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**Citation:** Trujillo-Torres, L., Anlamlier, E., Mimoun, L., Chatterjee, L. & Dion, D. (2024). Access-based customer journeys. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 52(1), pp. 24-43. doi: 10.1007/s11747-023-00942-6

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**Link to published version:** <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-023-00942-6>

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## **Customer Journeys in Access-based Platforms**

LEZ TRUJILLO-TORRES

EDA ANLAMLIER

LAETITIA MIMOUN

LAGNAJITA CHATTERJEE

DELPHINE DION

Forthcoming, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*

Lez Trujillo Torres\*, ltruji3@uic.edu, is an Assistant Professor in Marketing at the University of Illinois Chicago, 601 S. Morgan Street - 2209 University Hall - MC 243, Chicago IL 60607, United States of America, +1 510 599 5908, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3463-2834>. Eda Anlamlier, eda.anlamlier@unlv.edu, is an Assistant Professor in Marketing and International Business at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 S Maryland Pkwy BEH 422, Las Vegas, NV 89154. Laetitia Mimoun, lmimoun@escdp.eu, is an Associate Professor in the European Marketing Department at ESCP Business School, 11 Avenue de la République, 75011, Paris, France, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5173-312X>. Lagnajita Chatterjee, lchatterjee@worchester.edu, is an Assistant Professor in Marketing at Worcester State University, 486 Chandler St., Worcester, MA 01602. Delphine Dion, delphine.dion@essec.edu, is a Professor in Marketing at ESSEC Business School, 3 Avenue Bernard Hirsch, 95021 Cergy-Pontoise Cedex, France. The authors thank the Editors, Associate Editor, and three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful guidance throughout the review process as well as the individuals who shared publicly and with the reviewers their experience with Rent the Runway. \*

Corresponding author

Accepted manuscript  
Not copyedited nor formatted  
Use DOI when citing

## Contribution Statement

Our study offers an alternative conceptual model to understand customer journeys in access-based platforms. Access-based platforms struggle to manage customer journeys given (1) customers' extended roles as prosumers in the value chain, (2) interconnected experiences of multiple customers, and (3) instrumental sociality among customers. Drawing from an extensive study on the platform Rent the Runway, we investigate two questions: What is the nature of access-based customer journeys? and How do customers perform these customer journeys?

We make two contributions to research on customer experience management and journey design. First, we expand past customer journey models by illuminating the crucial role of prosumers in some market contexts. We highlight the limits of past models in contexts (e.g., access-based consumption) where firms have limited control over the journey because of systemic dynamics and customer job crafting opportunities that create an important divergence between designed and performed customer journeys. We develop an access-based customer journey model, defined as the experiential process a customer goes through when temporarily accessing goods/services via a platform's commercial intermediation. We showcase the benefits of job crafting in access-based customer journeys for individuals and its potential collective impact, highlighting the unique systemic instability dynamics of access-based platform journeys.

Second, we address managerial concerns, including how to manage access-based customer journeys. Given the systemic and unstable dynamics of access-based journeys and the limited firm control, managers need to be agile in handling customers' job crafting efforts and their impacts on other customer journeys. Platforms must constantly monitor job crafting practices and their collective consequences. Specifically, they must adjust their customer journey design to integrate (eliminate) customer work that creates positive (negative) interdependencies.

## Customer journeys in access-based platforms

### Abstract

Despite the popularity of access-based platforms, the understanding of customer journeys remains anchored in traditional market contexts that overlook prosumers' extended value-chain roles, interconnected experiences, and instrumental sociality in access-based consumption. Using a qualitative study on the access-based platform Rent the Runway, the authors discuss the nature of customer journeys in access-based platforms and showcase how customers perform these journeys. The study reveals two key elements: (1) systemic dynamics, which encompass just-in-time circularity and tightly coupled customer interdependencies, and (2) job crafting, which involves customer work practices that allow pain point avoidance, circulation flow adjustments, and journey stickiness increases. Job crafting can create unpredictable disruptions in other customer journeys and affect systemic flows. This investigation expands research on customer experience management and journey design by developing an access-based platform journey model differentiated from ownership- and service-based platform models, showcasing its systemic instability dynamics, and elaborating how to manage these customer journeys.

**Keywords:** Customer journeys; Access-based consumption; Social interdependencies; Customer work; Job crafting; Sharing economy; Prosumer.

Fashion, music, film, furniture, transportation, office, tools— access-based platforms are developing in many sectors to give customers temporary access to products. Access-based platforms such as Zipcar and Netflix have transformed the customer journey. They create value for customers by helping them select goods; reducing search, decision, enforcement, and monitoring costs; and ensuring that actors meet performance expectations (Perren and Kozinets 2018). Given these perceived benefits, access-based consumption is on the rise and is projected to grow from \$15 billion in 2014 to \$335 billion in 2025 (Statista 2020).

Access-based platforms differ from ownership-based platforms where product ownership is transferred (e.g., when customers purchase a car through the CarMax platform and become solely responsible for the product and its maintenance). Access-based platforms are also different from service-based ones where an intangible benefit is provided to customers, but product ownership remains with a different actor (e.g., the driver remains responsible for the ownership and/or care of the car in platforms that offer driving services such as Uber, Lyft, and Blablacar).

Marketing research uses existing customer journey models (i.e., service-based and ownership-based) to explain customer journey challenges in access-based platform consumption. However, considering the aforesaid differences of access-based platforms, scholars have yet to create a customer journey model that recognizes the unique foundations, opportunities, and challenges of access-based platform consumption. We need to update our theoretical tools to diagnose and solve managerial problems in access-based platform consumption. Specifically, we investigate two research questions: What is the nature of customer journeys on access-based platforms? and How do customers perform these customer journeys?

Three characteristics of access-based platforms require more exploration. First, we contend that access-based platforms struggle to manage customer journeys due to the extended

roles of customers in the value chain (Eckhardt et al. 2019). This is because access-based models often rely on prosumption (Toffler 1980); that is, customer work in the form of “productive activities” (Dujarier 2016, p. 555) situated at “the interrelatedness of consumption and production” (Ritzer 2014, p. 3). For example, the car-sharing platform Autolib expects its customers to return cars to a pre-selected station, at a pre-set time, and in perfect condition so that the next users can immediately access them (Gruen 2017). Thus, customers actively co-produce value by shouldering many tasks that also benefit the platform’s other customers (Dellaert 2019) and, importantly, create exchange value for others (Humphreys and Grayson 2008). In other words, the success of access-based business models is based on the assumption that prosumers behave like professional suppliers/partners.

Second, customer journeys in access-based platforms rely on the interconnected experiences of multiple customers (Perren and Kozinets 2018). That is, the experience of a single prosumer as a customer is connected with and dependent on the experience of other customers. The management of such experiences can be complex in cases of high customer volume, circulated goods scarcity, and fast circulation pace. For example, in car-sharing, customers’ experiences are negatively affected when increasing customer demand jeopardizes car quality, diminishes the availability of cars and parking spots, and challenges the platform’s customer service response time (Gruen 2017).

Third, access-based customer journeys are characterized by instrumental sociality, in which relationships among customers are more individualist and opportunistic (Perren and Kozinets 2018; Rainie and Wellman 2012). Instrumental sociality involves self-interest and the (experienced or anticipated) expectation that other customers will misbehave (e.g., damage the accessed product). It can generate social norms of negative reciprocity (Bardhi and Eckhardt



2012), with perceived immunity from accountability (Sahlins 1972). For example, expecting that others will misbehave, ride sharers might not be careful in keeping the car clean or avoiding small dents and scratches (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012).

To answer our research questions, we adopt a longitudinal, multi-method approach to study Rent the Runway (RTR), a platform that provides short-term access to designer apparel. Our dataset consists of customer and blogger interviews, social media posts, marketing materials, and news articles. We make two contributions to customer experience management and customer journey design research. Our first contribution is to expand past customer journey models by shedding light on the important role of prosumers in some market contexts. In particular, we highlight the limits of past models in contexts (e.g., access-based consumption) where firms have limited control over the journey because of systemic dynamics (i.e., just-in-time circularity and tightly coupled customer interdependencies) and customer job crafting opportunities that create an important divergence between designed and performed customer journeys. In addition, we empirically develop a customer journey model for access-based platform consumption, defined as the experiential process a customer goes through when temporarily accessing goods or services via the commercial intermediation of a platform. We showcase the benefits of job crafting in access-based customer journeys for individual customers and its potential collective impact, highlighting the unique systemic instability dynamics of access-based customer journeys.

Second, we address practical concerns about the management of access-based customer platform journeys. An access-based platform relies on a collection of customer journeys that may produce unexpected collective dynamics. Given the systemic and unstable dynamics of such journeys and the limited ability of the firm to control them, managers must be agile in handling customers' job crafting efforts and their impacts on other customer journeys. Firms need to

constantly monitor customer job crafting and its collective consequences. Specifically, they must adjust their journey design to integrate job crafting that creates positive interdependencies and minimize job crafting opportunities that create negative interdependencies.

## **Theoretical background**

### **Customer journeys**

Customer journeys are the process a customer “goes through, across all stages and touchpoints, that makes up the customer experience” (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, p. 71). Generally, a journey entails a series of stages through which a customer moves in his or her interaction with the company (e.g., from the consideration of alternatives to evaluation, choice, and consumption; Court et al. 2009). During their journeys, customers interact with the firm at myriad touchpoints, only some of which are under the firm’s control (Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

As a construct, customer journeys are ever more central to the marketing field, since a decade of research has demonstrated that properly managing them is beneficial to both the organization and customers (e.g., Court et al. 2009; Hamilton and Price 2019; Homburg et al. 2017; Kuehnl et al. 2019; Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Trujillo Torres and DeBerry-Spence 2019; Siebert et al. 2020). Successful customer journeys are associated with improved bottom lines and key outcomes, such as customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, word of mouth, profitability, and customer lifetime value (Court et al. 2009; Homburg et al. 2017; Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

Customer journeys can be classified in many ways. First, customer journeys can differ on customer goals: acquiring goods, receiving services, or having short-term access to goods. Furthermore, product type and cost also impact the journey such that the journey can be tightly set for standard goods or services, while it will be more open-ended for customizable goods and

services (Følstad and Kvale 2018; Siebert et al. 2020; Wirtz and Zeithaml 2017).

We can also classify customer journeys based on the experience they aim to produce. For instance, research on customer experience management has focused on smoothing customer journeys aiming to enroll customers in predictable experiences leading to “loyalty loops” (Court et al. 2009, p. 102), which ensure retrigger, repurchase, and reconsumption (Homburg et al. 2017; Lemon and Verhoef 2016). In contrast, Siebert et al. (2020) recently proposed a sticky journey model that makes customers’ lives exciting, with a cyclical pattern of unpredictable experiences that increases customer involvement over time in an involvement spiral.

Finally, and of particular interest to this study, the role that customers play in the value chain also shapes distinctly their customer journeys, ranging from traditional consumption (e.g., Wirtz and Zeithaml 2017) where customers “focus on the use value of what they buy” (Humphreys and Grayson, p. 966) to active consumption where customers are dynamically adjusting and/or creating use value for themselves (e.g., Siebert et al. 2020) to active prosumption or co-production where customers generate exchange value for others including firms and other customers (e.g., Humphreys and Grayson 2008) and are situated at the nexus of consumption and production interrelations (Ritzer 2014). Nonetheless, the rising popularity of access-based platforms leads us to extend our understanding of customer journey models.

