



# Non-Prime Opportunity Index

2026

How consumers with less-than-perfect credit shop, pay, and engage with retail credit.



# Rethinking Credit Engagement in a Debit-Dominant Economy

Credit wins when it fits how consumers already behave.

Consumers with less-than-perfect credit are often viewed as constrained, but the more important story is how actively and purposefully they engage in the marketplace. They participate in everyday transactions, regularly balancing trade-offs among spending, payments, and credit use in ways that show both financial pressure and discipline. This report explores those behaviors through a practical perspective, demonstrating that this group is neither disengaged nor uniform.

What emerges is a clearer picture of a consumer group that uses financial tools strategically. Payment preferences, shopping patterns, and credit behaviors shift meaningfully by age, income, and credit profile, revealing a market defined by different needs rather than a single “non-prime” mindset. Across those differences, one theme remains consistent: consumers respond to products that align with how they already manage money, especially when those products offer clarity, flexibility, and immediate relevance.

For brands and financial institutions, the opportunity is to move beyond broad assumptions and to design credit products around actual behavior. The best credit offers will naturally fit into everyday spending, support real financial trade-offs, and create value that feels usable in the moment. The sections that follow explore where this opportunity is strongest and what it means for product design, positioning, and growth strategy.

## Demographic Stats



This survey reflects 1,039 U.S. adults (18+) with at least one credit card and below-prime credit scores (550–699). Data were collected February 19–23, 2026, via the Centiment platform. Findings are based on self-reported responses and may be subject to recall and selection bias.

# Key Takeaways

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01

## Financial pressure increases the need for flexible credit

With nearly 80% reporting budget constraints, consumers are actively balancing spending instead of pulling back completely. Credit plays a flexible role, supporting both short-term liquidity and planned purchases.

02

## Debit reliance reflects constrained credit access, presenting a growth opportunity for credit

Debit-led behavior is more common among lower-score consumers, where credit availability may not fully support everyday spending. Expanding access to credit can better align with consumer needs and increase adoption over time.

03

## This is a high-frequency, everyday spending segment

Non-Prime consumers are deeply engaged in essential retail categories, with most shopping weekly at grocery and mass retail stores. This provides consistent opportunities for credit engagement linked to routine purchases.

04

## Retail credit is already integrated and most effective in essential categories

Adoption is widespread, and demand peaks in high-frequency environments like mass retail and grocery. These categories offer the most consistent route to engagement and long-term value.

05

## Practical, immediate value drives adoption over complex rewards

Consumers respond to products that clearly improve their financial situation through savings and financing flexibility. Value that is easy to understand and use is more effective than aspirational or complex reward structures.

06

## Trust and timing influence conversion

Applications are most likely when credit is offered at the moment of purchase and backed by trusted sources and clear value. Relevance at the point of purchase is more impactful than broad awareness campaigns.



# Financial Pressure Drives Strategic Spending and Selective Credit Use

## Current Financial Situation

A combined **79% report that money feels at least somewhat tight** (Figure 1), with 43% saying it is very tight.

Instead of disengaging, consumers actively rebalance their spending. Discretionary categories like dining out (22%) and entertainment (17%) are the first to be cut back, while essential expenses stay mostly protected (Figure 2). At the same time, purchases related to household needs (27.5%) and small personal rewards (18.6%) continue, highlighting the importance of maintaining both function and quality of life.

Credit behavior reflects this trend. About **40% increase credit usage to handle expenses**, especially among mid-income households and those with more established credit lines. Lower-income or lower-FICO consumers who are more sensitive to debt accumulation generally cut back on their use.

These differences reveal two distinct patterns:

- Financial flexibility leads to higher credit use to manage timing
- Those facing tighter constraints use it more selectively, often reserving it for larger or unavoidable purchases.

## What Gets Protected During Financial Pressure



### ESSENTIAL

19.8% say it feels hard to give up



### HELPFUL

23% say it saves money or stress long-term



### IMPORTANT

27.5% say it's important to their household



### TREAT

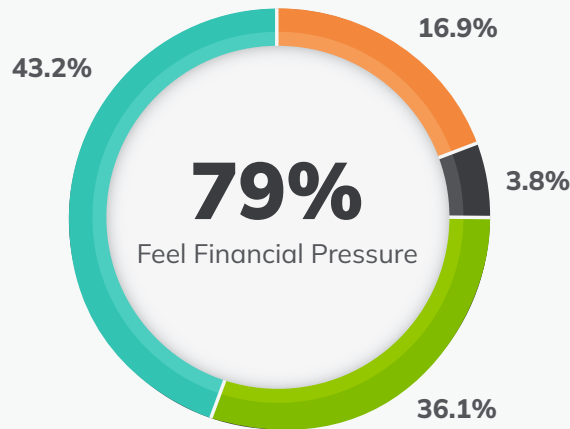
18.6% say it's a small way to treat themselves



