including Social Security, Disability/SSI, Veterans, or Civil Service)
State government benefits.

The Walmart Money Card was representative of the other prepaid cards’ sample pages in how the varying needs of direct deposit were detailed – payroll, social service payments – and described through a lens of personal control. Such a context indicated the advertisers’ assumed that prepaid card users, regardless of motivation for use, constructed a shared aspiration for control in both a personal life and as an actor in the larger economy. The advertisement then exploited the assumed desire for control by promoting features intended to improve the time and money a typical consumer spent in daily banking. Such a context lent insight into Cronin’s (2000) argument that advertisers assume consumers turn to advertisements for information and a notion of streamlined consumptive practices. The advertisers, in grouping together distinct consumer groups with varying motivations, assumed the cardholder sought a greater meaning to the status of operating outside the mainstream banking system. In building a narrative of control around these distinct motivations, the advertisers reinforced the pervasiveness of the mainstream banking system by grouping together disparate markets under the umbrella of credit
exclusion or avoidance. The next section further explores the second theme present in the five prepaid cards’ sample pages.

3. **Financial transgression**

The second theme on the five prepaid cards’ sample was the suggestion the card helped consumers successfully transgress the larger financial infrastructures, and that such transgression eliminated risk and brought independence. The five prepaid card web sites’ home and secondary pages constructed a complex message that reified the credit scoring and mainstream banking systems, and then encouraged the target market to transgress the rules established by both these systems. The frame analysis of the sample’s promotional text observed a consistent disparagement of the mainstream banking system, and the discourse analysis found the material deliberately construed these structures as worthy of transgression and suggested the promoted product as a mechanism for avoidance. The iBankUp card, for example, described the device as “the transparent way to manage your money” which indicated competing banks intentionally obscured fees and account balances in order to take advantage of the consumer:

> We make sure the balance on the iBankUP website accurately reflects the amount of money you actually have so you never need to worry that what you spent yesterday might come back to haunt you (and your balance) today. No waiting for checks that you wrote to actually clear: because iBankUP is online, we reflect the check amount when we issue the check for you. We also post all your transactions in real time. Some banks who charge $35 per overdraft transaction probably do not want you to know your actual balance. We do, and we do not even have overdraft fees!

Similar to the iBankUp card, the UPside card also described its services as means for being financially responsible while independent from untrustworthy, mainstream institutions:

> Unlike other banking products, UPside is a great real-time budgeting tool for your spending, as you can only spend the funds available on the prepaid card account - meaning that you will not go into debt like many do with credit cards or "overdraft protection" plans that most retail banks offer. And, with UPside, you do not pay for incoming loads, unlike
with most retail banks. Anyone can enroll, even with poor or no credit. UPside is the most powerful and effective means to help you develop responsible spending behaviors, while still having the freedom to shop everywhere Visa debit cards are accepted.

The ACE Elite homepage also shared a message of transgression in which the card was a device directed at consumers with bad or limited credit and offered an empowering alternative to secured credit cards. The following passage identifies the product as directed toward consumers seeking alternatives to both checking accounts and secured cards. The repetitive use of the word “goodbye” suggested the consumer has the agency needed to make self-directed decisions regarding participation in the mainstream banking system.

With this ACE Elite card, you can say:
* Goodbye hidden fees
* Goodbye confusing fee plans
* Goodbye long deposit holds
* Goodbye minimum balance.

The ACE Elite alternative to:
Credit cards for bad credit
Secured credit card.

Similar to the ACE Elite card, the BuyRight card also addressed varying consumer motivations. In addition to describing itself as a “modern… alternative to traditional checking accounts,” the promotional text further delineated consumer motivations. The following text was directed at applicants with limited or poor credit: “No credit check means everyone is approved. A fresh start with BuyRight means no credit checks and no red tape. We promise you'll be approved, go ahead — try us!” The following passage indicated the card also served consumers who were unbanked or underbanked:

Free yourself from financial woes with BuyRight Online Bill Pay. No more writing checks, no more stamps, and no more standing in line for money orders. Pay your utility
bills, cable, rent, car payment—even pay a friend—using our fast and secure online Bill Pay service.

The BuyRight promotional text identified distinct target markets but also presented a suggestion that the consumer, regardless of motivation, should use the device to transgress the mainstream banking system. The promotional text in the sample for the five prepaid cards’ consistently positioned banks as dishonest, untrustworthy, and predatory whenever possible. The following passage from a Walmart Money Card secondary page positioned itself as a helpful contrast to a bank:

Add money online from your bank’s website through an electronic funds transfer. Transfers usually take 1-3 business days. There is no reload fee. However, your bank may charge you for this service.

Whereas the promotional text on the five prepaid cards’ sample pages identified various motivations for transgressing the mainstream banking system, the visuals on these pages presented images of satisfied, non-conforming consumers who rejected the dominant systems and successfully established their own control. These visual examples of identifiable individuals who embodied the prepaid card experience was first observed in the visual frame analysis, which noted the five prepaid card web sites used the most instances of identifiable individuals. These identifiable individuals were primarily women and people of color, and they were overwhelmingly placed in domestic situations. The BuyRight card, for example, depicted a young, biracial couple and their child on the homepage. Similarly, the iBankUp card included a sliding panel on the homepage that showed women interacting with an oversized mobile phones to depict online money management.

The earlier visual frame analysis also found the images in my sample visualized groups who were historically disenfranchised from the mainstream banking system, and repositioned
such as status as an opportunity for self-reliance and advancement. In further scrutinizing the promotional material, the discourse analysis found the visuals – with the exception of the UPside card – did not delineate the consumers’ motivations for pursuing the prepaid card. Rather, the visuals shared an amalgamated message aimed at consumers who either avoided or were excluded from the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems. The discourse analysis confirmed the visuals addressed these distinct motivations with a shared message that the card was a device for transgressing the mainstream banking system, and provided visual examples of consumers who had successfully extracted themselves from the credit and mainstream banking systems.

The UPside visuals in the sample were directed at two consumer groups – parents with children, and young adults living independently and managing their own funds. The site directed at the young adults provided images of a nonconforming lifestyle. The young adults in these images were pictured at home (managing funds on a laptop), walking in attractive urban neighborhoods (and managing funds on the go), and with significant others. By depicting parents at a laptop with a child watching on, or a young adult managing money on the go, there was shared message among the two target groups that the card advanced the consumer in the digital economy.

The five prepaid cards’ home and secondary pages consistently described how the consumer remained an active member of the digital economy, despite his or her displaced status from the credit scoring and mainstream banking systems. Thus, a consumer who distrusted these larger systems – or felt negatively evaluated by such systems – maintained participation in an evolving, global economy as well as an affiliation with the performance of middle class standards. The construct of the maintained digital participation was indicative of the
reconstructed boundaries the advertisers construed around the target market’s socioeconomic status, and in doing so, identified an evolving and increasingly fractured middle class.

The repositioning of displacement from the credit and mainstream banking systems as a conscious choice discounted the consequences of non-participation. The five prepaid cards consistently presented the promoted products as “checking account alternatives” which spared the consumer costs and inconveniences associated with both the mainstream banking system and various AFS. However, the web sites ignored the long-term consequences of being unbanked or underbanked. In doing so, the home and secondary pages for the five prepaid card web sites reproduced the larger economic environment as a type of market exchange in which participation was optional, risky, and unpredictable. The larger economic environment, however, has long-term, punitive consequences for consumers who either choose or cannot participate. The next section turns to the secured cards, which were directed at consumers who desired a greater level of inclusion.

B) **Secured Cards**

The discourse analysis for the secured cards was informed by the textual frame analysis, which identified two primary frames that addressed the target market through the lens of their disenfranchised status. The *progress* frame suggested the card was intended for short-term use, and the *boundary* frame created confines around the consumer’s current state of exclusion from the mainstream banking systems. The discourse analysis drilled deeper into the material that produced these frames in order to consider the narrative advertisers’ constructed about the target demographics’ experience of exclusion and desire to participate in the mainstream banking system. In examining the text on the five secured cards’ home and secondary pages, two themes
emerged regarding the credit scoring system and good citizenship. Before considering these themes, it is first helpful to describe the distinct target markets that were addressed by advertisers in the sample.

1. **Varying motivations**

   Similar to the prepaid cards, several different consumer groups were addressed in the five secured cards’ home and secondary pages. These disparate groups had varying credit histories but shared an interpolative status in which they were not fully disenfranchised from the mainstream banking system, but also not deemed completely creditworthy. From this shared status, a message regarding credit as an indicator of good citizenship was interpreted. This message ignored the inherent biases of the credit scoring system, and associated the ability to achieve and maintain good credit as a moral indicator.

   Three distinct groups were identified as the target demographic for the promoted products. The first, recent immigrants to the U.S., were the target market for the AeroMexico Secured Visa. The text described how the card was intended for consumers seeking to build credit within the U.S. system: “Establish your credit in the U.S. and enjoy superior travel rewards. Now you can earn Miles that take you to Mexico and build your credit too!” The second target demographic, consumers seeking to build an initial credit history, were the target market for several cards including the First Progress and U.S. Bank cards. The following passage from the First Progress card demonstrates how the card was targeted toward young adults who were “just starting out” as well as consumers seeking to rebuild a blemished score:

   Whether you are just starting out and looking to build credit or you are determined to start over fresh and reestablish good credit, First Progress can help. It all starts with your credit records at the major credit bureaus.
The US Bank card used a similar language on its homepage to designate the card was for consumers seeking to “build” or “rebuild.” The following passage from a US Bank secondary page further defined the target market:

The U.S. Bank Secured Visa® Credit Card is great if you haven’t had the chance to establish credit yet or if you’ve had credit problems in the past and you wish to re-establish a good rating. You decide what your spending needs are, and your own money secures the card.

The third target demographic, consumers with blemished credit, was described by both the Matrix and First Premiere cards as being directed toward consumes with “less than perfect credit.” Whereas US Bank and First Progress used the term “rebuild,” the Matrix and First Premiere cards both used the phrase “less than perfect credit” to describe a consumer whose past credit history led to exclusion from the mainstream banking system. The following passage from a Matrix secondary page describes the company as a service provider to consumers excluded from the mainstream banking system as a result of their credit actions:

Founded in 2005, Continental Finance Company (“CFC”) is one of America's leading originators of credit cards for consumers with less-than-perfect credit. The company specializes in providing credit products and services to consumers who are largely overlooked by traditional credit card issuers and local banks. As a consumer finance company, with a state of the art consumer lending platform, we are able to provide a variety of services to our customers when other financial institutions will not accommodate them.