### **Access-based platforms**

The term “access-based” describes a “technologically enabled socioeconomic system with five key characteristics” (Eckhardt et al. 2019, p. 5): (1) temporary access to market offerings (vs. permanent ownership), (2) transfer of economic value, (3) intermediation by an internet-based platform, (4) expanded role of customer who assumes some supply and demand roles, and (5)

crowdsourced supply in archetypical entities. Access-based platforms create value for customers by helping them select goods; reducing search, decision, enforcement, and monitoring costs; and ensuring that actors meet performance expectations (Perren and Kozinets 2018).

Prior research highlighting the distinctiveness of access-based consumption (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2012; Mimoun and Bardhi 2022) suggests that such consumption challenges the understanding of customer journey management. We contend that access-based platforms struggle to manage customer journeys because of (1) the extended roles of customers in the value chain, (2) the interconnected experiences of multiple customers, and (3) the instrumental sociality among customers.

First, customers actively co-produce access-based platforms' offerings and act as prosumers (i.e., they take on the roles of both consumer and producer; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Humphreys and Grayson 2008). Thus, the access-based customer journey is both a consumption and production journey (Dellaert 2019). Customers may co-design and recommend products, participate in the distribution and sale of products, maintain products, co-produce and share experiences, offer peer support, review products, and innovate (Dellaert 2019). Thus, to ensure its success and optimize value, the platform must consider this dual dimension of the customer journey and ensure that its customers perform all these tasks professionally, following the platform guidelines. Such a just-in-time supply chain involves customers as crucial partners.

Second, access-based exchanges rely on the interconnected experiences of multiple customers, with each customer's actions affecting other customers' experiences (Ciborra 2006). Customers are often responsible for the care of shared resources (e.g., returning products in proper condition, on time, and at the right place). Thus, customer journeys are both connected (Dolbec and Fischer 2015; Perren and Kozinets 2018) and overlapping (Ciborra 2006).

Interconnection among customer journeys can have positive impacts, such as when customers share advice, but it can also be negative, such as in the case of misbehavior (Eckhardt et al. 2019; Schaefer et al. 2016). For example, if a Zipcar customer returns a damaged car, subsequent customers' experiences will be spoiled (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). Moreover, managing the interconnected experiences of multiple customers becomes more complex and riskier when the volume of customers is high, and the pace of circulation is fast. Mismanagement of circulation can lead to disappointing customer journeys.

Third, access-based exchanges are characterized by instrumental sociality (Rainie and Wellman 2012). In instrumental sociality, the experiences of a single customer can shape and constrain the experiences of other customers, and social influences can benefit some customers more than others, in line with the perspective that social influences are not an isolated environmental factor of the customer experience (Verhoef et al. 2009). While access-based platforms can create value by organizing and facilitating systemic social interactions among customers (e.g., fostering communities, customer review systems), managing instrumental sociality becomes a challenge in a business model that requires cooperative behaviors to create "value outcomes for participants in the network" (Figueiredo and Scaraboto 2016, p. 510).

These characteristics of access-based consumption shape customer journeys because access-based platforms have limited control over customer experiences, and quality control remains the greatest challenge for platforms. Quality control becomes an essential dimension of the customer journey, as some of the production functions are delegated to customers (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Perren and Kozinets 2018). We mobilize the literature on social interdependence and customer work to provide a better understanding of the nature, opportunities, and challenges of access-based customer journeys.

### **Social interdependencies**

We frame the interconnections in access-based customer journeys as a matter of social interdependence (Johnson and Johnson 1989). This long-standing theory argues that “social interdependence exists when the outcomes of individuals are affected by each other’s action” (Johnson and Johnson 2005, p. 287). Positive interdependence occurs “when the actions of individuals promote the achievement of joint goals” and negative interdependence “when the actions of individuals obstruct the achievement of joint goals” (Johnson and Johnson 2005, p. 287). We also label as “effective” the actions that increase a customer’s chance of achieving a goal and as “bungling” the actions that reduce it (Deutsch 1949).

While not using the lens of social interdependence, past literature on customer journey has noted that interdependencies can emerge among customers, during reflexivity observed in practice continuity (Akaka and Schau 2019) and notably due to shared time in service contexts. Interdependencies in service contexts emerge from the simultaneity of service delivery and copresence of customers in the same service setting. Indeed, service customers are served at the same time and the crowd can impact the customer journey. It has both positive (e.g., excitement and fun) and negative (e.g., wait time, atmosphere) impacts (Gelbrich 2010).

Yet, interdependencies differ from the ones emerging in access-based contexts. First, services are usually based on face-to-face interactions: the presence of service providers and social pressure among co-present customers tend to limit disruptions and render issues’ detection and service recovery easier (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1991; Ostrom et al. 2021). Service employees can also control and adapt the service encounter (Ostrom et al. 2021) producing a more flexible customer journey management. In contrast, operating at a distance limits the

control, flexibility, and recovery abilities of access-based platforms (Lawson et al. 2016).

Second, interdependent others are co-present in services (Ostrom et al. 2021) generating social pressures (e.g., courtesy, conformity) and allowing for (at least partial) blame attribution to the customers in case of disruption. In contrast, interdependent others in access-based contexts are distant (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2012) leading to a more individualistic experience and blame being attributed to the known party (i.e., platform). This shows the complexity of managing access-based interdependencies which are extensive and crucial to successful journeys.

Optimal access-based journey management thus requires mostly positive interdependencies (i.e., all customers engage in effective actions at all times). In such an optimal arrangement, customers are driven by the joint goal for all journeys to unfold satisfactorily and their awareness of this goal. Yet, we suggest that this level of cooperation will be limited considering that customers, because of the anonymity of and distance to other customers using the platform, will perceive their journeys as an individualist effort when they are instead a cooperative effort. Considering that engaging in effective actions is not necessarily in each customer's self-interest, optimal journey management may be unachievable. We investigate the implications of these assumptions in our findings but first, we mobilize the literature on customer work as a lens to investigate presumption in access-based journeys.

### **Customer work and job crafting**

Prior research has established that access-based customers act as prosumers (Eckhardt et al. 2019) and emphasized the key role of prosumers in access-based customer journeys (Dellaert 2019). Customer journey scholars note some evidence of presumption, in particular in service contexts, but prosumers' activities are usually limited to the consumption step of the journey

(e.g., as they coproduce the service experience) and under the close supervision of the firm (e.g., through the presence of service employees and/or technology (Schaeffer et al. 2015).

In contrast, in access-based contexts, prosumption is involved in all steps of the journey, at the nexus of both consumption and production (Ritzer 2014), and the platform usually lacks the ability to directly supervise prosumption activities (Dellaert 2019; Eckhardt et al. 2019). As a result, we suggest that the extent and nature of prosumption in access-based customer journeys are unique and lead us to carefully consider the roles of prosumers in such journeys.

We frame the prosumer role in access-based customer journeys through the lens of customer work. Customer work refers to all “the productive activities carried out by consumers, supervised by the suppliers for their profit, in the market economy” (Dujarier 2016, p. 555). It ranges from self-service in which customers produce for themselves with tools supplied by the firm (e.g., self-check-in counter), to collaborative co-production in which customers freely help companies develop products and services (e.g., crowdsource product ideas), to organizational work that regroups indirectly productive activities that help customers problem solve and navigate journeys (e.g., search the best price, cancel a subscription) (Dujarier 2016).

In recent years, customer work has been increasing both quantitatively (i.e., customers are made responsible for an increasing number of tasks) and qualitatively (i.e., customers work not only for their own benefits but also for the company’s) (Azzari et al. 2021). This is due to customers becoming “systematically integrated into corporate structures, much as if they were employees” (Rieder and Voss 2010, p. 4). Customer work helps firms create and capture unintended value through, for example, collective deal communities (Campbell and Schau 2019). It can also enhance customer satisfaction, involvement, and empowerment (Burroughs and Mick 2004; Norton et al. 2012). Nonetheless, customer work also leads to higher levels of



dissatisfaction in cases of service failure (Heidenreich et al. 2015) and can be deemed exploitative, as it increases the burden that customers are asked to carry (Cova and Dalli 2009).

The nature of access-based journeys, especially those characterized by platforms' limited control and customers' extensive co-production responsibilities, gives customers much "latitude to define and enact the journey" (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001, p. 179). As a result, customers may engage in job crafting, or "the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work" (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001, p. 179). Job crafting is a modality of customer work that aims to improve individuals' consumption outcomes by personalizing an organization's or a service provider's knowledge and know-how to their specific circumstances (Azzari et al. 2021). Job crafting mobilizes both content expertise (i.e., technical expertise usually possessed by service providers) and context expertise (i.e., situational expertise usually possessed by the customer) (Azzari et al. 2021). In access-based contexts, the usual assumption as to who possesses which type of expertise may not hold, considering the major co-production role assigned to customers.

In sum, past literature has reflected on what customers as prosumers have to do (i.e., customer work). For example, Dellaert (2019) proposes a conceptual framework to describe the wide diversity of tasks that access-based prosumers perform (e.g., co-design and recommend products, participate in distribution and sales, co-produce and share experiences, offer peer support, review, and innovate) and their impact on customer motivation and engagement. We lean on this literature to shine a light on how prosumers perform these tasks –i.e., job crafting– to navigate access-based customer journeys. In doing so, we can propose a new understanding of how the customer journey works. We are particularly interested in the forms that job crafting takes in customer journeys and its implications for access-based journey management. Exploring

job crafting in access-based customer journeys also allows us to answer a recent call for a better understanding of the central role of unpredictability in customer journeys (Siebert et al. 2020).

## **Method**

We investigate access-based customer journeys by taking a longitudinal multi-method approach to examine RTR, a platform that facilitates access-based consumption of fashion in the US. The US fashion rental market was valued at \$1.1 billion in 2020 and expected to reach \$2.5 billion by 2023 (Pagano 2021). RTR is an ideal context to examine access-based customer journeys for three reasons. First, RTR is one of the oldest and fastest-growing access-based platforms. Second, it relies on crucial customer interdependencies that sustain the circulation of products in just-in-time systems. Third, Perren and Kozinets (2018) show that the key function of some access-based platforms, in particular hub platforms that centralize the exchanges between actors like RTR, is protecting customers from risk and ensuring customer trust in exchanges.

## **RTR**

Founded in 2009, RTR rents apparel and accessories from over 700 designer brands to more than nine million users, primarily women. When RTR went public in 2021, it was valued at \$1.7 billion (Nishant 2021). RTR charges a fee per product rented and offers various memberships with different levels of rental access. Members can rent four items at a time and swap four, eight, or 16 items in a month (see Web Appendix A). At the time of our study (and until the end of 2020), RTR also had a popular “Unlimited” option in which members could swap any number of items in a month. While operating mostly online, RTR had a retail footprint in select locations. However, it closed its stores in August 2020 when the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic hit

the market. RTR still collaborates with a variety of brands to facilitate access to and drop off of rented items, including WeWork, West Elm, and Nordstrom department stores.

In an RTR customer journey, customers select items to rent on the website depending on items' availability, delivery options, brand, retail price, and comments and pictures of other customers. The selected items are dry-cleaned and delivered via UPS in reusable garment bags. Alternatively, in the past, customers were able to select items at one of the RTR stores. If the fit is a problem, the company guarantees to send a replacement overnight. Customers can keep items for a short (e.g., one night) or long (e.g., indefinitely) time. They can return rented items directly to an RTR store or by using the pre-paid shipping label or the drop-off boxes located at third-party stores in the major cities. Customers can also buy items at discounted prices.