### OCCASION

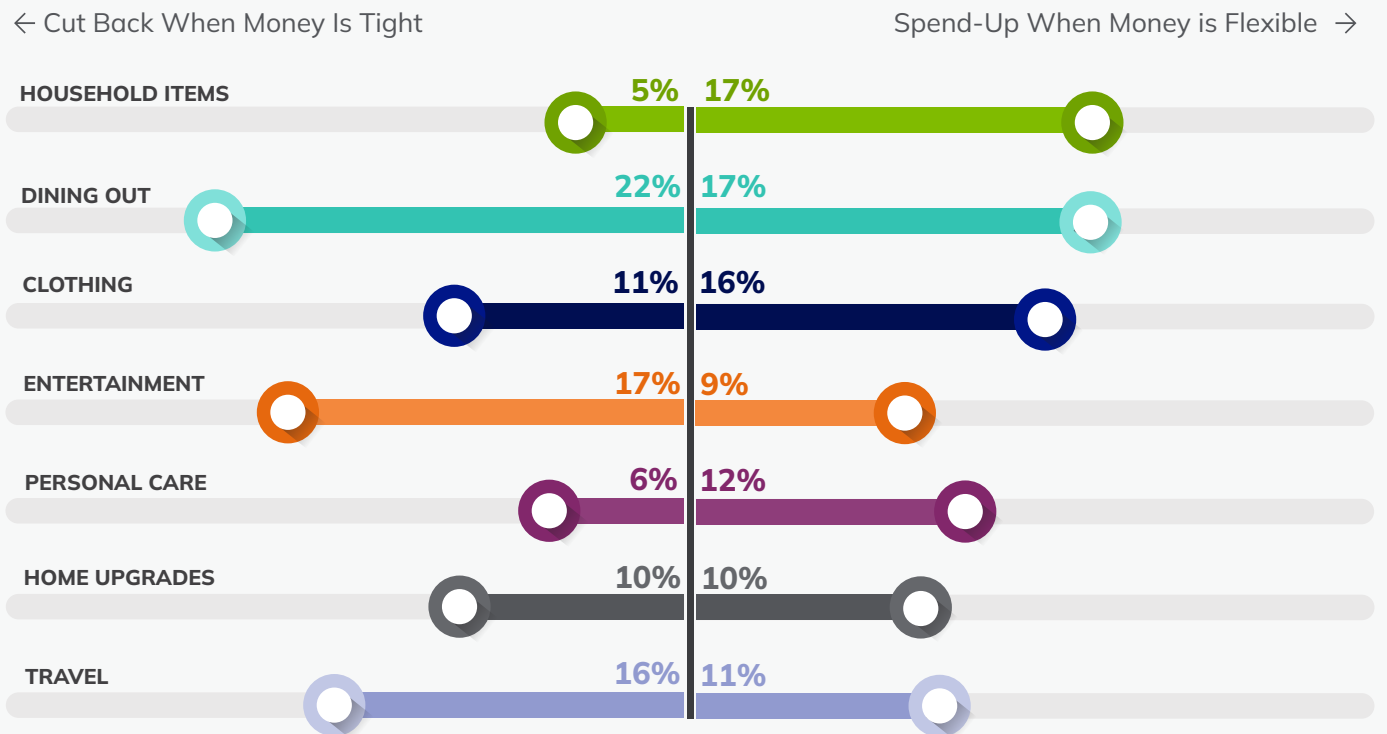
11.1% say it's tied to a special occasion

Figure 1: Current Financial Situation



- **Very Tight**  
Cutting back on most non-essential spending
- **Somewhat Tight**  
Can still afford some non-essential purchases
- **Manageable**  
Need to plan before making bigger purchases
- **Comfortable**  
Can spend on most things without worry

Figure 2: How Spending Priorities Shift with Financial Pressure



# Payment Preferences

## Preferred Payment Methods

Nearly **89% of consumers use debit cards, 82% use cash, and 80% use credit cards** (Figure 3), reflecting broad engagement across payment types. Yet despite this widespread use of credit, **debit is the primary payment method for 54% of consumers**, suggesting that usage does not necessarily translate into reliance.

This gap is likely driven by limited credit depth. With **76% of consumers holding only 1–2 credit cards**, many may not have access to sufficient credit lines to support everyday spending. As a result, debit often becomes the default.