Similarly, the First Premiere card described on its homepage how the card was a device designated for consumers whose credit history led to disenfranchisement. “First Premiere: Life without a credit card can be a real pain. That’s why we want to offer you the First PREMIER® Bank Credit Card - the card designed for those with less than perfect credit.”
The three target demographics – recent immigrants, new credit users, and consumers with “less than perfect” credit scores – had distinct experiences with the credit scoring and mainstream banking system. The shared experience was an interpolative state in which the consumers were not fully disenfranchised from the infrastructures of the consumer economy, but not fully integrated into the credit/debt economy. The five secured cards’ home and secondary pages shared a message in which full integration into the credit/debt economy was made possible through card usage and was a reflection of good consumer citizenship.

2. **Credit as good consumer citizenship**

The first theme identified in the five secured cards’ sample text was the connection between good credit and good consumer citizenship. Lauer (2008; 2010) argues the depersonalized structure of the credit scoring system conflates a consumers’ willingness to repay a loan with the actual ability to do so, and a low score is a type of moral judgment in which the consumer’s citizenship is deemed as corrupted:

> To be a good credit risk is, to some extent, to be considered a good person, one who is responsible and trustworthy. On the other hand, poor credit ratings may be taken as a sign of incompetence, extravagance, weakness, or at best a susceptibility to misfortune. Indeed, the common causes of financial distress—illness, divorce, and job loss—are themselves tinged with moral failure: a failure of self-management in the care of one’s health, personal relationships, or career (2008, p. 272).

The sample pages for the five secured cards included multiple examples in which poor credit was presented as an indicator of incompetence, extravagance, or weakness. The US Bank card, for example, included a video on a “credit wellness” page that depicted an “amateur rock star” in the midst of a repossession. The character acknowledged he spent recklessly, but felt assured he would not need credit once his album went platinum. The video, which was detailed in the previous chapter, depicted bad credit as the result of incompetence, and further suggested
“You don’t have to be a millionaire to have good credit” and that “just a little knowledge” was all that was needed.

The other web sites also included examples of incompetence, extravagance, or weakness that was a symptom of moral corruption. The following passage from First Premiere begins with an understanding that “tough circumstances” can contribute to a low credit score. But the passage transitions into a moral judgment in which the target consumer is described as needing to “develop better credit habits:”

Every year, millions of Americans find themselves faced with bad credit sometimes due to illness, divorce, loss of job or other tough circumstances. Aside from poor credit costing individuals thousands of dollars a year in higher interest rates, in severe cases, a person can even be denied credit. As a national market leader, First PREMIER Bank focuses on individuals who have less than perfect credit but are actually still creditworthy. We take pride in offering a transitional credit card to help our customers nationwide develop better credit habits. Our products may be able to help build, rebuild, or reestablish credit history if on-time minimum payments are made with all creditors and account balances are maintained below the credit limits.

The path to good consumer citizenship was associated through card usage. On a secondary page, the First Progress card suggested a “better future” made possible through the promoted product. In a separate passage, the promotional text provided multiple examples in which a consumer’s ability to advance as productive citizen was dependent on their credit score. The following passage from a First Progress secondary page associates employment, housing, and future lending with the consumer’s credit score. In doing so, the passage indicated that not applying for the card and attempting to rebuild credit was an action associated with corrupt citizenship:

We know how important building good credit is to you. That’s why we strive to offer the best opportunity for establishing and rebuilding your personal credit standing as reflected in your Credit Score and your files at the three major consumer credit bureaus. So many
aspects of modern life depend upon your credit score, whether you’re trying to qualify for an affordable auto loan, obtain a mortgage, or purchase insurance. Your credit score can even be reviewed by prospective landlords or employers.

The ability to rent or purchase a home, gain employment, and obtain insurance was described as the reward given to good consumer citizens who demonstrated morality through a high credit score. The AeroMexico card was the only secured card to provide a rewards program, and the description of the miles redemption indicated that it was designed as an incentive to keep the card in good standing and demonstrate good citizenship: “AeroMexico Visa Card must be open and in good standing at the time of the Mileage award.” The text was part of a description on a secondary page about the rewards program, card usage, and associated costs. By assuming the rewards program needed to be withheld in order to maintain motivation, the text was consistent with Lauer’s (2008; 2010) observation that poor credit was associated with weakness, incompetence, and extravagance. Such assumption of consumer corruption indicated the presence of paternalism, which implied the consumer’s interpolative condition was their own fault, and further regulation from a higher authority was needed. The next section further examines the second theme, subordination through paternalism.

3. Subordination through paternalism

The second theme on the five secured cards’ sample pages was the subordination of the target applicant through paternalism. Although the card was directed at varying consumer groups – including recent immigrants, new credit users, and consumers with “less than perfect credit” – the sample promotional material shared a paternalistic message in which submission to rigid guidance was a requirement of participating successfully in the secured card program. This section describes the paternalistic presence in the sample pages, and considers how the
assumption of poor financial habits reinforced the message that consumers without high credit were not proven to be good consumer citizens.

The five secured cards were fully-secured products in which the consumer provided a deposit that matched the credit limit. Both the AeroMexico Visa and the US Bank card allowed cardholders to deposit as much as $5,000 to establish the credit limit. The First Progress, First Premiere, and Matrix cards, however, all set the initial credit limit at $300. The limit was further diminished by the cost of annual fee. The following text from a First Progress secondary page describes how the initially available credit was $261:

Your initially available credit will be your initial Credit Limit, less the initial Annual Fee imposed after your Account is opened. For example, if your initial Credit Limit is $300 and the Annual Fee specified in the accompanying Summary of Terms is $29*, your initially available credit would be $271. The renewal Annual Fee, when imposed annually thereafter, will also reduce your then available credit by $29*. Or, for example, if your initial Credit Limit is $300 and if the Annual Fee specified in the accompanying Summary of Terms is $39**, your initially available credit would be $261. (The renewal Annual Fee, when imposed annually thereafter, would also reduce your then available credit by $39**.)

The initial $261 credit limit was an amount which restricted the cardholder’s consumption and minimized the possibility for damaging debt. Increases to the credit limit were determined by the card company. The following passage from a First Progress secondary page described how the consumer lacked the authority to add additional funds to the limit. The use of the words “approval” and “permit” revealed not only the card company’s uncompromising authority, but also established how the company sat in judgement of the consumer and determined when indicators of good consumer citizenship warranted reward:
You may add funds to the Deposit Account only with our approval. If we approve such addition of funds, they must be mailed to us using a paper check at the address we specify at the time of approval. You are not permitted to initiate electronic transfers to or from the Deposit Account.

The theme of paternalism was present in the other cards’ sample pages, specifically in descriptions of how the card company held the authority and expertise to determine when the consumer had proven ready to advance to the next level of credit worthiness. This message was also shared by the two card companies that permitted $5,000 credit limits, and there was a suggestion in the promotional text that the consumer was potentially unreliable and needed rigid guidance from a higher authority in order to maintain the card in good standing. On a secondary page, for example, the AeroMexico promotional text provided a vague description as to what was required by the consumer to advance to an unsecured product. The vague description both suggested the consumer needed to prove him or herself as financially mature, but also indicated the decision for advancement was subjective and based on the card company’s expert authority:

When you've managed all of your credit obligations responsibly consistently for 12 months, you'll be well on your way to a strong credit standing, and we may be able to move you to an unsecured credit card product.

The US Bank card shared a similar message in which there was an assumption the consumer’s past issues or inexperience with credit had destructive potential. A secondary page describing the various card features included an insinuation that the online bill pay option was particularly helpful because of the consumers’ past history with late payments: “No more worrying about paying late — Make last minute payments!” Similarly, the promotional text described in on a secondary page how the essential function of the card was to prove financial maturity: “Demonstrate good habits with a card that looks and works just like any other credit card.”
The shared message of paternalism was absent in the prepaid and traditional card sample pages. The prepaid cards promoted the card as a device for a savvy consumer to successfully circumvent the mainstream banking system. The traditional cards promoted the card as a type of preferred membership that was earned by the consumer’s successful participation in the credit/debt economy—a status worth coveting. The shared message of paternalism was unique to the secured cards, and assumed the consumer’s poor or limited credit score was indicative of poor moral character. Although such an assumption may have been true for some of the applicants, this message reinforced the larger message that good credit was a reflection of good consumer citizenship, and ignored the inherent biases of the credit scoring system, while constructing the consumer’s interpolative state as a personal fault in need of correction. The next section considers the messages sent to the traditional card users, and how the advertisers encapsulated the splintered demographic.

C. **Traditional Cards**

The visual frame analysis for the 10 traditional cards in this study’s sample found the advertisers used the *ostentation, distinction, and facilitation* frames to communicate a complex message in which the consumer was encouraged to view card usage as a device for maximizing their middle class potential. The visuals drew distinct boundaries around the aspirations prescribed by the middle class, and these images reinforced the textual frames of *boundary, authenticity, and progress*, which presented the card as an authentication of the consumer’s socioeconomic status. These frames revealed how the advertisers perceived the middle and upper middle classes as performative experiences which required consistent rearticulation of authentic membership. The discourse analysis examined the promotional material on the home and
secondary pages of the 10 traditional card web sites to further consider how the advertisers constructed this consumer category, and what this construction indicated about the advertisers’ perception of the target demographics’ post-recession experience.

In contrast to the prepaid and secured cards in the sample, the 10 traditional cards’ home and secondary pages were directed at a more homogeneous consumer group. Card acceptance for the 10 cards required a high credit score, proof of income, and participation in the mainstream banking system. There were several identified interest groups within the 10 cards, and these subcategories are further described in this section. This section begins by describing the varying consumer subcategories constructed by the traditional cards. Then, the section considers how card membership was constructed by the card company as an earned status worthy of privilege and special treatment. In doing so, this section goes beyond the description of the elite language present in the text, and further considers how the cards suggested the cardholder’s accomplishments as a consumer were worthy of exclusivity and privilege – within a middle class context.