### **Data collection**

We collected (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews with customers and customer-bloggers, (2) customer social media posts, (3) RTR marketing material, and (4) news media articles (see Web Appendix B). This combination of sources provided a variety of perspectives (e.g., customer, brand, industry, public discourse) on access-based customer journeys (Spiggle 1994).

First, we collected customer data (interviews and social media posts) to help us assess how customers experience and resolve issues related to the risks and interdependencies that characterize RTR customer journeys. We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews (13 customers, 4 customer-bloggers, and 1 follow-up) with current and previous RTR users (see Web Appendices C and D for details). We used convenience and snowball sampling to identify customers and Google Blog Search for bloggers. Participants were all women (reflecting RTR's customer base) and aged 34 on average. Representative of RTR users at the time of the study,

most of the participants had “Unlimited” memberships even if they had used other options (e.g., “Update,” “Reserve”). Participants answered questions about their fashion habits, membership, motivations, and RTR use; positive and negative RTR experiences; and strategies to deal with problems. Bloggers were also invited to share how they decided to create content about RTR, how they generated blog content, and the reactions they received from readers.

Second, we complemented our interview data with archival data from blogs and social networking sites covering the period 2012–2019. Having multiple sources of customer-generated content helped us assess various customer journeys (e.g., first-time buyers, different memberships, brand loyalists, offline vs. online users). We identified 38 unique customer-bloggers through Google Blog Search. We selected bloggers by their popularity, experience with RTR, and disclosure of non-financial compensation by RTR. This dataset of 78 blog posts, including text, pictures, and comments, amounted to 744 single-spaced pages. We also collected 210 Instagram posts using online data collection platforms for the period 2016–2017 and scraped 1,509 Twitter posts using the program R and the hashtags #renttherunway, #rtrrunlimited, #myrtr, and #rentherunwayunlimited from August to January 2019. We also collected Twitter posts about three RTR competitors (Le Tote, Gwynnie Bee, and The Black Tux) to gain a broader understanding of this industry. Collectively, the social media data amounted to 330 KB.

Third, we gathered RTR marketing material to access the platform’s perspective and business model evolution (e.g., evolution of RTR’s mission and narratives and of product categories, features, and services) over 2009–2021. This includes press releases, company websites, and social media links to awards, news coverage, podcasts, and ads (43 items). We also transcribed seven interviews with RTR founders from podcasts and YouTube videos.

Fourth, we gathered news media data in the form of podcasts, videos, and articles from

major circulation newspapers and magazines covering 2009–2021 to embed our analysis of the phenomenon in its historical, sociocultural, and competitive context. Included were 1,168 news media articles from major circulation newspapers and magazine articles (e.g., *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Cosmopolitan*). We also collected 528 articles from trade journals (*Advertising Age*, *Business of Fashion*, *Financial Times*) for the years 2013–2020. We obtained the articles using the keyword “Rent the Runway” in the LexisNexis and ProQuest databases.

### **Data analysis**

We analyzed the data following a hermeneutical approach through an iterative movement between data and theory (Thompson 1997). We manually coded and analyzed the data to understand patterns of narratives and meaning across different individual customer journeys (e.g., customers, customer-bloggers, co-founders) and institutional values, actions, and policies (e.g., company, industry, market, media). Triangulating across different sources (public data vs. private interview) and viewpoints (customer/firm/media) helped us refine our interpretation.

First, we used descriptive coding and identified issues, solutions, and stakeholders. Next, we applied the customer journey framework, coding for journey steps and emotions related to journey outcomes. Web Appendix E is a map of RTR’s customer journey. Finally, we abstracted our analysis into third-stage coding, identifying systemic dynamics that shape and constrain the journey, how customers practice job crafting, and what the impacts of job crafting are. Web Appendix F summarizes our coding process and Web Appendix G provides additional quotes.

### **Systemic dynamics**

In this first findings section, we explore the systemic nature of access-based platform customer

journey. Systemic dynamics cover two elements that differentiate customer journeys in access-based consumption: just-in-time circularity and tightly coupled customer interdependencies.

### **Just-in-time circularity**

Just-in-time circularity in access-based consumption involves timely, cyclic flows among customers with the assistance of platform intermediation. In contrast with traditional just-in-time production systems in which specialized firms coordinate to manage the complex flow of goods, customers of access-based platforms play an essential prosumer role in ensuring the just-in-time circulation of goods. This includes a multitude of customer work tasks, such as maintaining product quality (i.e., undamaged and clean enough so that a quick and minimal cleaning allows product recirculation), bagging and tagging (i.e., identifying and using the right tag and container when shipping back products), identifying the right return option (from a diversity of service providers offering drop-off points and postal service), and depositing the product correctly (i.e., as set by the guidelines of membership to avoid any delays and extra fees).

Just-in-time circularity becomes more complex with the ever-increasing number and variety of touchpoints involved. To facilitate products' access and return, RTR has increased and diversified available touchpoints. It introduced brand-owned physical touchpoints (in addition to existing transporter-owned touchpoints such as UPS), first via owned stores and then third-party-owned physical touchpoints, by developing diverse partnerships (e.g., with WeWork, West Elm, Staples, and Nordstrom department stores) to facilitate just-in-time circularity. Customers enjoy the facilitated circulation offered by brand-owned touchpoints, as indicated in this quote:

If you have a store nearby, go to it. It's kinda nice to be able to go to the store to check stuff out and try some clothes on. The store drop-off is really easy as well, it puts the items right back into your account, so you can order that same day and you don't have to wait for

them for UPS to drop them back off. (Angel, previous “Unlimited” member, interview)

Yet the multiplicity of touchpoints can also lead customers to be uncertain about how to access or return products or even make errors when doing so, leading to customer dissatisfaction and circularity failure. For example, if a customer returns a product at the wrong touchpoint, its circulation will be delayed, leading to a circularity failure and the need to find a substitute product for the next customer awaiting that item to start a new journey.

In addition, RTR has created a wide range of speeds of just-in-time circularity by adding membership options. For example, with the premium plan “Unlimited,” members could access and return up to four products as often as they wanted (in contrast the traditional plan allows customers to access one product at a time and return it after four to eight days). The premium plan was intended to speed up circularity by maximizing the frequency of exchanges and therefore avoiding the unvalued retention of products. However, because it also allowed customers to keep the most appealing products for an unlimited time, this membership could also slow down circularity, increasing the retention of high-quality items by a few customers. By allowing “Unlimited” members to keep products indefinitely, RTR indirectly encouraged customers’ bungling actions that have the potential to lower other customers’ chances of achieving their journey goals and the likelihood of future exchange value for the platform.

Maintaining just-in-time circularity is paramount for the platform to optimize its customers’ journeys. RTR must manage just-in-time circularity failures that can threaten its system (and the journeys of its customers) and exchange value generation, when shared product (e.g., product quality deteriorates severely enough that a product cannot be circulated) or shared time (e.g., when customers delay the return of products) become a problem. We find that RTR must compensate quickly when these flows are disrupted by prosumers’ inability to accomplish

one of their customer work tasks:

I originally picked out this black [dress] for the rehearsal dinner, and then this amazing dress [blogger emphasis] for the wedding. Unfortunately the girl who had that dress before me did a little too much partying (can't blame her), and they [RTR team] were unable to fix the dress in time for me to wear it—but luckily, they sent a few backups, and it all worked great! (The Golden Girl Blog, July 13, 2015)

The blogger's journey was linked to the completion of another customer's journey, and she expected the product she selected to flow in a timely manner from this customer. Yet the product was damaged, preventing its subsequent circulation. When successful, as in the above quote, RTR adds redundancy to the system. That is, it duplicates critical activities and/or components to increase the journey's reliability by deploying substitutes that can be sent to customers in a timely manner to replace irreparable products and avoid customer dissatisfaction. However, adding redundancy is an unreliable approach that can often fail, given that customer perceptions of product quality reflect taste and temporal boundaries that are beyond the platform's control. Also, customers may lack the reflexivity (Akaka and Schau 2019) necessary to motivate customer work that creates value (e.g., garment care).

### **Tightly coupled customer interdependencies**

Tightly coupled customer interdependencies refer to journey interconnections among customers such that one customer's actions and/or outcomes are directly linked to other customers' actions and/or outcomes (Johnson and Johnson 2005). Tight coupling (Perrow 1984) means that multiple journeys are highly dependent on one another. When customers retain products for a long time, they decrease the number of products in circulation and reduce the product assortment available



for future exchange value creation. When customers damage products, they reduce product assortment or quality. When customers circumvent or mismanage returns, they slow down and/or make delivery to the next customer uncertain and jeopardize future exchange value generation.

An ideal access-based journey management requires mostly positive interdependencies and assumes that customers are aware that they must cooperate to ensure a satisfactory journey for everyone. However, we find that this level of cooperation is not realistic or feasible, considering that customer interdependencies in access-based customer journeys are characterized by two aspects: limited social accountability and low substitutability of customer actions.

First, because they feel limited social accountability (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012), customers have little motivation to cooperate or lack concern for the consequences of their actions on subsequent customer journeys. In other words, customers are not concerned with and possibly not even aware of the just-in-time circularity dynamics they might disrupt when engaging in bungling actions. For example:

I'm like spilling coffee on myself all the time. And also ... there were definitely some things where like some seams were ripped or different stuff like that. So I didn't really feel too bad because I figured that they [RTR], they like must build that into ... the plan especially. And there was [*sic*] definitely times where I was sort of worried about, especially at first being penalized for [the damage], but then kind of after a while when nothing bad happened, then they never rebuffed me. (Anna, interview)

Anna's bungling actions damage product quality (e.g., stains, tears), potentially disrupting the journey of the customer who expects to access the product next. Yet, she does not even seem aware of the future customer with whom her journey is highly interdependent.

The lack of direct interactions between customers sequentially accessing the same

product causes limited social accountability. Social interactions with and awareness of other customers would be needed to create social obligations and responsibility (Deutsch 1962) during products' just-in-time circulation. With no social interaction with other customers, they are rarely thought of or only in an abstract manner—anonymous and distant. This lack of social obligation allows customers to be careless with accessed products and to assume that RTR will manage any issues they might cause by deteriorating product quality (e.g., substitute, clean, repair). Indeed, customers' only worry is often self-oriented (i.e., being fined/sanctioned) and towards use value that generates utility for themselves as customers (Humphreys and Grayson 2008). This results in limited social accountability that fosters bungling actions with the potential to disrupt systemic dynamics, an important distinction that complements Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) findings.

Second, the low substitutability of customer work means that certain customer actions are irreplaceable and cannot be easily addressed or fixed within just-in-time circularity. Thus, much of just-in-time circularity's success is beyond RTR's control and depends on every customer performing effective actions. Yet customer work can result in clumsy mistakes or bungling actions that negatively affect customer interdependencies and reduce customers' chances to achieve their journey goals. The following quote evidences this low substitutability:

I mistakenly dropped off the package on time at a USPS drop bin. But I was one letter off.

A few days later, [RTR] sent me an email claiming my package never arrived and that the company charged a \$50 late fee to my account and would do so every day the package didn't show up.... [T]he company's director of communications told *The Daily Beast* that it charges the 200 percent fee to cover the cost of the dress and to pay back other renters who would've received the dress and didn't. "If someone loses a piece of clothing, we have to purchase that piece all over again. The reason [the cost] is doubled is because we have to

refund whoever we rent it to next,” she said (Mandy Velez, blogger, 2018, *Daily Beast*)

This shows how customer work is irreplaceable in ensuring that sequential journeys unfold and in creating exchange value for the platform. Here, a customer’s bungling action (i.e., error in return provider) affected not only her journey (i.e., high post-purchase dissatisfaction) but also, and more importantly, that of other customers (i.e., they had to be offered substitutes/refunded).