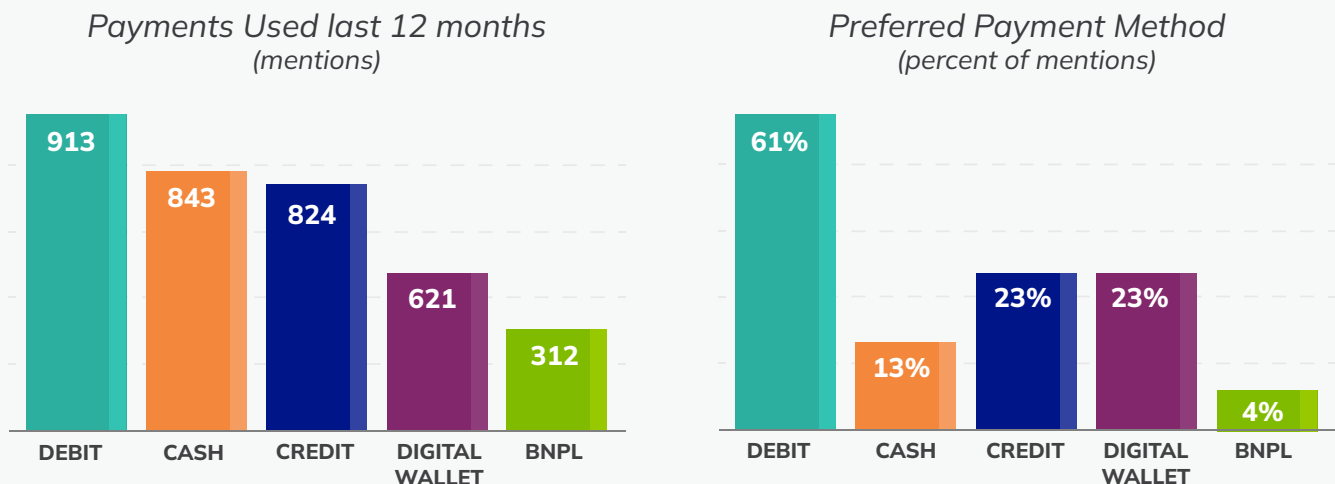
When isolating consumers who primarily use debit or credit, a clear shift emerges across credit score tiers.

Among those with lower FICO scores (550–659), roughly 80% rely on debit, compared to about 19% on credit. As scores increase (660–699), debit usage declines to 64% while credit rises to 35%, demonstrating a clear progression as credit access improves.

Younger consumers (18–34) reinforce the role of credit access in shaping behavior. They are underrepresented among higher card holders, indicating thinner credit profiles, while over-indexing in digital wallet usage.

As credit access improves, consumers are likely to shift toward greater credit usage. Expanding access, particularly at the point of sale, can support this transition and unlock incremental spending.

Figure 3: Payments Methods Used vs Preferred

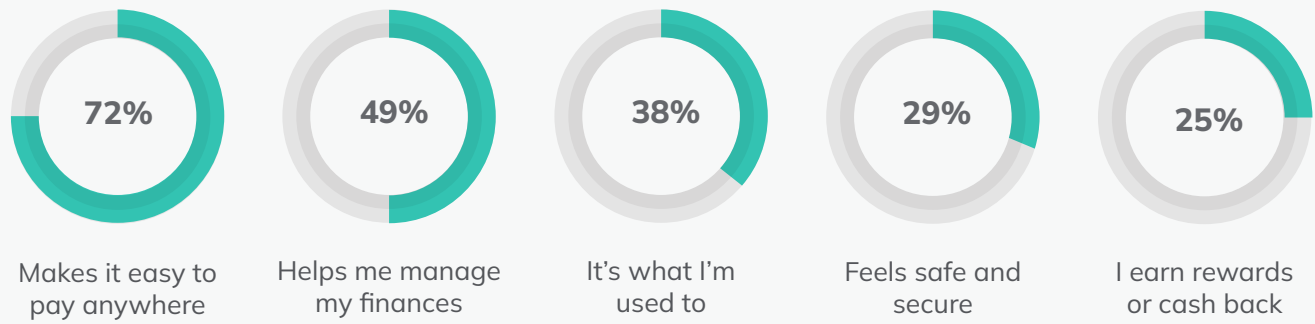


## Reasons for Preferred Method

**Convenience and acceptance are the dominant drivers of payment choice**, cited by 72% of consumers (Figure 4), far exceeding all other factors. This indicates that consumers prioritize payment methods that are easy to use and work consistently across contexts, regardless of the underlying funding source.

At the same time, nearly half of consumers cite financial management as a key factor, alongside considerations like security, familiarity, and rewards. Together, this reflects a dual expectation: payment methods must not only function seamlessly, but also support how consumers manage their money, leading them to gravitate toward options that best meet both needs.