1. **Subcategories of success**

Three notable consumer subcategories were observed in the 10 traditional cards home and secondary page – college students, frequent travelers, and money-savers. The college student subcategory was represented by one card, the Discover Student Card, which was directed only at college students enrolled in a four year college or university. As noted in the chapter five, college students as a demographic were not visually represented in the sample pages. Rather, the visuals showcased commodities the target market should aspire to achieve. The text, however, specifically addressed the exclusivity of the target market. The following passage demonstrates how the promotional text in the sample set boundaries around the potential cardholders’
socioeconomic status by excluding students enrolled in a community college, trade school, or two-year education program:

To be eligible for the Discover Student Credit Card you must be a college student. To determine whether you qualify for an account, we consider information bearing on your creditworthiness, including the information you provide in this application, which includes whether you are enrolled in a 4 year college or university, and your current credit report.

The Discover Student card was the only card in the sample that was directed exclusively to college students. Traditional college students are typically building credit for the first time, and the card served as a middle class alternative to secured or prepaid cards. The availability of such an alternative suggested participation in the credit/debt system is an inherited privilege for young consumers of a middle or upper middle class background. Several other cards, such as the Capital One Platinum Prestige and Capital One Cash Rewards, noted that student loan balances could be transferred to the card. Similarly, the American Express Gold card listed “student loan rebates” as one of many perks of the card, but did not further describe the program on a home or secondary page within the sample.

Frequent travelers were another subcategory observed as a target demographic. Several cards were directed at consumers who were willing to pay a premium in order to experience special treatment at hotels, airports, and car rental retailers. The American Express Platinum card, for example, identified on its homepage how the card offered “world class travel benefits,” global assist services, discounts, and special access. A secondary page further offered an example of the ideal consumer with a testimonial from a cardholder who stated he was a cardholder because of the travel amenities, including the 24-hour access to international travel agents. On the home page, the “at a glance” tab further described the card as a device for connecting consumers with exclusive travel access: “Experience the extraordinary. The Platinum Card gives you one-of-a-kind travel privileges and access to benefits when you’re away
from home.” Similar to the American Express Platinum Card, the United Explorer card was also
directed at frequent travelers. The home page depicted a young businessman in the airport,
holding up a card as though it was a point of access for special treatment. The headlines and
subheads reinforced the promotion of the card as an exclusive, privilege-granting device:

- Get it & You're In
- First Checked Bag Free
- Priority Boarding
- No Foreign Transaction Fees†
- Get treated like an insider at the airport and beyond with the MileagePlus Explorer Card*:  
  Check your first bag for free
  Save up to $100 per roundtrip.

Consumers who used the card as a money-saving device emerged as the most notable
sub-category that was shared across the promotional text in the sample. Nine of the 10 cards
(90%) offered a rewards program in which spending was reimbursed with shopping points,
airline miles, or cashback. The only card which did not offer a rewards program was the Capital
One Platinum Prestige, which offered a low-interest rate and no annual fee as way for consumers
to “save a ton.” Three of the cards, the Capital One Cash Rewards, Chase Freedom, and
Discover Student card, were based on rebate systems in which spending entitled the consumer to
a percentage of cash back. Chase described the accrued benefit as a “rewards currency” in which
1% cash back equaled 1 point. The following passage from the Capital One Cash Rewards
home page was representative of how the three cards promoted the products as money-saving
deVICES:

- Load up on cash back with a 50% bonus every year
- Summary of Key Benefits:
  Enjoy a 50% bonus on the cash back you earn every year
  Earn 1% cash back on all purchases
  Get your cash back how you want it, when you want it
  Save with a low intro APR on purchases and no annual fee
One-time bonus of $100 once you spend $500 on purchases within the first 3 months

This Credit Card is For:
People with excellent credit who want to get more cash back for their spending.

The Capital One Cash Rewards passage identified the card as a service for consumers with excellent credit. The 10 traditional cards home and secondary pages consistently identified the card as directed toward consumers with good or good/excellent credit. According to the Capital One Platinum Prestige card home page, the promoted product was intended for “people with excellent credit who want to save money.” Similarly, a Chase Freedom secondary page described how applicants needed to prove themselves as creditworthy as a condition of receiving the card: “Before we approve you for a credit card, we will review your credit report and the information you provide with your response to confirm that you meet the criteria for this offer.”

2. Constructing boundaries

The first theme identified in the 10 traditional cards’ sample pages was the construction of imaginary boundaries around card membership as a deserved status. These artificial boundaries served to present card membership as an elite space with limited access. The promotional text on the 10 traditional cards’ home and secondary pages confirmed the cards were directed at consumers who were deemed low-risk. These consumers maintained either good or excellent credit, both of which were categories that required a persistent self-regulation in order to maintain multiple accounts in good standing. The consumers who were the target market for these 10 cards were members of the middle class and active participants of the mainstream banking system whose involvement in the credit/debt economy was historically
rewarded with increased credit limits and a higher credit score. The following text from a United Explorer secondary page explained a tiered structure in which few were eligible:

You will first be considered for a Visa Signature card. If you do not qualify for the Visa Signature card, you will automatically be considered for a Visa Platinum. The Signature and Platinum cards have different credit availability and benefits levels. Platinum benefits do not include the Concierge Service.

Similarly, the Citi Thank You card explained how not all applicants qualified for the card, and explained how both the credit scoring system, as well as the applicant’s annual salary, were factors in determining worthiness:

To receive the Citi ThankYou® Preferred Card, you must meet our applicable criteria bearing on creditworthiness for the Citi ThankYou® Preferred Card. Otherwise, you may receive a Citi ThankYou® Card provided you meet our applicable criteria bearing on creditworthiness for the Citi ThankYou® Card. The Citi ThankYou® Card does not have as many benefits as the Citi ThankYou® Preferred Card. Your credit limit (Citi ThankYou® Card) or revolving credit limit (Citi ThankYou® Preferred Card) will be determined by your annual salary and wages, your other annual income and a review of your debt, including the debt listed on your credit report. You will be informed of the amount of your credit limit (Citi ThankYou® Card) or revolving credit limit (Citi ThankYou® Preferred Card) when you receive your card.

Other card web sites specifically advised consumers how the promoted product was intended only for consumers with high credit. The Discover Student Card, for example, instructed consumers with “credit that needs improvement” to click away from the web site. The BarclayCard stated on the homepage how maintaining “credit worthiness” was a condition of membership and participation in the rewards program. The BellCo card, American Express Platinum, and American Express Gold Cards also used the words “credit worthiness” to describe how the consumer’s entire credit profile would be factored when determining the APR or spending limit.
In establishing good or excellent credit as a requirement for acceptance, the card companies constructed an imagined community around the existing cardholders who qualified for membership due to their high credit scores, middle class income, and history of participation in the mainstream banking system. Entry into these confines were presented as privileges which connected the consumer to the lifestyle and material good aspirations the advertisers prescribed as satisfying and reflective of an authentic middle class life. The 10 traditional cards’ home and secondary pages shared a message that card ownership was a privileged space reflective of status.

The United Explorer card, for example, was directed at consumers who wanted to accrue points and privileges with United Airlines. The card entitled the consumer to bypass long check-in counter lines, carry additional luggage without a fee, board early, enjoy priority seating, and access lounges not admissible by the general public. These actions were observable by other passengers whose exclusion (or decision to not participate) from card ownership meant standing in line at the counter, waiting to board, and being unable to access the priority lounge. In this sense, the card’s home and secondary pages created a boundary around the travel experience, and promoted these boundaries as privileged spaces available to only select consumers. In constructing a privileged space, the promotional material in my sample identified the contents within the boundaries as recognizable symbols of status.

The construction of a privileged space was observed on the home and secondary pages for the other traditional cards in the sample, with the promoted good or service varying to fit the cards’ described commodity culture. The text reinforced this structured privilege by using elite language that bolstered the consumer’s belonging as a card member. The BellCo card, for example, complimented visitors to its homepage as exceptional individuals who needed lucrative
rewards programs: “You are unique. Shouldn't your Visa be? Earn triple Scorecard Bonus Points. 3x Points.” Similarly, the American Express Platinum Card offered cardholders airport lounge access, but also “chauffeured transportation” through the limousine program, cruise privileges, and resort upgrades – all of which the cardholder is encourage to use to “Enrich your life with one-of-a-kind travel.”

The elite language on the 10 traditional cards home and secondary pages was emphasized by exclusionary language which reinforced the constructed boundaries around the status of card membership and contributed to the message that such a status was a privileged space. The American Express Gold card, for example, offered events “not available to the general public.” Similarly, Citi Thank You consumers were encouraged to pursue “VIP” treatment and “special amenities” which elevated them above other middle class consumers pursuing the same consumptive experience. The exclusionary language also served to position the status of card membership as a type of competitive experience in which acceptance was an accomplishment. The following passage from the Barclaycard homepage demonstrates how the cards were constructed as a privilege in which rejection was possible. For consumers who met the “credit criteria,” acceptance was a personal accomplishment:

Not everyone will qualify for the Barclaycard Rewards MasterCard credit card and its benefits. If at the time of your application you do not meet the credit criteria previously established for this offer, or the income you report is insufficient based on your obligations, we may not be able to open an account for you.

The above passage was representative of how the 10 traditional cards’ home and secondary pages reproduced the rigid structure of the credit scoring system and defined consumers with high credit scores as accomplished individuals worthy of exclusive treatment. In doing so, the sample pages positioned consumption as a type of accomplishment that suggested
the applicants’ past spending history and future aspirations were a reflection of their good moral character and productive consumer citizenship. This reproduced the notion of consumption as a type of work, which was worthy of the reward of continued reward. The next section further considers how the 10 traditional cards’ home and secondary pages shared a message of consumption as a type of work. This message served to reinforce the construction of high credit as a sacred space worthy of protecting. This message also constructed consumers who were excluded as unworthy of the treatment granted to middle and upper middle class consumptive workers.