In summary, access-based customer journeys are defined by systemic dynamics resulting from just-in-time circularity and tightly coupled customer interdependencies. Successful journey management relies on a just-in-time circulation of products in which customers play a crucial prosumer role. The platform must manage circularity failures by implementing redundancies, but these often remain inefficient. Moreover, systemic dynamics rely in large part on customer interdependencies that are characterized by limited social accountability and low substitutability. The former dissuades cooperation among customers, while the latter limits redundancy options. To maintain effective systemic dynamics, customers have much work to do, but the platform has limited control over how customers perform their job. This tends to encourage customers’ job crafting, which can enhance systemic dynamics but also contribute to their instability, as we show next. In other words, job crafting is both influenced by and influences systemic dynamics.

## **Job crafting**

Access-based customer journeys require a significant amount of customer work to function effectively. In their role as prosumers, customers have many opportunities for job crafting. In this second findings section, we identify job crafting practices of access-based customers before explaining the individual benefits and then the collective outcomes of these practices.

### **Job crafting practices**

We find that access-based customers deploy three job crafting practices to personalize their journeys and enhance their experiences: co-opting shared resources, stretching the platforms' policies to the extreme, and reconfiguring circulation flows. Job crafting requires effort, focus, intent, and perseverance from customers.

**Co-opting shared resources.** First, customers co-opt a wide array of shared resources, including products, logistical devices, and touchpoints. To co-opt shared resources, customers mobilize their content expertise, specifically their knowledge of the available resources in circulation and how to access them, to use these resources in a manner unintended or unpredicted by the platform. For example, Harper, a blogger and premium “Unlimited” member, co-opts a shared resource to enhance her journey:

If you get your first 4 pieces and simply don't like one; you can just package it up and return it by itself while you keep the other three pieces... There is an amazing hack that was a game changer for me. When you first start to return one item in a box, with shipping that you pay... you'll keep the fabric bag and your pre-addressed return label for future use. Once RTR received the item you returned at your own ground shipping expense, they'll intake it, you'll pick a replacement piece and they will ship it out in another fabric bag. Now you have 4 pieces, two fabric shipping bags and two prepaid return address labels... [giving] you significantly more flexibility with your exchanges and the ability to get more styles each month with less downtime and little/no waiting on shipments.

(September 11, 2017, blog)

Harper co-opts a logistical device (i.e., a shipping bag) to maximize the number of products she can access by virtually unbundling them, enhancing along the way her experience and use value. She does so by mobilizing content expertise (e.g., rules around paid vs. free shipping) that allows

her to leverage transporter-owned touchpoints (e.g., shipping services) and obtain additional benefits (e.g., minimizing wait, receiving more styles). Harper demonstrates that such efforts involve learning the ins and outs of a complex just-in-time process and designing a personalized workaround that yields transformative results in her journey. Unlike some market settings in which supervision is required to job-craft (Azzari et al. 2021), access-based customers can do so independently, effectively, and unpredictably without support or feedback from the platform and other customers. While the impact of co-opting resources on systemic dynamics varies (e.g., a bag as a logistical device vs. a shared product expected by another customer), these are important elements in customer journey management given these resources are transformed by prosumers from collective “means of prosumption” (Ritzer 2014, p.13) to individual means of consumption.

**Stretching the platform’s policies to the extreme.** Customers also deploy job crafting efforts by stretching the platform’s policies to the extreme. When doing so, prosumers often deploy context expertise, that is, the “knowledge, skills, and capabilities” (Azzari et al. 2021, p. 529) that surround the consumption context, in particular its rules, policies, and norms. For example, as noted previously, RTR allows customers who subscribe to premium options to keep their rented products for unlimited periods. While such a policy helps recruit customers, it also means that customers such as Victoria, a blogger, can keep their rented products indefinitely:

One of my favorite times to use RTR is during the winter, when I would hold on to incredible coats (some with a retail value of well over \$2,000) for weeks, or even a whole month, at a time. Coats are expensive, so it saved me a ton of money to not have to buy any all season, and allowed me to experiment with more out-there designs (faux fur! Color blocking! Giant puffers!) instead of my usual, safe, boring black coats. (August 29, 2019, *Elle* magazine article)

By continuously and selectively following a policy for keeping products for a significant time, she skillfully saves money and enjoys expensive and diverse products (i.e., creates use value for herself), and deliberately removes those products from just-in-time circulation. Stretching the platform's policies to the extreme is effortful and requires customers to selectively maximize occasions when a permissive policy works best for them. Unlike co-opting shared resources, stretching a platform's policies to the extreme involves customers deftly navigating a path envisioned by the platform and strategically exhausting exchange value and creating use value.

**Reconfiguring circulation flows.** A third way customers engage in job crafting is by reconfiguring circulation flows. Here, customers deploy both content and context expertise to rearrange or extend platform processes and their ambiguities. Unlike the other two job crafting practices, reconfiguring circulation flows can create both use value and positive interdependencies with exchange value potential for the platform and other prosumers. Reconfiguring circulation flows can highlight the potentiality of the prosumer role and benefits. Bloggers Luna and Hailey explain how they reconfigure the distribution logistics process:

If you don't have a reliable mail person and/or where you live might be a little [sketchy], you can have these packages delivered anywhere, anytime. I have so many addresses saved in my account that customer service at RTR probably think I'm bonkers. I've had my items delivered to hotels... residential addresses, work places, friends (July 20, 2017, blog)

Luna and Hailey navigate third-party-owned touchpoints to maximize their access to RTR services and adapt circulation flows to their hectic lifestyles. By increasing the breadth of private (e.g., residential addresses, friends' homes) and public (e.g., workplaces, hotels) touchpoints, customers avoid pain points around the delivery and return of RTR products. In other words, they forge their own product distribution process and add versatility that matches their busy

lifestyles by making the most of the platform policies and ambiguities. In doing so, they add use value. Notably, recognizing the potential future exchange value creation, RTR ended up formally adopting this delivery/return strategy at select hotels and coworking spaces. Thus, prosumer-driven processes, along with customers' context and content expertise in job crafting practices, can be recognized and incorporated as legitimate innovations within systemic dynamics. This finding expands our understanding of job crafting as a form of customer-driven engagement (Harmeling et al. 2017), as it shows that customers can empower and motivate themselves (and others when job crafting practices are shared) to contribute to the platform's marketing and productive functions without the deliberate encouragement of the firm. Implicitly, customers also motivate and empower the platform to engage in further customer engagement marketing.

By mobilizing their extensive expertise, customers deploy job crafting practices to personalize their access-based journey. In doing so, they bypass, circumvent, and even hack the shared resources and policies that were set by the platform to optimize its just-in-time circularity. Next, we detail how job crafting practices may affect access-based customer journeys at both the individual (i.e., creating use value) and collective level (i.e., creating exchange value).

### **Individual outcomes of job crafting**

Creatively deploying job crafting practices, customers generate three specific use value outcomes for themselves: pain point avoidance, circulation speed adjustment, and journey stickiness increase. While these outcomes are presented as independent benefits, they can overlap and co-occur. Additionally, each outcome can be the result of engaging in one or multiple practices. In some instances, one practice can also lead to one or multiple outcomes.

**Pain point avoidance.** Job crafting allows customers to avoid pain points that reduce or

impair the efficiency of their individual access-based customer journeys. Customers' experience and content expertise help them identify and avoid pain points and problems they may face in their journey. For example, Clara, a current "Unlimited" member and past blogger, explains how, over time, she devised a creative routine to access only new items:

Sometimes... you get something that has been worn a lot, it will smell funny, or it will not be in great shape, it looks like it has been over laundered and so I don't like that but I just try to avoid getting old stuff, like an outfit has too many reviews and orders, then I just know it has been worn too many times.... This isn't true anymore but they used to put all their new clothes on at 10 a.m. on Saturday, so I knew that I needed to have open spots at Saturday 10 a.m. on Saturday; so I would set a reminder to myself and log in, so I would be guaranteed, essentially, to get clothes that would come with tags on them. (Interview)

Clara mobilizes her knowledge of platform policies (context expertise) to maximize her access to new products by identifying the platform timing of their release. These items have not previously been associated with tightly coupled customer interdependencies. This helps her avoid most problems associated with the damaged products she has encountered before. In a sense, by co-opting new resources (i.e., brand-new items) and stretching the platform policies to the extreme, the early stages of Clara's journey (up to product consumption) resemble those of an ownership-based journey in that she avoids up-front customer interdependencies. In other words, Clara's pain point avoidance enhances the efficiency of her own journey.

This example of obtaining brand-new items demonstrates how long-term customers maximize journey efficiency by crafting a "deal" whose value exceeds their expectations (Campbell and Schau 2019). While these customers may not have initially "desire[d] to outsmart firms" (Campbell and Schau 2019, p. 43), these practices certainly grant them efficiency



advantages over other customers, somewhat loosening up the tightly coupled interdependencies that bind them and an unequal distribution of positive journey outcomes.

**Circulation speed adjustment.** Job crafting also helps access-based customers adjust to the speed of just-in-time circularity, essentially magnifying use value outcomes in their journey along the way. While customers who avoid pain points usually aim to rectify a journey, those who adjust circulation speed do not necessarily face journey obstacles. Rather, adjusting speed allows them to extract as much use value as possible for themselves, by significantly increasing their access to the quantity and quality of shared products through all job crafting practices.

First, customers can adjust circulation speed by accelerating circulation flow. Mariah, for example, illustrates how she maximizes multi-channel touchpoints (i.e., co-opting shared resources) to accelerate circulation flows around her journey and extend product access limits:

Previously you could rent as many changes [as] you wanted, so you were highly incentivized to get [clothes] back as quickly as possible. I live near the [RTR] store. I was trying to get pieces and I could hand drop them off, and immediately as I was walking away from the store, I would be ordering my next clothes. (Interview)

Customers such as Mariah adeptly mobilize their content expertise to seamlessly make the most of the platform's multi-channel affordances. They know when and how to return pieces through a home or store pick-up, third-party-owned retail (e.g., Nordstrom, WeWork), and other non-RTR partner locations (e.g., hotels). They minimize waiting times when accessing products and fend off shared time threats (i.e., optimizing just-in-time circulation) and competition threats from other customers who may be interested in the same products.

Second, customers can also adjust circulation speed when decelerating circulation flow, for example, by stretching the platform's policies to the extreme (see Victoria's prior quote) to

retain products over long periods and optimize the goods they can access (i.e., higher-quality, more expensive, more versatile, and rarer goods). Meredith, for example, states, “I rented a piece that I kept for several months and it got marked down more and more until I finally bought it for around 65% off.” This shows that access-based customers can actively “sharpen” or “flatten” the just-in-time circularity for their benefit and self-enhance circulation in their journeys.