Figure 4: Why They Choose Preferred Method



## Experience Using Credit

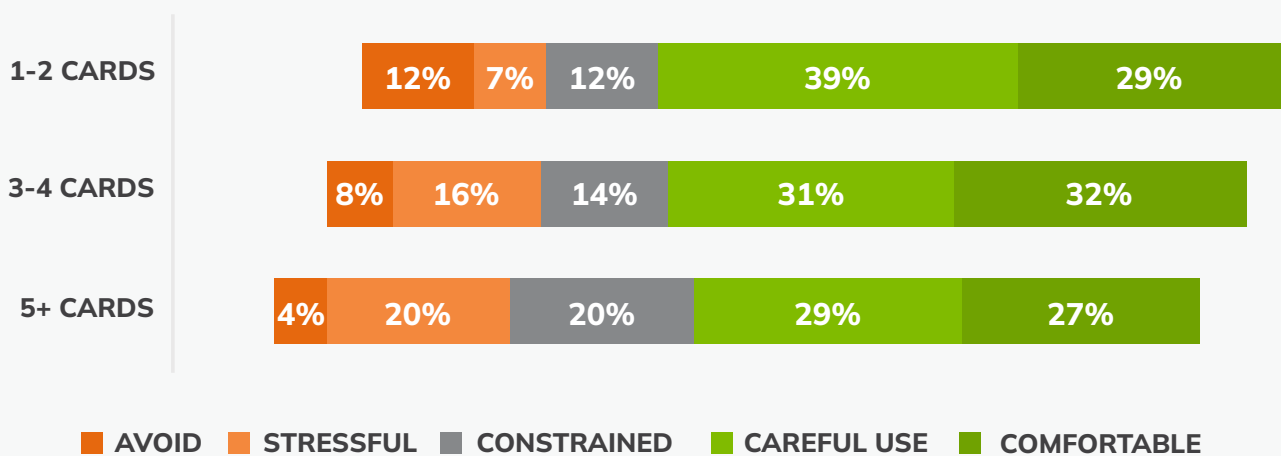
### Comfort Level Using Credit Cards

Most **non-prime consumers are moderately comfortable with credit cards** (Figure 5), but their usage is purposeful rather than habitual. They manage balances carefully, use credit strategically, and aim to avoid financial stress.

Credit use spans a spectrum from stress and

avoidance to confidence and control, with many consumers operating in the middle, using credit in a functional way but within perceived limits. As access and experience grow, credit use expands to more situations, but with added caution. The most experienced consumers are not only more comfortable but also more balanced, blending flexibility with a clearer understanding of risks and tradeoffs.

Figure 5: Comfort with Credit Cards



## Purchase Threshold for Credit Use

Purchase thresholds reinforce this pattern. Most respondents **do not turn to credit until a purchase exceeds \$50** (Figure 6), and roughly half of credit card transactions are between \$50 and \$299. Consumers with fewer cards tend to reserve credit for larger expenses, while those with five or more cards are more comfortable using credit for smaller, everyday purchases.

When money gets tight, credit behavior becomes more divided. About **39.7% of respondents report increasing credit card use to help manage**

expenses (Figure 7), while 31.4% try to cut back on credit card use. Consumers with fewer cards are more likely to reduce usage, whereas those with multiple cards are somewhat more likely to maintain or increase their borrowing, likely due to greater available credit and financial flexibility.

Overall, the market reflects two distinct needs: some consumers are using credit carefully as a tool for stability, while others are using it more confidently to gain more flexibility and value. The best credit products should be designed to support both approaches.

Figure 6: Purchase Threshold for Using a Credit Card

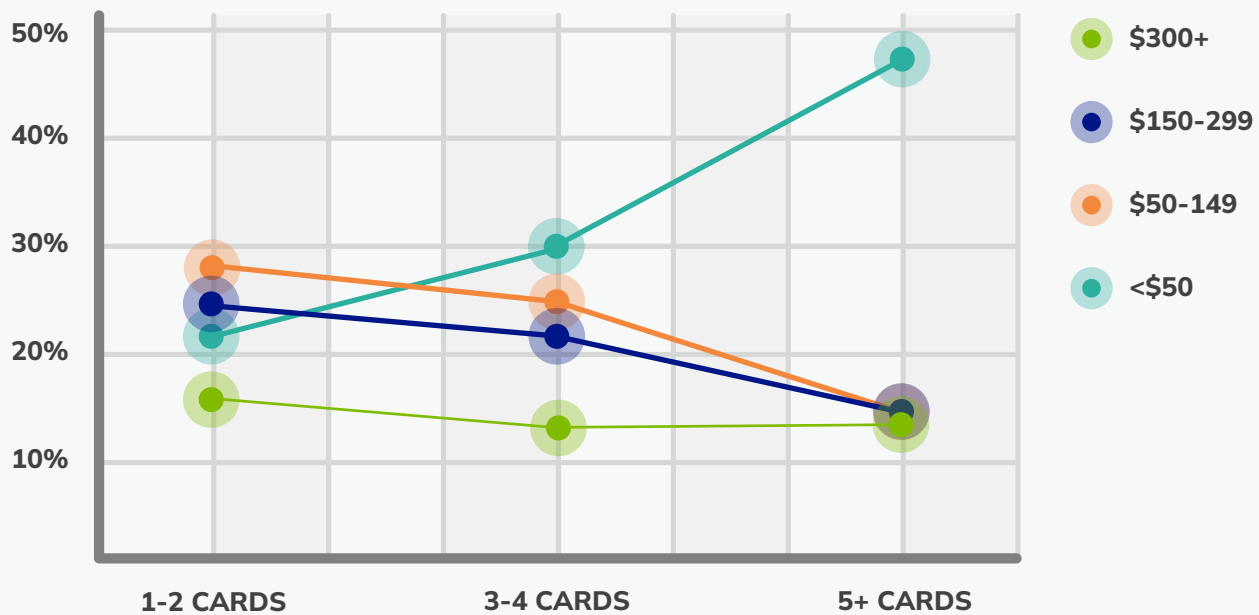
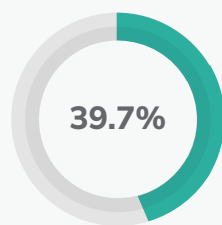
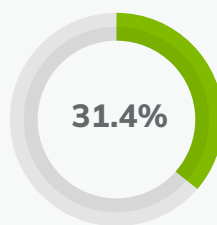