3. **Consumption as work**

The second theme observed in the 10 cards’ sample pages was the notion of hyper consumption as an effort worthy of reward. To maximize the card, and in turn their middle class experience, the consumers were necessitated to acquire goods and services that were denotive of lifestyle aspirational achievement. The discourse analysis observed three discursive practices which reinforced the message of consumption as work. The first was a visual or textual construction of the consumptive experience that created an action plan for how the card could be used in order to maximize rewards as well as the benefits of the card. The second was a visual and textual reminder that the privileged space required continual maintenance by the consumer, which involved monitoring against fraud, theft, as well as vigilant use of the card to demonstrate worthiness. The third was a textual reminder, primarily in frequently asked questions or areas of fine print, which described the conditions in which the consumer no longer proved to be worthy of inclusion in the privileged space. At least one of these discursive practices was present on each of the 10 traditional cards’ home and secondary pages. This section describes each of these discursive practices and explains how they contributed to a message about consumption as work.
The first discursive practice was the visual or textual representation of the consumptive experience which demonstrated how the card could be used in order to maximize rewards as well as the benefits of the card. The Citi Thank You card, for example, included dozens of images on its home page that included a price tag for how many points were required to redeem the reward. The bottom of the page included a sliding panel of items that were “now trending,” which served to communicate which material aspirations were most valuable, but also suggested that other cardholders’ spending efforts were being rewarded. Other web sites, such as the American Express Gold card, including a secondary page that linked to a special rewards redemption sites. A photograph that ran the length of the page showed four identifiable individuals toasting at a restaurant. The image visualized how cardholders’ spending efforts were being rewarded, and it also reinforced the construction of exclusivity in which card membership was a privileged space. In the image, the four diners were alone in a white-tablecloth restaurant, a symbolic representation of how the card was intended to deliver exclusivity and special treatment.

Whereas several cards visualized the rewards of consumptive work, other cards provided a guide as to how consumptive work was more satisfying through the promoted product. The Discover Student card, for example, listed hundreds of retailers where card usage earned the consumer a higher percentage of cash back. Similarly, the BellCo card listed retailers where double or triple points could be earned. The Chase Freedom card, much like the Discover Student Card, also created quarterly shopping opportunities in which a higher percentage of cash back could be earned. Shopping at a home improvement store during the second quarter, for example, earned the cardholder a higher rebate percentage. The following passage appeared on the Chase Freedom card home page and used the word “activate” to describe the shopping terms as having rigid timeframes the consumer had to plan for and follow:
5% CASH BACK ON UP TO $1,500 SPENT IN BONUS CATEGORIES EACH QUARTER* You'll enjoy new 5% categories every 3 months like gas stations, restaurants and Amazon.com. It's free and easy to activate your bonus each quarter! Activate every three months for 5% cash back on up to $1,500 spent in 2013 bonus categories:

April-June: Restaurants, movie theatres, Lowe's. Activate starting March 15, 2013
July-September: Gas stations, theme parks, Kohl's. Activate starting June 15, 2013
October-December: Amazon.com; Select Department Stores. Activating September 15, 2013

You'll earn 5% cash back on up to $1,500 spent each quarter. See Chase.com/freedom for more details and exclusions on 5% categories. Keep in mind, you always earn a full 1% cash back on all other purchases.

The structured quarterly shopping program required the consumer to plan and organize his or her consumption in order to maximize rewards. This additional effort contributed to the notion of consumption as work, and accepted card members as having earned the right to join the privileged space.

The second discursive practice was the reminder that the account required consistent maintenance and remaining in the privileged space involved vigilance against fraud, theft, as well as account delinquency. The American Express Gold card, for example, described on a secondary page how the privilege of inclusion involved certain obligations: “Credit and charge cards offer convenience, flexibility, safety and purchasing power. Understand the tools, resources, and responsibilities that come with card ownership.” Similarly, the American Express Platinum card explained how good credit was need for personal financial success, which effectively reminded that further effort was required to maintain good consumer citizenship.

Learn how to manage your Card account and protect your credit with simple tips, advice and explanations. Understand and protect your credit profile. Managing your personal credit history is key to building -- and maintaining -- a bright financial future. Our detailed
credit resources can help you understand and make informed decisions about credit. Credit is one of the most misunderstood tools in the financial toolbox. Used well, it can help you attain things you want in life – things that might otherwise be unavailable.

In addition to describing the card membership as a privilege laden with responsibilities, there were also instances on the 10 traditional cards’ home or secondary pages in which applicants were reminded that credit scores required vigilant protection: The United Explorer card, for example card cautioned on a secondary page about the program that although authorized users were not financially liable for the account, their credit score may be impacted:

As the primary cardmember, you will be liable for all account balances. Authorized users will have no financial responsibility for the account. For authorized users, this account will be reported to the credit reporting agencies as an authorized user’s account. This could potentially impact an authorized user’s credit score.

The other credit card web sites also positioned credit as worthy of protection by promoting fraud services that protected the consumer from paying charges on a lost or stolen card. These programs are described “$0 Fraud Liability Program” (Capital One) or “Fraud Protection” (Chase, Discover). These programs, however, required a consumer to actively monitor their account and notify the company if a suspicious charge was posted. Thus, the inclusion of the fraud protection programs contributed to a larger understanding that ongoing maintenance was a condition of inclusion.

The second discursive practice, ongoing maintenance of the privileged space, was also observed in the introductory teaser rate programs. Eight of the 10 cards (80%) charged interest on purchases. (The two American Express cards were charge cards which required monthly settlement, unless the consumer opted to pay for select purchases over time). Of the eight cards which charged interest, only one card – the United Explorer – disclosed the interest rate. Seven of the 10 cards (70%) offered an introductory teaser rate in which the consumer enjoyed a 0%
interest rate for a set term, ranging between three months to a year. At the end of the term, the consumer’s history of usage determined the interest rate. The following passage from the Barclaycard demonstrates how the teaser rate period required a demonstration of good consumer citizenship in order to qualify for the lowest interest rate:

The 0% introductory APR on Balance Transfers and Purchases is applicable for the first 12 billing cycles after the account is opened. At the end of the introductory period, the APR for all Balance Transfer and Purchase balances will be a variable APR of 14.99%, 19.99%, or 24.99%.

The above passage from a Barclaycard secondary page was representative of how the other cards offered a variable APR which ranged by as much as 10%. The teaser rate period served as a type of probationary period in which the new cardholder demonstrated – through spending – his or her consumer credentials and worthiness as a card member.

The third discursive practice described the conditions in which the consumer no longer proved to be worthy of inclusion in the privileged space. These descriptions primarily occurred in frequently asked questions pages or areas of fine print, and demonstrated the fragility of card membership and reinforced how consumptive work was required in order to remain in good standing. In doing so, these descriptions also reinforced the privileged space as an earned status in which the consumer demonstrated good consumer citizenship and was worthy of the exclusive status.

The 10 traditional cards’ secondary pages included reasons in which card membership might be revoked. The termination of card membership was consistently referred to as “cancellation” and the card companies reserved the right to cancel for a multitude of reasons. The American Express Gold card, for example, listed both specific and vague reasons as to why the company might cancel the card. The specific reasons included: violation of a provision of
the agreement, providing false information during the application process, filing for bankruptcy, defaulting on an agreement with either American Express or one of the company’s affiliates, incapacitation, or death. The vague rationale was if “we believe you are unable or unwilling to pay your debts when due.” The following passage describes the company’s authority to cancel the membership, and how even accounts in good standing might be terminated:

We may:
Cancel your Account,
Suspend the ability to make charges,
Cancel or suspend any feature on your Account, and
Notify merchants that your Account has been cancelled or suspended.
If we do any of these, you must still pay us for all charges under the terms of this Agreement.
We may do any of these things at our discretion, even if you pay on time and your Account is not in default. If your Account is cancelled, you must destroy your cards.

Other cards in the sample did not provide specific reasons as to why an account might be canceled. The following passage from the Citi Thank You card, for example, described how the card company held the right to close the account or terminate participation in the rewards program, simply by providing the cardholder with advance notice:

Citi® ThankYou® Rewards is offered to certain cardmembers ("you") at the sole discretion of Citibank, N.A. ("we"), the issuer of your card account ("Card Account"). ThankYou Rewards or any portion thereof may be revised or terminated with 30 days prior written notice. Any revisions may affect your ability to use the ThankYou Points you have already accumulated. If ThankYou Rewards is terminated, you will only have 90 days from ThankYou Rewards termination date to redeem all your accumulated ThankYou Points ("ThankYou Points"). Rewards offered by ThankYou Rewards and the ThankYou Point levels required for specific rewards are subject to change without notice.

Similarly, the Barclaycard described how the company reserved the right to determine if a card was not in good standing. Penalties might include the closing of the account or the forfeiture of the rewards points. The latter punishment meant that allow the cardholder was
allowed to continue a line of credit with the bank, his or her accrued reward points were confiscated as a penalty. The following text from a Barclaycard secondary page about the terms and agreements described how the reward point penalty is not subject to challenge: “You have no property rights or other legal interest in points.”

The third discursive practice presented the card as a privilege that must be maintained by the consumer. This discursive practice worked with the first two to construct a message that card membership as an earned experience based on work, organization, vigilance, and the ability to maintain the account in good standing. This theme of constructed work reinforced the first theme that card ownership was a privileged space that was rightfully not available to all applicants.

D. Conclusion

Cronin’s (2000) insight into the professional norms of advertising agencies provided an understanding of how advertising agencies sell campaigns to companies. In these campaigns, advertisers identified a demographic for the product, and intended to communicate with the target market in the visual and textual promotional material with a widely recognizable approach consistent with boundaries of the mainstream and credit scoring systems. In examining discourse of the visual and textual material on the 20 consumer card web sites, this analysis gained a greater understanding of how advertising agencies conceptualized the audiences for the three card types, and how they sought to communicate how the promoted product enhanced or alleviated the consumer’s post-recession experience.

Each card type in my sample shared several messages which constructed a larger narrative about the card’s intended uses and the experiences or expectations of the target market. The five prepaid cards’ home and secondary pages were directed at a fractured target market
with varying motivations for card usage. However, these promotional pages shared a message regarding the financial control made possible through card usage. The message control reinforced a second message regarding the agency associated with transgressing the mainstream and credit scoring systems, and how the card was a responsible and helpful tool for such a transgression. This finding opens space to consider in the next chapter the consequences of promoting non-participation in the credit/debt economy, as well as the staged agency which suggests deliberate disenfranchisement is empowering and harmless.