**Journey stickiness increase.** Job crafting helps customers make their access-based journey sticky (i.e., more unpredictable and enjoyable) and maximize their fun and excitement. In contrast with the original sticky journey model (Siebert et al. 2020), access-based customers do not always rely on the platform for stickiness opportunities. Rather, they self-initiate job crafting practices to add stickiness to their own customer journeys. We find that customers view job crafting as creative and often playful experiences that add an exciting, surprising, or novel dimension to their journey. For example, blogger Victoria informs her followers how she pursues a reconfigured process to discover new products (i.e., reconfiguring circulation flows):

If you scroll to the bottom of every item on the app, you’ll see a tab that says “More from this Designer.” Do not ignore this option! It will show you pieces that never even come up on the algorithm. RTR is wonderful for discovering and falling in love with brands you haven’t tried before, and searching this way will get you looking at pieces you’re already bound to like because you loved something from the brand before. (August 29, 2019, blog)

Victoria job crafts to beat RTR algorithms which, in her opinion, convey limited information. She has developed a creative and non-obvious information and decision-making process to find valuable products. Job crafting in such ways increases customers’ fun and satisfies their curiosity in a system full of mysteries (i.e., product variety) that can be unraveled. Personalizing their journeys to make them more enjoyable or ludic makes customers more engaged in performing

customer work. This extends the conception of job crafting beyond managing or escaping the burdensome customer work imposed by service providers (Azzari et al. 2021).

In summary, job crafting tends to optimize efficiency and satisfaction at an individual level by helping customers avoid pain points and obstacles, adapt circulation flows (i.e., shared product, shared time) to their needs, and add excitement to their journeys. As a result of their job crafting, customers do not perform their journey as designed. This creates journeys that are difficult for the platform to predict and thus fraught with potential systemic disruptions.

### **Collective outcomes of job crafting**

We find that job crafting, while beneficial at the individual level, can also affect systemic dynamics within an access-based system. Job crafting can be disruptive and destabilize customer journeys and the platform at the collective level—even more so when the practices are amplified publicly. Yet, at times, systemic dynamics can be beneficial and incorporated as an innovation by the platform to create positive outcomes for other customers.

**Disruption of systemic flows.** We find that job crafting can disrupt systemic flows in two ways. First, it can affect just-in-time circularity and other customers' journeys. For example, when customers slow down circulation flow by retaining products indefinitely, they also negatively affect product assortment within the system (i.e., shared product). Job crafting can cause localized (i.e., when a single customer journey is affected) or systemic (i.e., when several journeys are impaired) flow disturbance because of unplanned pressures on the platform. Job crafting can loosen tightly coupled interdependencies, as it increases slack among interdependent customers and forces the platform to expedite substitutes to maintain just-in-time circularity.

Second, job crafting can decelerate product circulation (e.g., reduce the speed of

shipping, delivery, and returns' processing) and affect shared time. Thus, it disrupts just-in-time circulation and customer journeys collectively. Bloggers Luna and Hailey offer an example of this outcome resulting from their reconfiguring of circulation flows:

Thursday delivery gives you an extra day to return – Here's the deal.... If you rent Thursday to Sunday you really get an extra day (unless you live in NYC, DC, Chicago, San Fran, or the L.A. area – places where there are RTR brick and mortar locations) to return your items because UPS isn't open on Sunday.... Just remember to get your package to UPS by noon on Monday morning or else you'll pay a late fee. (July 30, 2017, blog)

By prioritizing transporter-owned over brand-owned touchpoints, customers such as Luna and Hailey can creatively push the temporal boundaries of the platform distribution process and of their own experiences. While this type of job crafting creates extra use value for individual customers, it is likely to disrupt systemic dynamics and threaten future exchange value. For example, it can accelerate the deterioration of product quality, given that one extra day with the product can increase wear and tear and the likelihood of damaged parts. It can also slow down product circulation by concentrating the redistribution, shipment, and delivery of products around a certain day of the week and creating customer service pressures.

The tensions between individual and collective outcomes shed light on how conflicts emerge in access-based contexts when many customers alternate between their customer and prosumer roles to personalize their experience. Extant research indicates that these conflicts arise from a norm mismatch between customers (e.g., when customers adopt either transactional or communal norms) (Scaraboto and Figueiredo 2022). However, we find that these conflicts arise from the low control that the platform exerts over job crafting practices. Thus, such conflicts also happen in a highly intermediated context in which the platform sets the rules, little interpersonal

customer engagement occurs, and exchanges are transactional, rather than only occurring in contexts with low intermediation and high consociality (e.g., forums; Perren and Kozinets 2018).

**Impact of crafting practices' amplification.** While platforms such as RTR may not involve high consumer consociality (Perren and Kozinets 2018), we find that job crafting ideas and practices are spread widely, particularly in spaces controlled by customers. For example, many customers share their job crafting practices with relatives and friends and on social media:

I would definitely be happy to share whatever tips I have with other users.... Anyone I knew personally who joined, I would always like to tell them what I was doing or ... tips or tricks I learned. (Anna, paused "Unlimited" member, interview)

Amplifying job crafting practices can have two far-reaching consequences. On the positive side, amplification can support the platform's overall strategy and increase exchange value creation for customers and the platform. For example, amplification can optimize shared products' availability by helping customers preserve quality (e.g., prevent items from being over-worn, repair damaged products) so that products remain in circulation for longer periods. In addition, it can contribute to the acceleration of product circulation (i.e., enhance shared time) when it helps speed up product redistribution (e.g., cleaning, delivery, return). As noted earlier, when Luna and Hailey publicly amplified the use of multiple delivery addresses, including hotels, they helped improve the journey efficiency for other customers. Positive impacts are amplified for all stakeholders when distribution versatility is introduced in the platform's journey design, strengthening customer satisfaction and loyalty and creating value for the platform.

On the negative side, amplifying job crafting practices commonly has adverse effects and can significantly impair the platform's overall strategy and exchange value creation for customers and the platform. As indicated previously, job crafting practices are likely to disrupt

systemic flows by directly or indirectly creating delays, reducing the available assortment of shared products, or damaging shared products. When occurring in isolation, the damage remains limited; yet, when job crafting practices are significantly amplified by their diffusion on social media, they can cause a great deal of damage to the platform and its users.

The amplification of job crafting reveals how customers guide one another along journeys that are not fully envisioned or sanctioned by the platform and weaken the platform's ability to remediate failures. This can threaten the exchange value creation process and even the entire business model if job crafting becomes significantly amplified.

In summary, job crafting can have both positive and negative collective implications for exchange value. It can enhance access-based customer journeys and the platform's overall strategy but also significantly speed up and magnify disrupted systemic flows. These distant customer connections around practices and outcomes contrast with Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) access-based customers who distrust and do not seek connectivity with one another or the brand (see also Fournier and Lee 2009). We find that access-based customers have learned to trust one another to manage and mitigate risks arising from tightly coupled customer interdependencies.

## **Discussion**

### **Customer journeys in access-based platforms**

As a starting point, our study highlights three elements of access-based consumption that have received limited attention in existing customer journey models: (1) customers' extended roles as prosumers in the value chain, (2) interconnected experiences of multiple customers, and (3) instrumental sociality among customers. As a result, a crucial contribution of our work is theorizing a journey model in access-based platform consumption that accounts for these

elements and extends the growing conversation on access-based customer journeys in our field (see Figure 1 for a summary of our findings).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Specifically, our model demonstrates that access-based platforms have limited control over customer journeys because they rely on just-in-time circular flows of goods among prosumers, customer journeys that are interdependent, and extensive customer work. This model contrasts with existing market-based journey models that assume the firm's control of the journey, either because the firm relies on linear flows of goods that circulate from the firm to customers (i.e., ownership-based journeys) or because it co-creates services with individual customers in real-time (i.e., service journeys) (e.g., Court et al. 2009; Ostrom et al. 2021). Thus, in existing market-based journey models firms can guide customer interdependencies and opportunities for customer work. We discuss three key theoretical aspects of our access-based customer journey model: the unpredictability of customer job crafting, unreliability of customer interdependencies, and divergence between designed and performed journeys (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

**Unpredictability of customer job crafting.** Prior research has noted that access-based customers must perform many roles and respect specific firm expectations (Dellaert 2019; Gruen 2017). We build on this and draw attention to the assumption in access-based business models that customers will behave like professional partners. For example, RTR expects its customers to return clothes to a preselected touchpoint, at a certain time, and in perfect condition so that the next users can quickly access them. Our investigation, however, advances that the characteristics of access-based platform journeys (e.g., platforms' limited control and customers' extensive co-production responsibilities) give customers much "latitude to define and enact the journey"

(Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001). To be clear, our investigation does not suggest that job crafting needs to be eliminated. Rather, we underscore that it introduces unpredictability in a model that depends on consistent customer behavior. Thus, customers engage in job crafting, or “the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work” (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001, p. 179). Notably, this job crafting perspective complements the prosumption lens (Humphreys and Grayson 2008; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010, Dellaert 2019), which focuses on the resources supplied by customers. Indeed, our perspective calls attention to the work and burden put on customers when they are made responsible for key journey tasks (Azzari et al. 2021; Cova and Dalli 2009). It also emphasizes the expected contribution of prosumers to the creation of exchange value for the platform and other customers (Humphreys and Grayson 2008). Concretely, our investigation introduces the following new insights into the unpredictable nature of job crafting in access-based customer journeys.

First, our investigation asserts that job crafting in access-based platform journeys is more extensive than in other contexts. Prosumers do not simply aim to cope with or avoid the burdensome customer work imposed by providers (Azzari et al. 2021). We show more diverse motivations, as job crafting efforts enable customers to personalize their journeys to make them more efficient and/or stickier. Consider, for example, how some of our informants try to circumvent the platform’s algorithms to discover new brands and products. While job crafting by definition aims to enhance customer outcomes, we evidence a diversity of positive outcomes beyond improved customer well-being (Azzari et al. 2021). The extensiveness of job crafting also allows us to broaden the understanding of stickiness, or the quest for excitement, in customer journeys by evidencing alternative pathways that prosumers follow to generate stickiness. Specifically, while Siebert et al. (2020) show how firms create stickiness, we show



that stickiness can be generated and controlled by prosumers independently of the firm's journey design. Indeed, we find that by deploying an array of job crafting practices, prosumers experience surprise and unpredictability along their journey, which leads to new opportunities for stickiness. While this can enhance loyalty to the firm, it can also lead customers to non-envisioned journey paths that the firms cannot guide or manage.

Second, we demonstrate that job crafting allows different types of customers to develop expertise such that the balance of technical knowledge is no longer in the favor of the firm. This includes satisfied and dissatisfied customers and new and loyal users, who use their content and context expertise to adapt to the circumstances they face (i.e., problems and opportunities they encounter in handling their multiple jobs). Consider, for example, how some of our informants manipulate RTR's and its partners' schedules to maximize the quality and duration of accessed products. The ability of job crafting to unpredictably tilt the balance of technical expertise toward customers, especially loyal ones, broadens the extant literature that assumes technical expertise to be in the hands of providers (Azzari et al. 2021). Thus, customers can proceed as envisioned by the firm but also deviate and challenge such vision.

Third, we demonstrate that job crafting in access-based platform journeys has both individual and (often unintended) collective consequences that can be both positive and negative. Indeed, while customers who personalize their access-based journeys through job crafting often enjoy individual benefits in the form of use value, the unpredictability of their job crafting can disrupt other customers' journeys. To understand the collective consequences of job crafting, we elaborate next on the extensive customer interdependencies between customers.