Figure 7: Changes in Credit Usage when Money is Tight



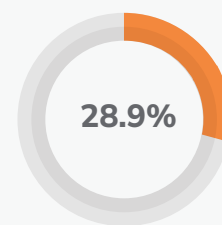
### INCREASE

Use credit more to manage expenses



### SAME

Use credit as they normally would



### DECREASE

Cut back credit use to conserve money



# Retail Credit Aligns Most Strongly with High-Frequency Spend Categories

## Shopping Behavior

### Where Non-Prime Shop

The idea that consumers with imperfect credit sit on the fringes of the economy underestimates their significance. In reality, they are highly active shoppers who participate regularly across a wide range of retail categories.

This activity is rooted in essential, high-frequency retail. **Over 56% of shopping happens in everyday categories** (Figure 8) such as big-box, grocery, and discount stores. These categories dominate because they support routine, necessity-driven purchases rather than occasional discretionary spending.

Figure 8: Retail Category Frequency

	TRAVEL	SPECIALTY	HOME	TECH	APPAREL	DISCOUNT	GROCERY	BIG BOX
WEEKLY	10	36	19	24	51	354	519	400
MONTHLY	20	72	70	72	257	205	201	293
EVERY FEW MONTHS	60	122	130	157	297	52	44	91
1-2 TIMES PER YEAR	36	23	107	88	37	11	12	15

## Shopping Frequency

Shopping frequency reveals distinct shopping patterns: essential retailers are visited weekly, apparel shopping occurs roughly monthly, and other discretionary categories are less frequent but still active.

Variations also exist based on income and life stage, with consumers aged 25–44 shopping more often for apparel and electronics, while

older consumers favor home-related stores. Higher-income individuals (\$75K+) tend to visit travel brands more frequently, whereas lower-income groups tend to have longer intervals between purchases in most discretionary categories.

These patterns create a retail environment defined by frequent, value-driven engagement, which sets the foundation for how consumers interact with retail credit.

### Figure 9: How They Choose Where to Shop

When choosing where to shop, consumers prioritize value. Price, selection, and quality influence most decisions, while brand and experience play a secondary role. This trend is stronger among consumers with lower credit scores, while those with higher credit scores place relatively more emphasis on quality and trust.



#### TRUST

Consumers gravitate toward familiar retailers they trust, where product quality, service, and brand reputation reduce perceived risk.

#### VALUE

Price is the primary driver of retailer choice, with consumers prioritizing strong value on everyday purchases over all other factors.

#### CONVENIENCE

Ease and accessibility shape decisions, with consumers favoring retailers that are readily available, easy to shop, and part of their routine.

# Retail Credit Adoption

## Current Retail Card Ownership

Retail credit is already deeply embedded in consumer behavior. More than **65% of respondents have owned a retail credit card**—whether store-only, co-branded, or both—indicating broad familiarity with retail-linked credit. Adoption increases with overall credit experience, with financially established consumers more likely to hold multiple types of retail cards, while less credit-experienced consumers are more likely to have never had one.