The five secured cards’ home and secondary pages were also directed at distinct consumer groups with varying motivation for building or rebuilding credit. The promotional pages shared a message of credit as an indicator of good consumer citizenship and moral character. This message was reinforced by a paternalistic message that the consumer required rigid guidance in order to learn better credit habits and evolve into a consumer worthy of participation in the credit/debt economy. This finding enables deeper consideration in the next chapter to consider the inherent biases of the credit/debt economy and whether the promotion of good consumer citizenship through secured card usage is an unobtainable, false reality.

The 10 traditional cards’ home and secondary pages also described the good consumer citizenship associated with high credit. Although these promotional pages were directed at a more homogeneous groups, there were subcategories of consumer interests which were constructed by the advertisers and satisfied by the promoted product. The message of good consumer citizenship created imaginary boundaries around the meaning of the credit score and suggested that card membership was a privileged space that brought the consumer an exclusive status and special treatment. This message was reinforced by a notion of consumption as work and a message that the consumer had earned such a privilege, but was required to vigilantly
maintain the account in good standing through additional work. This finding open spaced to consider in the next chapter the mandatory nature of the credit/debt system.

The next chapter, the discussion, draws conclusions to the greater meaning of these 20 consumer card application web sites based on the findings in this chapter as well as the visual and textual frame analysis.
VIII. Discussion

The purpose of this dissertation was to analyze consumer card application web sites for three card types – prepaid, secured, and traditional – and determine how the web sites’ promotions communicated to competing consumer groups in the post-recession economy. In doing so, this project began with visual and textual frame analyses which served to identify the broad frames which amalgamated the motivations and needs of the promoted product’s fractured target market. The visual frame analysis identified how the card companies addressed disparate groups, as well as the overarching themes that were prioritized and presented as persuasive devices. The textual frame analysis also identified how the card companies approached a disparate group, and was also able to note instances in which the varying consumer groups were addressed. The visual and textual frame analyses revealed how the card companies categorized the target markets by their participation in the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems, and constructed the consumers’ limitations and choices based on their placement within these infrastructures. Thus, the frame analyses informed the discourse analysis, which sought to drill deeper into the promotional material to identify themes related to consumer hierarchy. The discourse analysis further identified the fractures which existed across and within each card type’s target market. Similar to the frame analyses, the discourse analysis then identified how each card type amalgamated these distinct motivations and experiences in order to communicate a core message about the promoted product.

My mixed-method approach enabled a larger consideration of how my sample from these promotional web sites reinforced the larger socioeconomic structure, and constructed varying consumer roles within the credit/debt economy. Additionally, my study sought to better
understand how the card web sites functioned as a company-sponsored space, and how the advertisements simultaneously presented information and promotion.

My examination of the 20 consumer card application web sites was informed and guided by Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach to frame analysis. Consumer card application web sites have yet to be examined by advertising scholars, and Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach guided the analysis of the visual and textual frames in the promotional material. Because advertisers target consumer longing and aspiration, advertisements are embedded with layers of deeper meaning to elicit such emotions. Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach to frame analysis accommodated the complexities of analyzing advertising frames. The approach enabled a consideration of the core viewpoint by identifying the cultural elements and symbols in the advertisements that were likely recognizable to the target market. My study also benefitted from applying this approach because the analysis of the elements that communicated the varying frames revealed distinct aspirations directed at a diverse credit-seeking public. In doing so, the analysis also enabled comparisons which provided insight into the wide spectrum of socioeconomic positioning.

A frame analysis was utilized to answer two research questions, which was followed by a discourse analysis to answer the third research question. The mixed-method approach offered the opportunity to identify, compare, and extensively analyze the aspirations present on the web sites and consider how the variations between the card types and intended audiences. I begin this chapter by reviewing the results of this study and summarizing the answers to the research questions. I then consider the implications of these results, and what the different frames and themes indicate about the post-recession experience. The second section of this chapter examines the limitations of my study. I then conclude with suggestions for future research.
A. **Summary of Results**

Adams (1931) conceptualization of the American Dream was that of a society without the rigid confines of a class-based system. In this dream of an open social order, Americans strove to achieve “the fullest statue of which they are innately capable” (pg. 214-215). Advertisers reconceptualized the American Dream as one of consumption, in which acquiring specific material goods was indicative of lifestyle aspirational achievement (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994). In the last 1990s and early 2000s, several scholars remarked how credit was used to quietly challenge class status, signal wealth, and satisfy a need for social prestige (Sterns, 2001; Bagwell & Burnheim, 1996; Amaldoss & Jain, 2005). However, the 2008 economic collapse resulted in a credit crunch that further delineated the social classes in the U.S. with deepened restrictions on who could access credit (Duke, 2010; Experian, 2012; Banjo, 2009; Pilon, 2009).

Both the frame and discourse analysis in this study observed post-recession fractures in the middle class which resulted in deepening divides in the U.S. social order. The promotional text in my sample’s home and secondary pages identified a post-recession fracture among the middle and former middle class, in which events such as a job-loss or financial troubles restricted consumer access to credit and relegated them to a status of non-participation, for which the consequences were severe. The post-recession deepening divide also revealed how the consumer credit and mainstream banking system of 2013 (the time of data collection) was fundamentally similar to the system in place a century earlier. Although the passing decades brought reform laws regarding usury and anti-discrimination, the credit scoring system developed alongside the opening markets and created an infrastructure that maintained the existing exclusions. The pervasiveness of the credit scoring system was increasingly normalized, and maintained
exclusions were not challenged by critics, but not accepted as a condition of the consumer economy.

The current literature on the credit scoring system as well as recent research regarding the exclusions served as a guiding point to this study. Prior to examining the promotional material, I understood how critics argued that specific demographics were unfairly excluded from the mainstream banking system. With this in mind, the frame and discourse analysis considered how the card companies communicated to competing consumer groups, and in doing so, encapsulated distinct variations of the American Dream. The next three sections reviews the major findings and contributions for each research question, beginning with the visual frames present on the 20 card web sites’ home and secondary pages.

1. **Visualizing disparities**

For the first research question, the visual frame analysis identified varying uses for the prepaid and traditional cards in my sample. (The secured cards did not have enough visuals present on the home and secondary pages to conduct a frame analysis.) In addition to identifying distinct uses, the prepaid and traditional cards also visualized widely-constructed consumer groups, shaped by the access to the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems. These widely constructed categories served to unify disparate consumer groups who held varying access and experiences with the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems. This section provides a brief summary and analysis of the results of the visual frame analysis, and describes the ways in which these findings contributed to the theoretical and practical study of advertisements, credit, and consumer aspiration.

The prepaid cards depicted utilitarian uses and visualized the possibilities for functioning successfully in the digital economy while comfortably remaining outside the mainstream
banking system. The *self-reliance, exculpation, and facilitation* frames were broad frames which addressed the consumer based on how the advertiser perceived the target market’s socioeconomic status. These frames communicated an experience in which the consumer utilized a product unaffiliated with the exclusionary mainstream banks that historically rejected specific consumer groups and contributed to the devastating economic collapse in 2008. These frames acknowledged how participation in the digital economy was increasingly mandatory, but ignored the long-term consequences of non-participation in the credit/debt system.

From the visual frame analysis of the prepaid card sample pages, a new consumer group emerged -- *the former middle class*. This consumer group consisted of individuals who were devastated following the 2008 economic collapse and were unable to ascend to the lifestyle they experienced prior to the recession. The identification of the *former middle class* was one of the most important findings in this study, primarily because such a formation indicated the rigid structure between the social classes in the U.S. strengthened after the 2008 economic collapse. Although these rigid confines might soften in a future economic boom and allow greater consistency of socioeconomic experiences, the sample pages in my study visualized a continuation of the disenfranchised state. The prepaid cards were indeed payment devices designed to extend a disconnection from the exclusionary and problematic mainstream banking system. Additionally, the payment devices were also designed to enable the consumer to perform the routines associated with middle class money management. Such a design indicated the advertisers sensed a shift in the socioeconomic strata which emerged in the post-recession economy and sought to extract increased consumer surplus.

The identification of the *former middle class* also offered insight into the critical nature of socioeconomic status. As the discourse analysis confirmed, the prepaid card sample pages
addressed consumers whose shared quality was avoidance or exclusion from the mainstream banking system. In the visuals, the prepaid cards prioritized such a desire and visualized how the card concealed a loss of status and enabled the consumer to imitate the banking practices of the middle class. In doing so, it appeared the advertisers consciously chose to reserve the fractured target market’s varied motivations for the text, and to intentionally use the visuals to appeal to a collective desire for middle class recognition. The privileging of middle class association in the visuals indicated that socioeconomic status was crucial in the post-recession economy, and that class consciousness was a guiding force in post-recession economy.

The observation of the former middle class provided one of this dissertation’s theoretical contributions. Entman (2010) urged framing researchers to consider the role of cultural context and to examine “enduring patterns of framing” (pg. 332). More so, he conceptualized framing “as a tool for exerting power in a system of relationships” (pg. 334). This visual frame analysis was a tool in examining the power in a system of relationships between consumers and the mainstream banking system. The depiction of the former middle class in the visual analysis was denotive of the ubiquitous nature of credit in the U.S. and the leverage that creditors hold in determining consumers’ financial choices. This finding also demonstrated the capabilities of examining the frames in advertisements to better understand the systems of power and the impact on consumer life.

Whereas the prepaid card sample pages included abundant visuals which lent insight into the perceived experiences of the target market, the secured card sample pages lacked sufficient visual information in which to conduct a frame analysis. There was meaning, however, in the absence of visual information. The secured cards were directed at a diverse category of
unbanked and underbanked consumers who sought affiliation with the mainstream banking system for a variety of motivations. These motivations were excavated in the second and third research questions, and the sample pages indicated the cards were directed at consumers who could not be visually represented within one group. The market for secured cards included but was not limited to: Immigrants new to the credit system; young Americans with limited credit; and consumers who became disenfranchised from the mainstream banking system due to divorce, unemployment, underemployment, poverty, illness, or poor budgeting. These varying motivations formed a class of consumers who understood the importance of credit and were desperate to gain access. Credit dictates access to daily essentials such as housing, transportation, insurance, and employment (Traub, 2013). Such desperation to gain access to the credit scoring system motivated secured card consumers to extend a line of credit to the card company through the form of a security deposit. In exchange, the card company reported monthly updates about the consumer’s progress to the three credit bureaus. In surrendering a security deposit prior to opening the card, the consumer forfeited immediate access to the funds. The temporary relinquishment of funds might have been challenging for a person with limited access to the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems, and such a forfeiture reflected the consumer’s deep desire to gain entry to both infrastructures.