**Unreliability of customer interdependencies.** We theorize that customer interdependencies in access-based platform journeys are ubiquitous (i.e., they concern all

touchpoints), and crucial to a successful journey. These interdependencies are also unreliable because they can generate major disruptions to other customers' journeys and because the firm's distance and just-in-time circulation constrain flexibility and limit opportunities for recovery. These theoretical insights extend and complement our understanding of ownership- and service-based platform journeys. In ownership-based journeys, interdependencies tend to be limited to specific touchpoints (e.g., retail experience) and in terms of means (e.g., only expressed via social media and reviews), limiting interdependencies' impact on other customers' journeys (e.g., Lemon and Verhoef 2016). In service-based journeys, interdependencies are more frequent because customers' co-presence in the service setting can generate disruptions to other customers' journeys (e.g., wait time, atmosphere) and opportunities (e.g., excitement, fun) (Gelbrich 2010). Yet, interdependencies can be also more controllable because service providers' presence during the service encounter means that they can detect any disruptions early and engage in service recovery by adapting the service interaction (e.g., providing flexibility, customization, just-in-time support) (e.g., Ostrom et al. 2021).

Another significant issue our study raises in access-based journeys is the tacitness of customer interdependencies, as evidenced by customers' lack of awareness of or concern for the ways they can disrupt other customers' journeys. Lacking any apparent social interactions, customers are only aware of interdependencies with other customers in an abstract way, which constrains their social accountability or social obligation to these distal others (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012) and highlights the need of consumer reflexivity for value creation (Akaka and Schau 2019). Rather than being obvious and explicit as collective endeavors, tasks involved in access-based customer journeys are taken as individualist efforts of use value creation, and prosumption and/or cooperation with other customers can be perceived as a cost. This limited

awareness of or concern for others is particularly problematic in a system that relies on systemic dynamics for the just-in-time circulation of goods among customers. The tacitness and unreliability of customer interdependencies, then, complement existing perspectives indicating that the social pressure among co-present customers tends to limit disruptions in service encounters despite existing interdependencies (Parasuraman et al. 1991; Ostrom et al. 2021).

By advancing the understanding of the unreliability of customer interdependencies in access-based customer journeys, our study also sheds light on the influence of distal customer journey companions (here, other customers having accessed the product before). The impact of distal others (i.e., those who are temporally and/or physically distant from the customer or even unknown) has been neglected in prior research (Hamilton et al. 2021). Yet, they “have an increasingly powerful impact as technology allows one’s circle of influential others to expand beyond geographic proximity” (Hamilton et al. 2021, p. 76). With this research, we answer Hamilton et al.’s (2021) call to emphasize social influences as a central component of customer journey models and depart from traditional perspectives (Court et al. 2009; Lemon and Verhoef 2016) that tend to focus on individual decision-making and reduce social influences as one of many environmental factors. These new insights complement previous works that tend to view distal others as a source of information during the information search and alternative evaluation phases of the customer journey (Campbell and Schau 2019; Hamilton et al. 2021). Specifically, we uncover a less purposeful influence of distal others that customers experience even when they do not seek it. Indeed, systemic dynamics, particularly when they lead to just-in-time circularity failures, are imposed on customers and may negatively shape their journeys.

**Important divergence between designed and performed journeys.** Central to the access-based customer journey are the notions of customer job crafting and customer

interdependencies that create an important divergence between designed and performed customer journeys. Together, the unpredictability of customer job crafting and the unreliability of customer interdependencies create systemic and unstable dynamics that disrupt the customer journeys of other customers in multiple ways and thus destabilize access-based platforms. In contrast, divergence from the designed journey is the exception in ownership-based journeys and tends to remain at the level of a single customer (Norton et al. 2012). In addition, thanks to the simultaneity of service production and consumption, performed journey's divergence in service settings can be simultaneously orchestrated by the provider and customer, allowing the service firm much more control and the ability to limit such divergence (Ostrom et al. 2021).

However, in access-based contexts, different customer journeys are interconnected through systemic dynamics. This means that when one journey fails to follow the sequence designed by the firm, it affects the other journeys to which it is connected. A single journey's deviation from the planned path may significantly disrupt many other journeys. These disruptions can be localized if they only affect the next customer in the circular flow of distribution (e.g., slight delay in returning a product); they can also be massive if customers share their context and content expertise on social media and if many customers begin using similar crafting practices. Notably, these disruptions can induce both exchange value destruction and creation. We find that job crafting practices can destroy exchange value for the platform and future use value for the customers who bear the negative consequences of other customers' personalized journeys. Yet, some job crafting practices can also be beneficial at the collective level when they align with the firm's strategy.

These findings theoretically qualify Siebert et al.'s (2020) model by evidencing some downsides of stickiness, especially in contexts that rely on extensive customer work. While we

confirm Siebert et al.'s findings that stickiness creates excitement, which drives customer involvement and loyalty, we also show that the unpredictability inherent to stickiness can be dangerous and potentially value-destroying. When customers are in charge of creating the surprise, novelty, and excitement leading to stickiness, they can do so in unpredictable ways (for the firm) that can have negative effects on interdependent journeys. When the firm has limited control over the customer journey, as in most access-based business models, job crafting that increases stickiness may also result in bungling actions. This means that some customers' attempts at creating stickiness for themselves may give rise to negative surprises for others due to customer interdependencies and job crafting.

### **Managing access-based customer journeys**

Finally, we develop recommendations to manage access-based customer journeys (see Table 2). Platforms must orchestrate a multitude of customer journeys involving job crafting efforts that may produce unexpected systemic dynamics. Given their instability and the firm's limited control, managers must work to direct job crafting efforts and reduce their negative impact.

**Developing journey agility.** As noted, access-based platforms have limited control over the way customers perform their jobs during their journeys. As access-based customer journeys are often customized at the individual level and unstable at the collective level, developing managerial agility is necessary to help improve the platform's performance.

An essential step is to carefully and regularly monitor job crafting to identify novel practices and their impact. The goal is early detection of any deviations with either disruptive or value-enhancing collective impact. This should help identify both pain points and innovations.

Depending on the crafting practices identified and their collective impact, managers can

decide whether to make the journey smoother or stickier. When the platform must make logistics and operations simpler and more predictable (e.g., when facing new customer surges), managers should make the journey smoother, by introducing barriers to prevent bungling job crafting practices and by integrating effective crafting into normal business operations. When the platform wants to revitalize its customer involvement, managers should make the journey stickier by encouraging job crafting innovations that do not disrupt or even enhance systemic dynamics. Platforms can also promote active reflexivity that motivates customer work (Akaka and Schau 2019). For example, they can enhance stewardship of accessed items by creating ‘You Wore It Well’ reminders that bring memories of prior access occasions and incite new rentals. These reminders can highlight well-kept garments that came without delay or repair need. In short, rentals reminders and enhanced stewarding can bolster interdependencies’ reliability.

**Avoiding systemic failures.** Access-based platforms must avoid systemic failures which often encourage customers’ job crafting. To do so, one strategy is to weaken interdependencies that cause large-scale disruptions such as discouraging customers from holding onto popular products for long periods. Weakening negative interdependencies that create large-scale disruptions improves the agile management of job crafting and interdependencies.

Another managerial strategy is to incite customer accountability, which increases positive interdependencies. Incentivizing cooperation and increasing social responsibility by emphasizing the role of customers in just-in-time circulation are essential to encourage customers to be more conscientious about the impact of their choices on distal others within the platform network. These strategies can stabilize systemic dynamics and enhance other customers’ circulation experiences. For instance, platforms could include a personalized mention of the next customer when sending reminders about the time a product is due or stress the importance of an

undamaged product to other customers. To increase consumer reflexivity, platforms can also provide firm- or user-generated information about products' provenance and usage stories (e.g., occasion). This personalized content can not only enhance the product's perceived value but may also incite good stewardship and increase rental. These strategies foster effective actions by making interdependencies more salient to customers, which can help prevent systemic dynamic failures. Our work also stresses the importance of the platform's market partnerships for its systemic health. Platforms can showcase partners' value adding activities to help avoid systemic failures by inciting partner accountability. For example, they can share customer stories that tout the partner value (e.g., just-in-time delivery, how some minor repairs were artful).

Finally, while redundancy processes have their own drawbacks, they are also important to mitigate situations that might lead to systemic failures. Understanding redundancy processes' limitations (e.g., taste variability, individuality) is necessary to better plan these processes. Our findings suggest that customers are attracted to popular products, which often creates supply issues such as long waiting periods or delivery delays due to damaged products. By planning for popularity-based redundancies, managers can avoid these failures within the overall system.

In summary, in managing access-based customer journeys, companies should focus primarily on the agile management of just-in-time circulation and supplement this with strategies for avoiding systemic failures. To do so, they should manage redundancies and increase social accountability as a secondary support for maintaining systemic dynamics.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

### **Avenues for future research**

This study is subject to limitations that generate avenues for future research on access-based customer journeys. First, our findings are anchored in multiple perspectives thanks to our

qualitative approach. Thus, while they provide a starting point to understand job crafting and customer journeys in access-based platforms, future research could improve our model's generalizability and refutability. For instance, our data focus on access-based platforms with high intermediation and low consociality (Perren and Kozinets 2018). The extent to which our results generalize to other platforms can best be revealed through further research. Future research can study job crafting in contexts when different degrees of intermediation are provided and within customer-to-customer supply chains. Another direction is exploring non-platform contexts in which brands' control mechanisms vary, such as free home trials (e.g., Warby Parker eyeglass). Such studies could yield different ways in which job crafting emerges and impacts journeys.

Research could also examine whether customers' perceptions of product, service, or platform change depending on their job crafting practices, intensity, and outcomes. For example, future research could explore questions such as: Does heavy job crafting lead to exhaustion or professional status? Does the ability to practice job crafting increase customer loyalty? Will customers whose job crafting is successful be more satisfied than those whose crafting fails?

Furthermore, scholars can study how access-based journeys are impacted by customers' engagement with the platform (e.g., reacting to company-created content). For example, a high level of positive customer engagement might motivate customers to feel a part of the platform community and be more cognizant of other customers' needs. However, negative/limited customer engagement might motivate customers to be more selfish in their journeys.

Lastly, research can explore the ethics of job crafting as a way to limit its negative impact. Conveying job crafting with negative collective outcomes as harmful to community members or the environment might reduce customers' tendency to engage in such practices.



**Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Accepted manuscript  
Not copyedited nor formatted  
Use DOI when citing

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**Table 1** Key differences between customer journeys on ownership-based, service, and access-based platforms

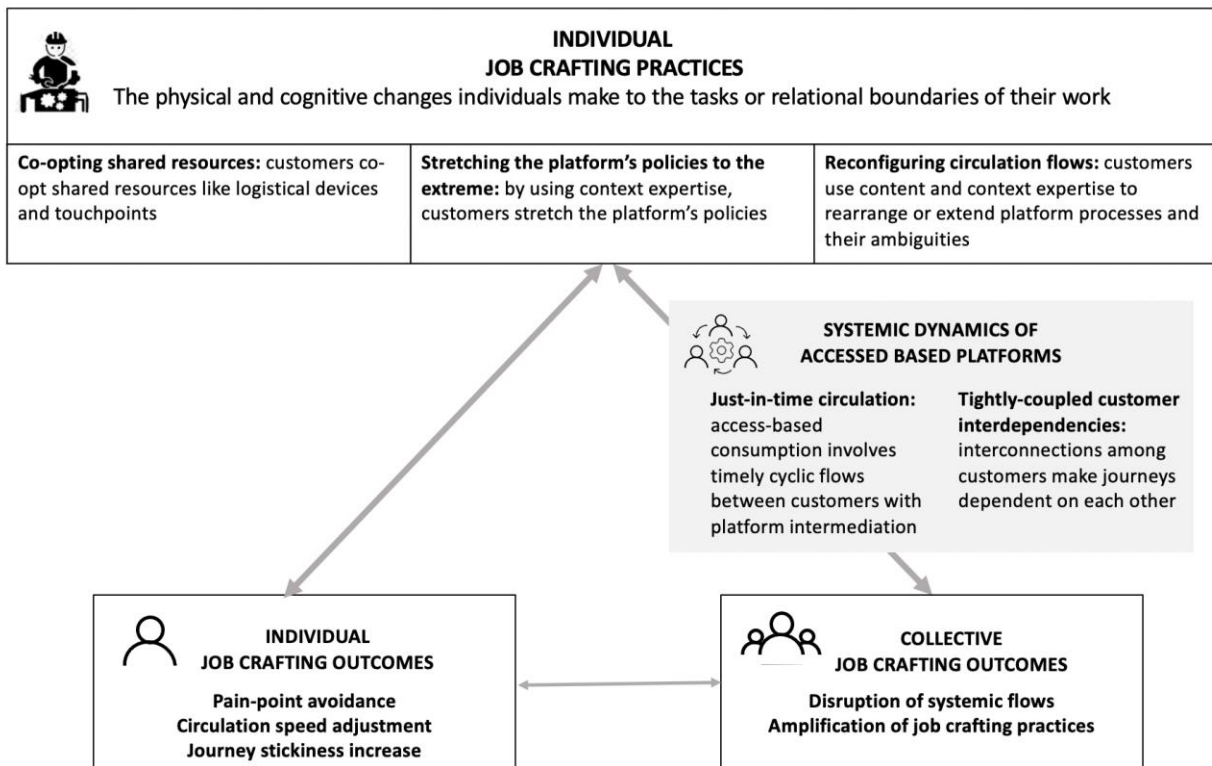
	<b>Customer Journeys on Ownership-based Platforms</b>	<b>Customer Journeys on Service-based Platforms</b>	<b>Customer Journeys on Access-based Platforms</b>
<b>Circulation of goods</b>	Linear flows of goods that circulate from platform to customers	Simultaneous production and consumption on platform, with real-time customer feedback	Just-in-time circular flow of goods orchestrated by a platform among distant customers
<b>Firm's control over the journey</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Extensive firm control: deviations from the designed journey are the exception</li> <li>- Firms manage customer journeys to make them either predictable (smooth journey) or unpredictable (sticky journey)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Considerable firm control: presence of providers and social pressure among co-present customers limit deviations</li> <li>- Firms can manage (e.g., via staff presence) and adapt (e.g., via customization, just-in-time support) the service encounter for early detection of disruptions and service recovery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited firm control: deviations from the designed journey are common and may generate massive disruptions</li> <li>- Firms have limited control (due to distance) and limited flexibility (due to just-in-time circulation) restricting opportunities for recovery in case of disruption</li> </ul>
<b>Customer work and job crafting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exchange value relies at most on minimal customer jobs</li> <li>- Customers have few occasions to job craft and create exchange value for the firm and others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exchange value and production of service rely on some customer jobs</li> <li>- Customers have limited occasions for job crafting (e.g., interacting with providers, determining service duration)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exchange value and circulation of goods among customers rely on multiple customer jobs</li> <li>- Customers have many job crafting occasions to personalize their journeys</li> </ul>
<b>Interdependencies between customers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interdependencies might concern specific touchpoints (e.g., website, retail) and have limited means (e.g., social media)</li> <li>- They do not create major disruptions to other journeys</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interdependencies emerge from the simultaneity of service delivery and customers' copresence in setting</li> <li>- They can create disruptions to other customers' journeys (e.g., atmosphere, wait time,) and opportunities (e.g., fun)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interdependencies are extensive, ubiquitous, and crucial to a successful journey. They concern all touchpoints of the journey</li> <li>- They can create major disruptions to other customers' journeys</li> </ul>
<b>Designed vs. performed journeys</b>	Customers mostly perform journeys as designed by the firm	Performed journey's deviation is simultaneously orchestrated by the provider and customer	Journeys are unpredictable because customers can perform their journey differently from the firm's design

**Table 2** Managing access-based customer journeys

Issues	Solutions
<b>Developing agile customer journey management</b>	
<b>Monitoring job crafting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Provide a typology of customers based on their crafting practices</li> <li>-Evaluate their impact on other customers' journeys</li> <li>-Use customers' journey deviations to identify additional services and improve the platform</li> </ul>
<b>Adapting job crafting opportunities to strategic needs</b>	<p><u>Making journeys smoother to simplify logistics and operations (e.g., new customer surge)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Prevent opportunities for job crafting to smooth the customer journey</li> <li>-Integrate effective job crafting into normal business operations</li> <li>-Introduce preventive measures against bungling job crafting</li> </ul> <p><u>Making journeys stickier to revitalize its customer involvement</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Maintain experiential involvement by managing job crafting opportunities</li> <li>-Implement contests to crowdsource job crafting ideas and reward/showcase ideas that do not disrupt systemic dynamics</li> </ul>
<b>Avoiding systemic failures</b>	
<b>Developing positive interdependencies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Incentivize cooperation and increase accountability by personalizing other sequential customers to achieve a more reliable just-in-time circularity</li> </ul>
<b>Increasing redundancy efficiency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Manage redundancy limitations (esp. for taste-dependent products) by gaining external legitimacy for substitutes choices (e.g., made by fashion influencers)</li> </ul>



**Figure 1** Access-based platform customer journeys



**Web Appendix A** RTR plan offerings (plans as of March 2021)

<b>Plan types</b>	<b>RTR reserve</b>	<b>Unlimited swaps</b> (formerly known as Unlimited)	<b>Up to 4 items per month</b> (formerly known as RTR Update or 1 swap)	<b>Up to 8 items per month</b> (formerly known as 2 swaps)	<b>Up to 16 items per month</b>
<b>Launch date</b>	2009 (since the launch of the company)	2016 (discontinued in 2020)	2017	2020	2020
<b>Price of renting</b>	Item specific	\$159/month	\$89/month	\$135/month	\$199/month
<b>Retail price range</b>	Max \$3,500	Max \$3,000	Max \$350 (basic closet access)	Max \$3,500 (full closet access)	Max \$3,500 (full closet access)
<b>Frequency of exchange</b>	One item exchange for one time (4 or 8 days)	Unlimited exchanges of four items	4 items in a month	Two exchanges of 4 items in a month	Four exchanges of 4 items in a month
<b>Occasions</b>	Special events such as weddings and proms	Special events, work, every day, workout, lounge wear, home décor, children's apparel	Special events, work, every day, workout, lounge wear, home décor, children's apparel	Special events, work, every day, workout, lounge wear, home décor, children's apparel	Special events, work, every day, workout, lounge wear, home décor, children's apparel

Source: [www.renttherunway.com/plans](http://www.renttherunway.com/plans), [www.renttherunway.com/reserve](http://www.renttherunway.com/reserve) (last accessed March 1, 2021).

**Web Appendix B** Data overview

Type	Dataset	Purpose
<b>Customer interviews</b>	18 interviews (Appendix B) - 12 non-blogger customers - 5 customer bloggers - 1 follow-up - 136 pages of single-spaced text	To understand customers' experiences, issues, and solutions during access-based customer journeys
<b>Customer social media posts<sup>1</sup></b>	Customer-blogger posts (Appendix C) - 78 blog posts with threads - 744 pages of single-spaced text Social networking sites posts: - RTR (1,509 Twitter posts, 210 Instagram posts) - Le Tote (134 posts) - Gwynnie Bee (141 posts) - The Black Tux (993 posts)	To examine various customer journeys and understand customer share complaints and tips/best practices
<b>RTR marketing material</b>	Press releases, website materials, social media posts, advertisements - 43 items (110 pages of single-spaced text) Secondary interviews conducted by major media channels (e.g., CNBC, <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> ) - 7 interviews with RTR's founders (42 pages of single-spaced text)	To understand access-based customer journeys from a company perspective, focusing on how RTR addresses customers' complaints/suggestions
<b>Trade journals and news media articles</b>	Trade journals - Examples: <i>Advertising Age</i> , <i>Business of Fashion</i> , <i>Chain Store Age</i> - 528 articles (LexisNexis & ProQuest databases) - 665 pages of single-spaced text (2013–2020) Newspapers and magazine articles - Examples: <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> , <i>The New York Times</i> , <i>Cosmopolitan</i> - 1,168 articles (LexisNexis database) - 3,319 pages of single-spaced text (2009–2020)	To understand historical, industry, and sociocultural influences that shape access-based customer journeys

<sup>1</sup> The temporalities for Instagram and Twitter data are aligned with data-scraping limitations imposed by these platforms. For example, Twitter only allows the scrapping of prospective data, and Instagram disabled parts of its application programming interface following the 2018 Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal.

**Web Appendix C** Primary interview participants' details

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>RTR services used</b>	<b>User status</b>	<b>Blogger</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Start year with RTR</b>	<b>Interview duration (min.)</b>
<b>1st round, April 2019–October 2019</b>								
Emily	34	Private equity investor	RTR Reserve RTR Unlimited	Previous	No	Chicago	2016	30:24
Madison	35	Marketing manager	RTR Reserve RTR Unlimited	Current	No	Chicago	2012	19:57
Lisa	35	Technology industry professional	RTR Reserve RTR Unlimited	Current	No	San Francisco	2016	25:26
Nicole	34	Sales and marketing director	RTR Reserve RTR Unlimited	Current	Yes	Jacksonville, FL	2008	50:01
Kylee	31	Marketing and public relations professional	RTR Reserve RTR Unlimited RTR Update	Previous	Yes	Baltimore	2014	34:36
Alison	35	Entrepreneur and public speaker	RTR Unlimited	Current	Yes	Los Angeles	2017	21:46
Katie	33	Corporate professional	RTR Reserve RTR Unlimited	Current	No	Northeast part of US	2017	30:24

Mia	35	Human resource professional	RTR Unlimited	Previous	No	US	2014	21:25
Clara	37	Financial journalist	RTR Unlimited	Current	Yes	New York City	2016	31:05
<b>2nd round October 2020–December 2020</b>								
Clara (follow-up)	39	Manufacturing business owner	RTR Unlimited	Current	Yes	New York City	2016	33:07
Tiffany	29	Casino marketing professional	RTR Reserve	Previous	No	Las Vegas	2015	18:13
Angel	32	Music technology professional	RTR Unlimited	Previous	No	Los Angeles	2018	22:15
Courtney	41	Software consultant and catering company owner	RTR Unlimited	Previous	No	Chicago	2011	44:48
Sofia	40	Entertainment professional	RTR Unlimited	Current	No	US	2009	39:16
Luisa	40	Attorney	RTR Reserve	Previous	No	Las Vegas	2015	14:29
Olivia	33	Program manager at a technology company	RTR Studio Services	Previous	No	Sacramento, CA	2011	34:09
Jackie	24	Finance professional	RTR Unlimited	Paused	No	New York City	2018	24:20
Anna	29	Full-time graduate student	RTR Unlimited	Paused	No	Los Angeles	2018	49:44