## Type of Retail Cards Held



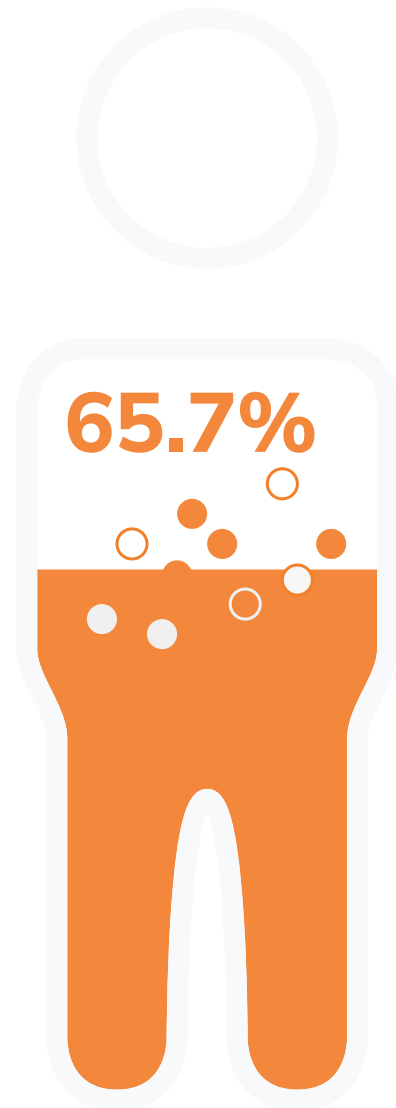
### STORE CARD

Owns a retail card that can only be used at a specific brand.

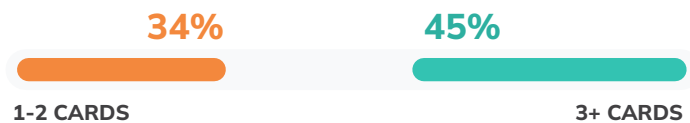


### CO-BRAND CARD

Owns a retail card that can be used anywhere.



## Adoption Increases with Credit Experience



More experienced consumers are more likely to hold multiple retail cards

## Figure 10: Retail Credit Delivers Perceived Value

Perceived value is generally high, with most cardholders rating their retail cards a 4 or 5 on a five-point scale. Value tends to increase with experience and usage, suggesting that familiarity with benefits, such as rewards or financing, strengthens overall satisfaction.



## Demand for Retail Cards

Interest in retail credit is closely tied to where consumers already shop. Retailer influence is strongest among big-box and mass merchants, followed by grocery and other everyday categories, reinforcing the idea that credit is most compelling when aligned with high-frequency spend.

Demand for retail credit cards is moderate but meaningful, with about **36% of respondents expressing interest in a specific card** (Figure 11). This interest is concentrated among those already comfortable using credit and is closely linked to everyday shopping habits. When asked which brands they would choose, mass merchants dominate, with Walmart, Amazon, and Target leading by a wide margin. A secondary tier includes apparel and department stores, as well as beauty and lifestyle

brands, where repeat but less frequent purchases still support engagement. Interest also extends to specialty and big-ticket purchase retailers, where credit facilitates larger, planned purchases.

## What This Means

Retail credit is a natural extension of how consumers already shop. High-frequency, essential retail drives the strongest engagement, making these categories the most effective entry point for credit adoption and ongoing use.

At the same time, discretionary categories serve a complementary role, with credit supporting larger, less frequent purchases through financing and reward redemptions. The most effective retail credit strategies will bridge both by focusing on everyday spend while also adding value to higher-consideration purchases.

Figure 11: Specific Brands Consumers Want a Retail Card



# Trust, Timing, and Relevance Shape Credit Adoption at the Point of Sale

## Motivations & Barriers

### Application Motivations

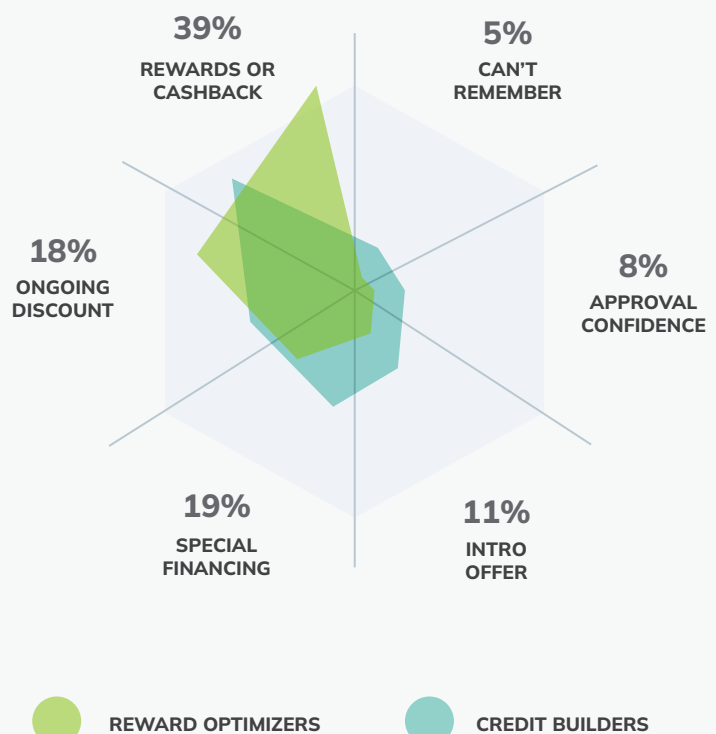
Consumers evaluate credit products based on how effectively they improve financial outcomes. The strongest motivators combine immediate benefits with continued usefulness. **Rewards or cash back are the most common initial appeal** (39%), followed by financing options (19%) and ongoing discounts (18%), each supporting everyday spending while increasing purchasing power over time (Figure 12).