Although the prepaid cards were also directed at consumers with distinct motivations, the prepaid visuals in my sample relied on images of consumers historically disenfranchised from the mainstream banking system – youth, women, and consumers of color – who represented the opportunities made possibly by transgressing the mainstream banking system. In the prepaid card sample pages, the visualized consumers shared a representation of middle class status made possible through card usage. This visualization on the prepaid cards’ sample pages served as a
unifying feature which enabled the prepaid cards to depict consumers who symbolized the interests of a disparate group. But how possible is it for a consumer to achieve a middle class lifestyle outside the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems?

In contrast to the prepaid cards, the secured card sample pages were unable to rely on a visual representation that symbolized the disparate group’s shared experiences and motivations. However, the traditional cards sample pages also include visuals which represented the assumed consumer life of the target market. The consumer life visualized on the 10 traditional cards’ home and secondary pages consistently produced and reinforced ideas of class structure which were defined by consumption and success within the credit scoring system. The three frames used in the traditional card visuals, *facilitation, distinction, and ostentation*, indicated a deepening fracture among the middle class and the former middle class. Whereas the prepaid cards envisioned a post-recession security made possible through card usage, the traditional cards depicted a return to the cheerful materialism that characterized the pre-recession years. The cheerful pursuit of material life was visualized as capable of providing the consumer with distinction and special treatment that reinforced the recognition of the consumer’s socioeconomic status. The persistent visualization of how the cards reinforced the consumer’s socioeconomic status offered insight into the socioeconomic anxieties the advertisers perceived were a characterization of the post-recession years and the desire for upper middle class consumers to remain distinct from the fragile and formerly middle class.

The analysis of the traditional card web sites identified a visualization of a prestige cycle in which the middle and upper middle class cardholders were presented with a perpetual succession of material goods worthy of aspiration. The prestige cycle on the traditional card web sites differed from the one visualized in the prepaid card promotions, as well as the ones absent
on the secured card web sites. Each card type visualized (or with the secured cards – omitted) class-appropriate consumptive patterns. Whereas the prepaid cards visualized a desire to emulate the money management behaviors of the middle class, the secured card pages in my sample did not consider such features. In doing so, the secured card sample pages indicated that such features were out the target market’s grasp. In contrast to the prepaid and secured cards, the traditional card sample pages visualized a material life denotive of authentic middle or upper middle class status.

These aspirations on the three card types’ sample pages were distinct, but shared the similar assumption by the advertisers that consumers – regardless of socioeconomic status – were always seeking improvement and access to a better life (Lury, 2001). These distinct frames suggested the advertisers perceived varying versions of the American Dream based on credit access, post-recession experiences, and aspirations for the future. These distinct frames also revealed the rigid class divide in the U.S. was increasingly impenetrable. Although the advertisements presented aspirations for an improved life, the fundamental differences in the presented aspirations indicated the card companies saw post-recession mobility as fairly stagnant and sought to provide profitable products which were positioned as solutions for navigating a challenging post-recession economy. This finding demonstrated one of this study’s practical contributions. In using a visual frame analysis, I identified a visual narrative that occurred within card pages, across the same card category, and then across the spectrum of card types. In doing so, this study exemplified how online promotional material for other products – and not just payment devices – were coded with a visual narrative which adjusted along with the intended audience.
2. Promoting disparate aspirations

For the second research question, the textual frame analysis considered how the advertisers constructed the experience of card usage, the target consumer’s role in the larger economy, and the potential of aspirational achievement. The analysis observed how the advertisers interpreted the distinct consumer groups’ post-recession experiences, which resulted in a greater understanding of how the card companies foresaw current and future possibilities for these groups. This section provides a brief summary and analysis for the results to the second research question, and describes the ways in which these findings contributed both theoretically and practically.

The prepaid card promotional text relied on two frames – progress and upgrade – to describe how the promoted product enabled the consumer to circumvent the mainstream banking system, respond to the demands of the digital economy, and emulate the money management practices of the middle class. The promotional text was also shaped by an overt hostility toward the mainstream banking system in which banks were described as expensive, exclusionary, and even predatory. The frame analysis for the prepaid cards’ sample pages observed how the advertisers perceived a persisting distrust against the mainstream banking system, which indicated an enduring collective sentiment in which the advertisers saw potential to capitalize. The promotional material was thus directed at disenfranchised consumers, some of whom were adjusting to a new status of exclusion. Although some consumers in this target market might have chosen disenfranchisement as a strategy to avoid the costs and risks associated with mainstream banks, others were disqualified as a result of the credit scoring system. This suggested the card advertisers perceived the consumers’ future aspirations were limited and based on financial survival, not material acquisition. Thus, the card companies perceived the
typical prepaid card consumer as not advancing within the credit/debt economy and likely to maintain a disenfranchised status in the long-term. The advertisers’ perception of the target market as possessing limited financial mobility in the coming years was another key finding of this study. The five prepaid cards in my sample provided cardholders with the ability to participate in the digital economy and perform an appearance of inclusion in the consumer economy. The frame analysis, however, observed the promoted product accommodated consumers with limited financial mobility, but obscured the growing disenfranchisement among unbanked and underbanked consumers.

This finding suggests that inclusion in the mainstream banking system was inelastic, and historical exclusions were maintained in the post-recession economy and legally justifiable through the credit scoring system. Although critics contend the credit scoring system was biased (Malheiros et al., 2012; Garcia, 2010), my analysis examined how such exclusions were rationalized to the rejected target market, and justified in such a way to avoid upset to the existing structures while maximizing profit potential for the alternative payment devices. In exposing such rationalizations, the textual frame analysis was also, as Entman (2010) describes, “a tool for exerting power in a system of relationships” (pg. 334).

The textual frame analysis also found the five prepaid cards in my sample obscured the growing disenfranchisement among a large classification of consumers. The mystification of disenfranchisement was another of this study’s theoretical contributions. Similar to how the visual frame analysis was a tool in examining incongruence between consumers and the mainstream banking system, the textual frame analysis identified how deeper layers existed within this power structure. Although the prepaid cards’ sample text suggested the payment devices were an empowering tool and a form of resistance against the larger consumer economy,
the card companies were not mobilizing against marginalization. Rather, the five prepaid cards companies in my sample were seeking to profit from the steady stream of fees charged to card users. Thus, the textual frame analysis presented framing as a tool for examining a multi-faceted power structure, such as the consumer economy, in which varying dimensions were obscured.

Whereas the prepaid cards’ sample text suppressed resistance and supplied a profitable alternative, the five secured cards’ home and secondary pages were rooted in the idea of complicity as a form of success. The progress and boundary frames constructed the consumer economy as a meritocracy and described a current status in which the secured card consumer held potential for improvement. The secured card sample pages communicated through these frames a sense of personal responsibility which ignored the inherent privileges of the credit scoring system granted to select consumers. The secured card boundary frame shared the same core message as the traditional card boundary frame, in that both card types indicated the consumer’s place within the larger socioeconomic hierarchy. For the secured card consumer, the boundary was exclusion from the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems. In contrast, the boundary for the traditional cards was tantamount to a fortress around middle class status and consumption. Demographic appropriate aspirations that fit within both of these constructions were implicit in both card types’ sample text. For the secured cards, the aspiration was for the end of disenfranchisement and admittance to the mainstream banking system. The traditional card consumers’ aspiration for a meaningful material life reflected the varied post-recession experience.

The traditional cards’ promotional text used the boundary, authenticity, and progress frames to communicate a continued reliance on the credit/debt system designed to advance the
consumer within the boundaries of his or her perceived socioeconomic status. The frames also communicated how such advancement authenticated consumers’ statuses and provided strategic assurance for self-created identities. A persistent description of protection ran through these frames and the consumer was assured that several dimensions of protection were made possible through card usage. The promoted cards authenticated and preserved the consumer’s socioeconomic status while progressing the consumer toward desired material good aspirations. The card also served to protect the consumer in the global economy, and such security was depicted as an essential asset, which demonstrated how good credit and participation in the credit/debt economy was a protected status that qualifying consumers were required to reiterate in order to produce the semblance of belonging. The performance of the protected status also demonstrated the vulnerabilities that traditional card consumers faced in the post-recession economy. Although these consumers were in comparably better positions than the prepaid or secured target markets, adherence to such a position could never be exhausted. Participation in the credit/debt economy was mandatory, which made traditional card consumers vulnerable and obligated to agree to terms that conditions that were not always in their best interest.

The identification of the distinct post-recession experiences and associated aspirations served as this research question’s practical contribution to the study of advertising frames. Advertising frames are intentional (Shimp et al., 1988), and advertisers manipulate visual and textual information to produce a message that helps a consumer achieve a positive state or avoid a negative state about the product or the brand (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990; Shiv et al, 1997; Chandy et al., 2005. Levy, 2006). This study demonstrated how comparable advertisements directed across categories of consumer groups were intentionally coded with messages intended to persuade distinct target markets.
This research question also identified a set of textual frames that worked in-tandem with visual frames to communicate a post-recession experience. In his study of the ruling class in the U.S., Mills Wright (1956) explained how Americans have long challenged how the very rich accrued their wealth: “Moral distrust of the high and mighty is of course an old American custom” (pg. 339). Mills Wright further argued there were certain times when such scrutiny was intensified, and cited the financial devastation of the 1930s as an era when financiers responded to distrust and worked to restore consumer confidence. This dissertation was the first to examine consumer card application web sites as a text, and the frames identified in this analysis archived how card companies used the consumer card application web sites to respond to scrutiny in an era of distrust and encourage consumer confidence. These frames serve as a guide for scholars examining online promotions in the post-recession economy for other credit products such as loans or mortgages. And given the cyclical nature of recessions, these frames serve as a guide for future framing researchers examining post-recession texts and attempting to gauge how card companies historically framed card usage in online promotions. The second research question, as well as the first, also contributed to the literature by identifying the intended manipulations by the card companies and pulling these frames to the surface. As the next section more fully discusses, such intended messages were well-hidden and served to obscure the card companies’ pervasive power and the consumers’ increasing dependence and vulnerability.