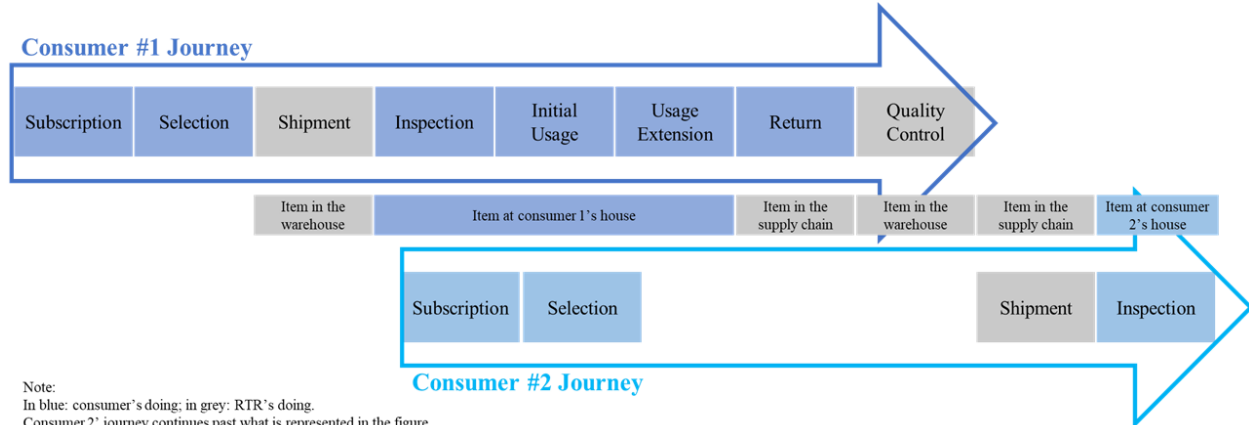
**Web Appendix D** Blogger details

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>RTR services used</b>	<b>User status at the time of posting</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Years of RTR coverage</b>
Victoria	Magazine director	Unlimited	Active user	New York City	2018
Harper	Marketing consultant	Reserve and Unlimited	Active user	San Diego	2017
Nicole*	Marketing executive in fashion industry	Unlimited	Active user	Jacksonville, FL	2017
Emma	Realtor	Pro Membership	Active user	Monterey, CA	2017
Penelope	Blogger	Unknown	Unknown	NC	2017
Ava	Developmental professional	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	2017
Nora	Project manager	Not applicable	Canceled	Unknown	2018
Sophia	Unknown	Pro Membership	Active user	Unknown	2016
Amelia	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	2017–2018
Lillian	Unknown	Unlimited	Active user	Unknown	2018
Abigail	Unknown	Unknown	Active user	Austin	2015
Clara*	Financial journalist	Unlimited	Active user	New York City	2017
Elizabeth	Blogger	Unknown	Active user	Chicago	2018
Luna	Fitness instructor	Unlimited	Active user	San Diego	2016
Alison*	Blogger	Unlimited	Active user	Los Angeles	2017
Grace	Blogger	4-day rental	Active user	Unknown	2014
Chloe	Business owner	Unknown	Active user	Wilmington, NC	2016
Kylee*	Unknown	Unknown	Active user	Washington DC/Baltimore	2018–2019
Zoey	Unknown	Unlimited	Active user	Unknown	2017
Hannah	Blogger	Unlimited	Active user	Washington, DC	2019
Addison	Business owner	Unlimited	Active user	Los Angeles	2020
Natalie	Blogger	Unlimited	Active user	Dallas	2019
Brooklyn	Photographer	Unlimited	Active user	Minnesota	2019
Leah	Data analyst & finance expert	Update-1 month trial	Cancelled	Unknown	2019
Stella	Unknown	Unlimited	Active user	New York	2019
Audrey	Unknown	Unlimited and Update	Cancelled	New York	2019

Violet	Product designer	Unlimited	Active user	San Francisco	2019
Claire	Blogger	Unlimited	Active user	Seattle	2019
Lucy	Business owner	Unlimited	Active user	New York	2019
Sam	Blogger	Update	Unknown	Unknown	2019
Maya	Writer	Unlimited	Cancelled but hopes to restart	Philadelphia	2020
Alexa	Graduate student	RTR 1-Swap	Cancelled	San Antonio	2020
Alice	Photographer	Unlimited	Active user	Oklahoma	2020
Ruby	Unknown	Unlimited	Active but plans to cancel	Washington, DC	2020
Cora	Unknown	Unlimited and Reserve	Paused	Sacramento, CA	2020
Alyssa	Blogger	Unlimited	Active user	New York City	2019

\* This blogger was also interviewed.

## Web Appendix E Customer interdependencies and the RTR access-based journey



We provide an overview of how customer journeys intersect in this web appendix by showing the interdependencies between two customers (C1 and C2). In this example, C2's journey has already begun before C1's journey ends and is dependent on the product rented by C1. That is, C2 has already selected the product before its return by C1 and awaits the product after RTR's inspection and cleaning. If C1 returns the product later than planned, loses it, or damages it, it becomes unavailable to C2 whose journey is consequently delayed or impaired. RTR might also carry out less-than-ideal inspection and cleaning, thus sending a product that is not properly cleaned or with unacceptable wear and tear. This can also disrupt C2's journey, as C2 may return the product without wearing it. Thus, the actions of previous users and RTR create a domino effect that can enhance or destroy the next user's journey.



## Web Appendix F Coding process

<b>First-order codes</b>	
Platform issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Product (e.g., quality, selection, fit)</li> <li>- Brand (e.g., trust, reputation)</li> <li>- Process (e.g., availability, delivery, return)</li> <li>- Policies (e.g., fines, membership system)</li> </ul>
Platform solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Understanding (e.g., platform policies, delivery process/timeline, brands and fit)</li> <li>- Planning (e.g., requesting/preparing backups)</li> <li>- Managing (e.g., identifying differences between website, store, and mobile app, using stores and drop-off locations)</li> <li>- Communicating (e.g., communicating with the platform and with other users)</li> </ul>
Stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Users: one-time users, members, past users</li> <li>- Company: brand, founders, customer service, salespeople</li> <li>- Influences: media, competitors</li> </ul>
Rhetorical justifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Smart consumption, sustainability, efficient use of space</li> <li>- Style, endless wardrobe, generation Z, social media culture</li> <li>- Women entrepreneurship</li> </ul>
<b>Second-order codes</b>	
Stages of journeys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pre-purchase stage: word of mouth from friend or colleague, receiving discounts/coupons to try the service</li> <li>- Early experiences: trying different membership options, exploring new brands, mastering the platform's affordances</li> <li>- First crises: encountering ordering/delivery/fit/return issues, problem solving, understanding the degree and severity of RTR punishments</li> <li>- Repeated experiences: interacting with RTR community, learning from other users, sharing tips with others, generating personal usage patterns, being recognized as an expert/power user</li> <li>- Exiting the journey: downgrade or stop using the service</li> </ul>
Emotions related to journey outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive: fun, proud, confident, communal</li> <li>- Negative: selfish, disappointed, frustrated, upset, panicked</li> </ul>
Platform disruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supply chain issues</li> <li>- Product availability issues</li> <li>- Product quality issues</li> <li>- User satisfaction issues</li> <li>- Membership updates and user reactions</li> <li>- Loyalty</li> <li>- Platform reputation</li> <li>- Platform valuation</li> </ul>
<b>Third-order codes</b>	
<i>Systemic dynamics</i>	
Just-in-time circularity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Timely, cyclic flows among customers assisted by the platform</li> </ul>

	intermediation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multitude of customer tasks</li> <li>- Variety of touchpoints</li> <li>- Different modes of access and circulation pace (one-time rental vs. membership)</li> <li>- Platform created redundancies to problem-solve</li> </ul>
Tightly coupled customer interdependencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Journey interconnectedness in terms of product availability, quality, and circulation pace</li> <li>- Limited social accountability and cooperation</li> <li>- Bungling actions</li> <li>- Low substitutability of customer work</li> </ul>
<i>Job crafting</i>	
Job crafting practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Co-opting shared resources</li> <li>- Stretching the platforms' policies to the extreme</li> <li>- Reconfiguring circulation flows</li> </ul>
Individual outcomes of job crafting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pain point avoidance</li> <li>- Adjusting circulation speed</li> <li>- Increasing journey stickiness</li> </ul>
Collective outcomes of job crafting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Disrupted systemic flows</li> <li>- Amplified practices and impacts</li> </ul>

## Web Appendix G Additional illustrative quotes

<b>Systemic Dynamics</b>	
Just-in-time circularity	<p>“@RenttheRunway so I emailed last night about my dresses, which were both ripped, for next day replacements and no one has gotten back to me. I guess I just don’t have a dress now?” (Twitter, August, 2018)</p> <p>“People return their rentals late or in poor condition, and you find out last minute that RTR will put in a replacement item in its place. To be candid, the “replacement items” never are really what I’m looking for, and I’ve had to swap those out the two times that has happened to me. [RTR] is pretty good at letting you swap out a replacement item if you don’t love it. Over the weekend, I had to get a replacement item replaced... and they shipped my dress to the wrong location. Luckily, I have pretty great friends who were able to go to FedEx and drive an hour to deliver the dress to me, and I got the dress about 10 minutes before the wedding started. Needless to say, it was pretty stressful.” (Alicia, <a href="http://www.aliciatenise.com">www.aliciatenise.com</a>, September 30, 2017)</p>
Tightly coupled customer interdependencies	<p>“I had a lot invested in the photoshoot and it was you know maybe 24 hours after I placed the order that they said my size was not available um, but they would send me a larger size.... I didn’t know what to do but I was like okay fine send me the larger size ... if there is nothing you can do about it and it just wasn’t this thing.... I mean the dress didn’t fit ... I had to pin it at the back you could see the pins in the photos.... We tried photoshopping it out but it was just really really frustrating that they said it was available and then it wasn’t.” (Kylee, interview)</p>
<b>Job crafting</b>	
Job crafting practices	<p>“I’m maximizing all my pieces by having multiple return/shipping labels at my house, and packaging up things either two to one package, and then sending two pieces back in one bag, and then I still have one bag leftover so I’m just being able to like time it.” (Mia, interview)</p> <p>“Because I was traveling a lot I would actually send my outfits directly to my hotels. So that I wouldn’t have to pack things. That was also a really big positive with this service is that when you have to pack formal attire for conferences, and speaking engagements, and big work events when I was traveling.” (Courtney, interview)</p> <p>“Even if an item isn't one of the ‘new’ ones, if you check it out and it doesn't have hundreds of photos of women wearing the piece and thousands of reviews, it's probably a piece that hasn't been worn a ton.”</p>

	(Victoria, blog post)
Individual outcomes of job crafting	<p>“Building a few lists of items you love makes it so much faster to find your next piece when you have an open spot to fill. I keep seasonal lists of things I've loved or want to try (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter), an ‘Up Next’ list for things I want to wear soon, and a dedicated list when I'm planning for an event or a trip. Being able to pick new items from my lists keeps me from scrolling endlessly through everything that's available.” (Audrey, blog post)</p> <p>“I would like to order a piece and ... it wouldn't fit me, so I would have to return it. So I guess to circumvent that, I started, like, ordering two sizes at a time and then just keeping one and then returning the other. So that I, I don't like having to go through renting again.... I feel like I saved a lot of time for myself and avoided, like, feeling annoyed that like a piece fit and then I would have to, like, wait a couple more days.... I guess it would be that there's less availability for other users. And like less choices for the company as well, to give out to the users.” (Jackie, interview)</p>
Collective outcomes of job crafting	<p>“It seems like they are trying to prevent my kind of tips [e.g., learning when brand-new items are added to the circulation and available for renting them right away] when they change the membership structure in January.” (Clara, interview)</p> <p>“I wanted her [mother-in-law] to try [RTR]. I thought she would really be into using it so when she signed up I was happy to tell her this tip [i.e., sorting items based on comment history and product by release time to avoid overworn items]. So certainly when I talk to other friends if they do not know this tip already I would tell them.” (Sofia, interview)</p>