While motivations are consistent, priorities vary by financial context. Two distinct segments emerge:

- **Reward Optimizers:**
  - Higher-income (\$75k+)
  - Own more credit cards (4+)
  - Prioritize maximizing rewards and overall value
- **Credit Builders:**
  - Lower-income (<\$75k)
  - Limited access to credit (1-2 cards)
  - Prioritize cost savings, lower fees, and manageable payment terms

Across both groups, the ability to build credit over time remains an important secondary benefit.

Figure 12: Motivations to Apply for a Retail Credit Card

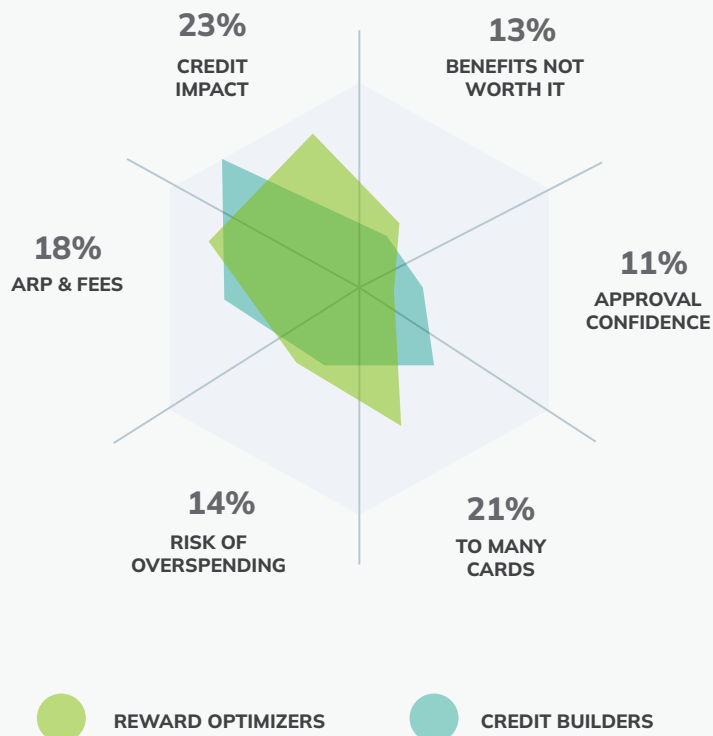


## Application Barriers

Barriers to adoption reflect these same priorities. Concerns about interest rates and fees, potential credit score impact, and the risk of overspending are the most common reasons for hesitation. At the same time, more experienced consumers are less concerned with risk and more focused on whether a new card offers meaningful incremental value.

These dynamics highlight a central tension: while retail credit offers clear value, uncertainty around cost, control, and relevance can prevent consumers from acting.

Figure 13: Barriers to Apply for a Retail Credit Card



## Converting Intent into Adoption

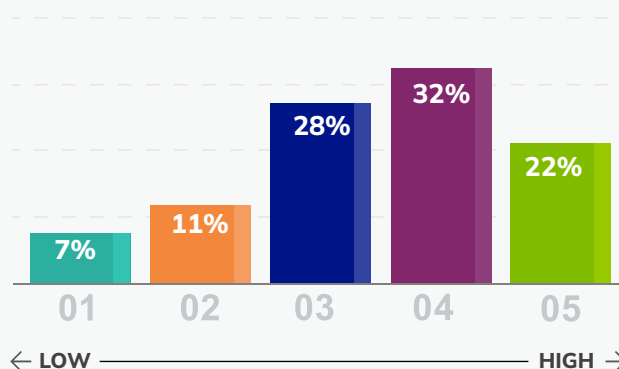
### Approval Confidence

The decision to apply ultimately hinges on confidence. While a **majority of consumers report feeling confident in their likelihood of approval** (Figure 13), a meaningful share remain uncertain, particularly those with less established credit profiles. Making consumers far less likely to apply if they are unsure of the outcome.