3. **Structuring status.**

The discourse analysis further considered how the advertisers’ constructed and encapsulated the varying target markets’ distinct experiences in the post-recession economy. This analysis identified the fractures that occurred within each card type’s target market, and considered the shared themes the advertisers perceived were collective among consumers with
distinct motivations but a shared economic status. The analysis observed how the advertisers’ perceived class distinctions, anxieties, and desires. In this examination, the advertisers’ notions of choice and agency emerged. The three distinct card types shared a reinforcement of a larger economic hegemony, despite the cards’ disparate functions and varying consumer groups. This section provides a brief summary and analysis for the results to the third research question, and describes the ways in which these findings contributed both theoretically and practically.

The five prepaid cards’ home and secondary pages were directed at a fractured target market with varying motivations for card usage. However, these sample pages shared a message regarding the financial control made possible through card usage. The message of control reinforced a larger, more universal message regarding the agency associated with transgressing the mainstream and credit scoring systems, and positioned the card as a responsible and helpful partner in the process of transgression. This finding opened space to evaluate the consequences of promoting non participation in the credit/debt economy, as well as the staged agency which suggested deliberate disenfranchisement is empowering and harmless.

In the sample, the meaning of disenfranchisement was reconditioned as a conscious choice the consumer made to intentionally extract him or herself from the unpredictability of the credit and mainstream banking systems. However, removal from the credit scoring system has severe consequences including the inability to secure decent employment, insurance, housing, and transportation (Traub, 2013). The repositioning of disenfranchisement presented a false choice toward non-participation and ignored the long-term consequences. Non-participation was presented as a responsible decision for consumers who wanted to avoid bank fees, debt, or the constant surveillance of the credit/debt system. However, non-participation begets further
disenfranchisement, a consequence that was repositioned on the prepaid card web sites as an intentional transgression of the confines of the credit/debt system.

In structuring transgression as a choice that was both liberating and responsible, the prepaid cards sample pages demonstrated a form of economic hegemony. The card companies presented an unbanked lifestyle that would inevitably result in long-term consequences for the consumer, while profiting the card companies and contributing to future dependence on AFS. In doing so, the card companies presented the model that enriched the companies’ shareholders as a model that best benefitted the target market. As consistent with any form of hegemony, the messages were both subtle and convincing. Prepaid cards were presented as a source of financial agency for consumers seeking extraction from the mainstream banking system as well as enhanced control in both their personal financial lives and the placement within the larger credit/debt economy. Positioning the prepaid products as a source of financial agency ignored how the cards were designed with an infinite cycle of fees which profited the card companies. Although the fee structure was mitigated through direct deposit participation, all five cards had fee schedules and none were free to use or maintain. These fees centered on usage as well as money management, and consumers paid to check balances, transfer funds, access cash at an ATM, and make purchases. These fees contrasted with the prepaid cards’ positioning of the card as a tool for personal progress and were demonstrative of economic hegemony.

The five secured cards’ home and secondary pages were also directed at distinct consumer groups with varying motivation for building or rebuilding credit. The promotional pages shared a message of credit as an indicator of good consumer citizenship and moral character. This message was reinforced by a paternalistic message that the consumer was in need of oversight in order to develop improved credit habits and evolve into a credit worthy consumer.
This finding enabled deeper consideration of the inherent biases of the credit/debt economy and whether the promotion of good consumer citizenship through secured card usage was an unobtainable, false reality. The credit scoring system was structured with inherent biases, some of which critics argued made it difficult for consumers of color, immigrants, young consumers, senior citizens, and working class Americans to build high credit scores (Malheiros et al. 2012; Traub, 2013). The secured cards’ sample pages worked within this system to encourage consumers to source blame internally for non-participation, and to trust the system was functional and fair. However, the proprietary nature of the credit scoring system meant that only 35% of a person’s score was based on their past credit usage and the rest was derived from other, unknown factors (Avery et al., 2010; Malheiros et al., 2012). The secured card companies profited from the mainstream and credit scoring systems’ inherent bias, and in turn, presented exclusion as beneficial to the consumer. This finding served as theoretical contribution by considering how advertisers’ suggested aspirations served a dual purpose of both persuading the audience to consume the promoted product while obscuring the influence of the systems which produced and sustained systems of power. The discourse analysis relied on Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) model to examine the aspirations emanating from the three card types. This approach required the consideration of readily recognizable symbols and phrases which were understood by as wide as an audience as possible. Within the secured cards, a disparate group of consumers were targeted with the shared aspiration for entry into the mainstream banking and credit scoring systems. Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) approach enabled a consideration into the varying elements that were used to communicate a core viewpoint regarding the varying consumer groups’ shared aspiration for enfranchisement. In using this approach, the intention was to understand how the aspirations revealed a spectrum of socioeconomic positioning of
credit-seeking publics. Within the secured cards, the prescribed aspiration for control revealed a fabricated social status for a displaced consumer, whose anxieties, desires, and sense within the larger socioeconomic system was constructed by an advertiser seeking to profit on the possibility of continued exclusion.

The discourse analysis for the secured cards’ home and secondary pages also found a shared message of economic hegemony within the card category. The secured card consumers had varying reasons for seeking a card, but they shared an interpolative condition in which they were neither fully disenfranchised nor considered creditworthy. In the sample, the interpolative condition was constructed as a withdrawal from good consumer citizenship, and a reflection of poor moral character. The secured card was presented as a device that assisted in the return to good citizenship, but onus was on the consumer to demonstrate improved credit habits. The emphasis on the consumer’s contributions to the poor credit scored disregarded the inherent biases within the credit scoring system, as well as the challenges of navigating a demanding consumer economy.

In structuring the credit/debt system as a type of meritocracy that a consumer was capable of navigating, the five secured cards’ home and secondary pages reflected a shared economic hegemony. The credit scoring system was presented as a benefit to consumers who could participate, and the system was presented as logical and fair, which constructed consumers’ exclusion as a result of their own failure. Effort to return to a state of franchisement was equated with good consumer citizenship, which further relieved the credit scoring system as an exclusionary, detached system.

The secured cards’ promotional material on the home and secondary pages presented participation (or exclusion) from the credit scoring system as a type of personal identity.
Similarly, the 10 traditional cards’ home and secondary pages positioned high credit as an indicator of good consumer citizenship. In the traditional cards sample, the construction of good consumer citizenship fit within imaginary boundaries which structured the meaning of the high credit score as a privileged space which entitled a consumer to an elevated status. This message was reinforced by a reproduction of consumption as a form of work which required skill, organization, and self-discipline. The notion of consumption as work further compounded the assurance the consumer had earned such a privilege, and that such a coveted status required further maintenance and ongoing effort. This open spaced to further consider the mandatory nature of the credit/debt system.

Consumers with high credit, as with all consumers in the U.S.’s credit/debt economy, have scores reported by creditors to the three major credit reporting bureaus (Avery et. al, 2010). Continued maintenance of the score requires a consistent vigilance in bill pay to avoid delinquency; monitoring against fraud or theft of credit products; and maintenance of the credit to debt ratio (Fico, 2012; Avery et. al, 2010). Credit histories are part of “financialization of everyday life” in which a consumer’s credit score dictates future access and socioeconomic status (Burton 1994; 2012). Consumers are required to maintain participation, and the system places the consumer at an inherent disadvantage. Failure to adhere to the system’s rules can lead to a lower credit score and threaten socioeconomic standing.

On the 10 traditional cards’ home and secondary pages, socioeconomic identity as a personal identity was carefully rearticulated. The sample of traditional cards defined the target market as part of a middle class consumptive experience which required both protection as well as a repetitive demonstration of acquired material goods and lifestyle aspirational achievement that confirmed authentic membership. The discourse analysis found the traditional cards’ sample
pages supplied class-appropriate material goods and lifestyle aspirational achievement as well as an assurance that such association with the consumptive class was a privilege.

The 10 traditional cards’ home and secondary pages presentation of privilege was indicative of economic hegemony. The credit/debt system requires constant rearticulation of creditworthiness through hyperconsumption, and consumers risk debt and immobility within the larger economy. The middle class’ forced participation, however, was reconditioned as an entitlement for those who fit within the boundaries the advertisers constructed. The promotional text on the traditional cards’ home and secondary pages constructed such confinement as opportunity for elevation from the standards of everyday living. The cardholders’ confinement to the boundaries of middle class consumption was represented as a form of empowerment in which the system benefited its forced participants.

The three card types in my limited sample shared a varying message of individualized empowerment. In the home and secondary pages in my sample, there was an omission as to how such agency was mediated by a credit scoring system that historically organized and maintained exclusions. The three card types in my limited sample differed in how individualized empowerment was suggested, and these varying depictions indicated a growing socioeconomic divide in the U.S. that was increasingly defined by the credit/debt system. This finding demonstrated one of this study’s practical contributions to the study of discourse. The study of discourse, according to Fairclough (1995), exposes the opacity of wider social and cultural structures. This dissertation used a previously unstudied text – consumer card application web sites – to examine the consumer economic structures and the restrictions set by the credit scoring system. These restrictions shared a message of empowerment which obscured the dominant
system, limited criticisms, and redirected resistance into further consumption. The next section further considers the implications of this research question as well as the first two.

4. **Further conclusions**

   This dissertation was the first to examine consumer card application web sites. Although applying online for a payment device was not a relatively new phenomenon, the promotions proceeding the applications had yet to be studied. In using frame and discourse analysis, this study uncovered complex layers of communication which revealed how advertisers viewed competing consumer groups in the post-recession economy. The prepaid and secured cards’ message of disenfranchisement confirmed a greatening socioeconomic divide in which the credit scoring system limited movement among the social classes. In contrast, the traditional cards’ message of protection indicated that credit access was a coveted status, which had the appearance of privilege, but bound the consumer to adhering to creditors’ demands.

   In identifying how the advertisers conceptualized the competing consumer groups, this study also noted the existence of multiple consumer economies. The consumer economy for the traditional target market was arguably the experience that was most represented in the larger public discourse about the post-recession middle class. However, the prepaid and secured card web sites revealed separate consumer economies in which many Americans functioned in disenfranchisement and held little desire or opportunity to regain access to the middle class and the mainstream banking system. The secured cards presented promotional material to a diverse group of Americans who were adversely effected by the recession but hoped to regain access. The prepaid cards, however, presented promotional material to disenfranchised consumer group who were obligated to operate in the digital economy but either chose not to or were unable to participate in the credit/debt economy. The complex prepaid promotions indicated that the target
market included individuals who were long disenfranchised and historically relied on AFS for daily money management. However, the promotions also indicated the presence of the former middle class – a group of consumers who once enjoyed access to the middle class consumer economy and likely still perceived themselves as such despite their current exclusion.

The presence of multiple consumer economies in the post-recession years indicated that Adams (1931) observations about the American Dream was a fallacy that never existed. In Adams’ (1931) observation, he noted how the unrestricted structure of the American structure meant that anyone could rely on hard work and ingenuity to succeed. Interestingly, he conceptualized the American Dream in the years following the 1929 stock market collapse. The early 1930s was a tumultuous time characterized by limited credit, bank restrictions, home foreclosures, unemployment lines, and great despair. The recent recession was the most devastating since the Great Depression (Duke, 2010), and the American Dream of consumption was employed to sell aspirations to varying consumer groups. This dissertation dissected the messages used to sell the funding source of such aspirations, and found that the existence of multiple consumer economies meant Americans could no longer rely on hard work or ingenuity to cross into a higher socioeconomic order. Credit was mandatory, and the credit scoring system provided a legal basis for lenders to discriminate. Yet, the ethos of the American Dream persisted, and the advertisers’ version of the American Dream of consumption provided the illusion that consumer dreams were obtainable. The consumer card application web sites presented a variety of consumer aspirations that appeared obtainable for the target market to achieve. However, these aspirations locked the consumer into the prestige cycle and served as a distraction from the actual lack of agency the consumer possessed in the credit/debt economy.
My observations about the fallacy of the American dream in the rigid credit/debt economy are admittedly negative, but not necessarily disheartening. Empowerment comes from identifying obscured systems of power and exposing the manipulations used by such systems to maintain control. This dissertation examined a previously unstudied text that was used to persuade consumers to obtain and use payment devices in a credit/debt economy for which they had little authority. In doing so, this dissertation identified and labeled the frames used by advertisers to persuade and mollify consumers. Such frames can be used in future study to comprehend and criticize such promotions, and serve as a basis for promoting larger discussion and consumer education.

B. **Limitations**

The strength of this study is that it ventured into new territory in order to examine a new method of acquiring payment devices that emerged in the past few years and rapidly reconstructed how consumers learned about and obtained payment devices. This dissertation navigated new waters, particularly because communication research had yet to consider consumer card application web sites, and there was an opportunity to pioneer into this form of advertising. In being the first to survey the new landscape, a small sample was collected so that the card web sites could be fully examined. A limitation of this study was how the sample was determined and the material collected before it was realized that the total word count for the promotional material was on the smaller side – 36,321 promotional text and 146,805 mandatory disclosures. The limited sample size also impacted the number of visuals collected for analysis. Although the prepaid and traditional card web sites had ample visuals in which to examine, the secured cards did not have enough visual content to include in the analysis. Increasing the sample size from 20 card web sites could have provided richer data for this inquiry. Another limitation was how this
study only considered each cards’ home and secondary pages. The decision to limit my analysis within in “three click rule” was based on the literature regarding consumer online browsing habits. However, this decision meant I could not generalize my findings to the entire site, only the pages within my sample. Increasing my data collection past the home and secondary pages would have enabled me to project my findings for each site’s full promotional space.

In being the first to survey a new landscape, this dissertation used a mixed method approach to identify the frames and discursive practices that communicated the experience of card ownership. This was helpful for establishing a baseline understanding in the similarities and differences for how these web sites were structured. However, the weakness of this method was subjectivity. Scholars typically identify the frames during the analysis (Charmaz, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which opens the analysis to subjectivity (Kuypers, 2010). Although my analysis was informed by prominent frequencies in the language and visuals, much of the interpretation was based on my subjectivity. In particular, the visual analysis required me to note camera angles, distance, spatial arrangements, and other manipulative elements (Grabe, 1996; Moriarty & Povich, 1991). Without a coding system or a second coder, this evaluation was limited to my interpretation.

A larger sample size might have made quantitative inquiry an option for analysis, and it was possible that such analysis might have revealed statistically significant similarities among the card web sites. Because this dissertation relied exclusively on qualitative inquiry, the rich information that arises from quantitative inquiry was absent. Another limitation related to the unit of analysis and the exclusive focus on the consumer card application web sites. These web sites initiate the online brand experience and are designed to actively engage the consumer (Bart et. al, 2005). These web sites are both persuasive and informative and fit Burton’s (2008)
description of credit advertisements as uniquely promotional and informative. However, there are other important advertising sources, and cross-examining the web sites with in-store promotions or mass media advertisements might have provided a wider understanding of the varying consumer groups.

The exploratory nature of this study resulted in a limited focus and a small sample size. Cross-examining the web sites with other forms of consumer card advertisements holds potential for future research. The next section provides recommendations for future research and how the approach can be improved in order to further enhance the study of these important promotional sites.

C. Future Research

This dissertation examined a promotional text – consumer card application web sites – that have yet to be examined by framing, advertising, or credit history scholars. Credit card advertising scholars have examined print and television advertisements, but have yet to consider the promotional material that proceeds an online application. These web sites were part of a new era of self-service banking and served as a starting point of the online brand experience (Bart et. al, 2005) and were designed to reframe the consumer experience (Gobé, 2007). In studying these web sites, this dissertation gained insight into how specific demographics were addressed by the card companies actively seeking the online application. This insight contributed to the growing history of credit card advertisement literature, and established how other consumer credit application web sites can be examined. As part of the new era of self-serving banking, there are a host of application web sites for home, student, and auto loans. Future inquiries into these web sites might consider the informational and aspirational approaches used to sell credit products to consumers. Further inquiry into these credit web sites is highly relevant.
because consumers are incurring long-term debts. Future research into long-term debt agreements and the promotional material used to inform and persuade applicants would be a vital and timely addition to the literature regarding credit advertisements.

By using a discourse analysis, which further allowed for the consideration of the history of credit in the U.S., this dissertation identified how the exclusions within the consumer credit system were established with historical precedents and maintained during the recent post-recession economy. This dissertation contributed to the credit history literature by reexamining credit history through the lens of aspiration, which created a point of comparison and enabled an understanding of how increased access to consumer goods changed our aspirations and sense of consumer power. Additionally, the varying versions of the American Dream, as suggested by the card companies to distinct consumer groups, indicated competing consumer interests in the post-recession experience. The identification and exploration of these aspirations can serve as a historical reference for future researchers examining the 2008 economic collapse and its impact on materialism, the American Dream, and consumer aspiration.

Future study regarding post-recession consumer aspirations would benefit greatly from qualitative interviews that further examine consumer desires as well as their experiences operating on the fringes of mainstream banking. Scholars such as Manning (2000) and Williams (2005) conducted extensive interviews with unbanked and underbanked consumers, but this was prior to the proliferation of prepaid cards. Similarly, Pew (2014) identified the prevalence of prepaid card usage and touched on consumer motivations for using the card. The study authors, however, were surprised by the usage of prepaid card consumers who had an existing bank account and chose an AFS for daily money management. Such a finding was connected to a strong aversion toward the mainstream banking system. Exploring this animosity through
 qualitative interviews presents the potential to obtain prolific insight into the post-recession experience.

This dissertation examined the varying post-recession consumer experience within a few years of the 2008-2009 economic collapse and the subsequent credit crunch. Data was collected and analyzed in 2013, a time when American consumers were still recovering from a loss of wealth, income, or credit. These web sites served as unintentional time capsules which captured the varying aspirations, anxieties, and concepts of the American Dream for competing consumer groups. My analysis scrutinized these unintentional time capsules and captured how advertisers conceptualized, predicted, and capitalized on varying consumer desires and experiences. Our discipline’s understanding of the post-recession years and the consumer communication specific to this timeframe is deepened and enriched by the archiving and analysis of the consumer card application web sites.
CITED LITERATURE


Bennett, M.J. When Dreams Came True: The GI Bill and the Making of Modern Day America. Mclean, Brassley's, 1996.


Demanyanyk, D. Your credit score is a ranking, not a score. *Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland*, 2010.


Entman, R.M. *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and US Foreign*


Experian. How to improve credit scores, 2012.


Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, FDIC Prepaid Cards: No Match for a Well-Managed Checking Account, 2009.


FICO. *FICO Score Distribution remains mixed*, 2012.

FICO. *Credit Basics*. 2013.


Hyman, L. Debtor Nation: The History of America in Red Ink, Princeton University Press, 2011

Hyman, L. The politics of consumer debt. ANNALS, 644:40-49, 2012a,


Ipsos. Interest in online banking flattens, 2005.


Lee, T.J. The role of financial services advertising on investors' decision-making. Dissertation, University of Tennessee, 2011.


Logemann, J. Different paths to mass consumption: Consumer credit in the United States and West Germany during the 1950s and '60s. *Journal of Social History*, 41:525-559, 2008.


MyFICO (2012). MyFICO.com


Runyon, K. Advertising and the Practice of Marketing. Columbus, Merrill, 1979,


Advertising (pp. 81-104). New York, Quorum Books, 1990.


VITA

NAME: Emilie Le Beau Lucchesi

EDUCATION:
- Bachelor of Journalism, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1999
- Master of Arts, Communication, DePaul University, 2009
- PhD, Communication, University of Illinois-Chicago, 2015

ACADEMIC HONORS:
- Scholarship, College of Communication, DePaul University, $6,000 2008-2009
- Acceptance, Omicron Delta Kappa, 1999
- Scholarship, University of Missouri, $3,000, 1996-1998
- Scholarship, Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans, John Fischetti Award, $1500, 1996

SELECT PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS:
TEACHING EXPERIENCE:
Department of Communication, University of Illinois-Chicago, 2009-2013
College of Communication, DePaul University, 2013-2014
Department of Communication, Elmhurst College, 2010-2014

SERVICE:
Reviewer, *New Media & Society*, 2012-2015
Reviewer, International Communication Association (communication history and journalism divisions).

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS:
National Communication Association
International Communication Association