**54%**

rate approval confidence as high

Figure 14: Confidence to Apply for Credit



## Origination Triggers

**Promotional triggers play a critical role in overcoming hesitation, but only when they reinforce both trust and relevance (Figure 15).**

Recommendations from trusted sources (40.4%) and limited-time offers (38.3%) are the most effective drivers, followed by associate explanations at checkout (27.9%). Digital touch points such as email and online checkout messaging also contribute, particularly among younger consumers. However, a notable segment (13.1%) reports being largely unaffected by promotions, suggesting that not all consumers are easily influenced by marketing alone.

What distinguishes the most effective triggers is timing. Consumers are most receptive when credit offers are presented in the context of an active purchase and when the value can be immediately applied. In these moments, the combination of a clear benefit, a trusted source, and a relevant use case can significantly increase conversion.

## Engagement & Continued Use

Beyond the initial application, the same principles continue to shape engagement. Consumers express the strongest engagement in products that deliver better rewards (31.5%), lower costs (26.6%), and more flexible payment options (25.9%), alongside higher credit limits and improved usability. Together, these factors reinforce that adoption and ongoing use are driven by a consistent expectation: **credit products must provide tangible, usable value within the context of everyday spending (Figure 16).**

## What This Means

Retail credit adoption is not driven by a single factor, but by the interaction of value, confidence, and context. Consumers are willing to engage when the financial benefit is clear, but hesitation emerges when costs, approval, or relevance are uncertain.

The most effective acquisition strategies reduce this friction by making value immediate, reinforcing approval confidence, and delivering offers at the moment they are most useful. Programs that succeed will not only communicate strong benefits, but also integrate seamlessly into the shopping experience by meeting consumers with the right message, in the right place, at the right time.

Figure 15: Promotional Channels Driving Originations

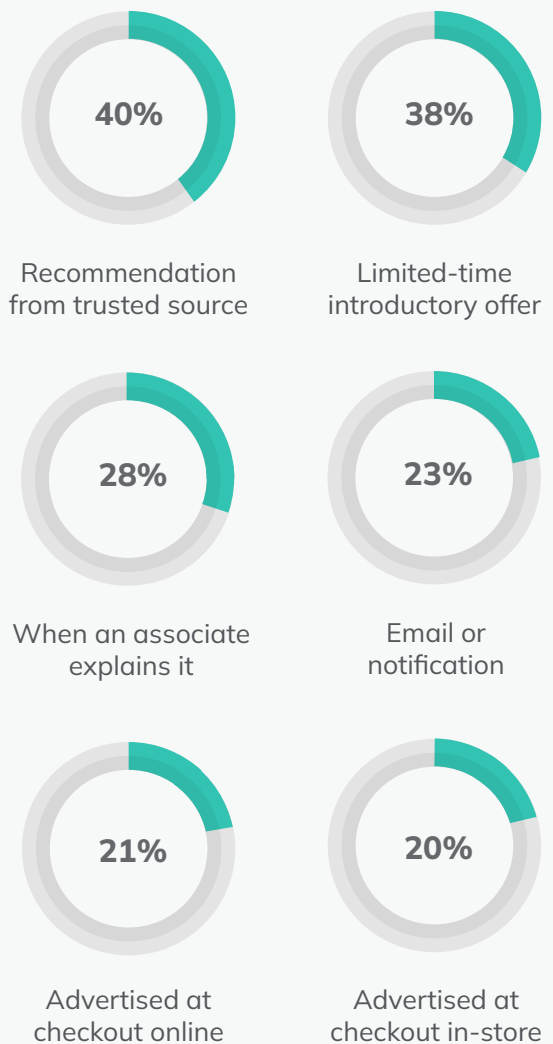
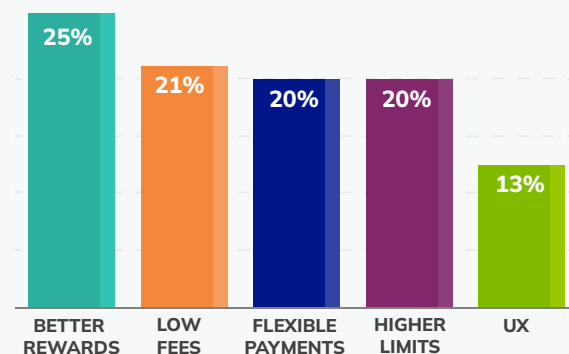


Figure 16: Factors Driving Retail Card Use



## About Concora Credit

Concora Credit is a leading provider of credit solutions designed to expand access and create meaningful financial opportunities for consumers with less-than-perfect credit. Partnering with retailers, financial institutions, and enterprise brands, Concora delivers tailored credit programs that align with how consumers shop, pay, and manage their money.

By combining data-driven insights, flexible underwriting, and seamless integration into the customer journey, Concora helps partners drive acquisition, increase customer lifetime value, and deepen engagement while enabling consumers to build credit and access purchasing power in a responsible way.



We're here  
to help you  
and your  
customers  
**Do More**  
with Credit.

