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ORIGINAL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Access-based consumption revisited

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Abstract

Access-based consumption, defined as transactions that may be market mediated in which no transfer of ownership takes place, is conceptualized by Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012). While it was introduced to explore consumer engagement in the sharing economy, conceptually it challenges the dominant assumption of ownership in marketing. This paper reflects on the impact of ABC and its boundary conditions. We critically interrogate and expand on five challenges of the original concept: the static dichotomy of access versus ownership; its transactional framing; its lack of identity value; its treatment of ideology; and its reliance on one context. We discuss the implications of ABC for marketing research related to: a prosumer role of the consumer; its ambivalent responsibility and governance; the bundled, or layered notions of access/ownership for digital ownership; as well as its implications for platformized consumption, which reinforces its instrumental sociality, and where value is extracted through data rather than ownership.

Keywords Access-based consumption · Sharing economy · Liquid consumption · Ownership · Digital consumption · Platforms

Access based consumption (ABC) was introduced over a decade ago to understand the dynamics of the sharing economy from a consumer behavior perspective (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). ABC is defined as "transactions that may be market mediated in which no transfer of ownership takes place" (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, p. 881). ABC challenged the normative dominance of ownership in marketing research and has come to ultimately capture an alternative to ownership, access. The purpose of this paper is to revisit the ABC concept, critically examine its evolution from its origins through subsequent research, as well as discuss its impact within marketing research and more broadly on the study of the sharing economy and related contemporary empirical realities.

Originally, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) were inspired by the emergence of the sharing economy in the late 2000s in the US as well as the theoretical conversation around sharing as a resource circulation practice. Belk's (2010) conceptualization of sharing had recently positioned it alongside gifting and buying as distinct modes of resource flow. Building on this foundation, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) sought to investigate how sharing operates when it is market-mediated, as in the case of sharing economy services. However, they did not observe practices consistent with sharing—a social exchange grounded in joint possession, prosocial orientation, and the extension of the self to others and to objects (Belk, 2010). To capture the avoidance of psychological ownership, dominance of use-value in contrast to other forms of consumer value, and negative reciprocity that they observed in their study of car sharing, they developed the concept of ABC.

Over time, as a growing body of research has shown, ABC effectively captures the consumption practices characterizing many sharing economy platforms such as Uber and Airbnb (Benoit et al., 2022; Costello & Reczek, 2020; Dellaert, 2019; Eckhardt et al., 2019). Initially, two dominant discourses emerged to explain the rise of the sharing

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economy. The first was a sustainability narrative: companies claimed that car-sharing services such as Zipcar would reduce individual car ownership, lower the number of vehicles on the road, and ultimately diminish consumers' carbon footprints. Indeed, Zipcar's founders—longtime environmental advocates—have stated that environmental concerns were central to the firm's inception (What is Zipcar - About Us | Zipcar). The second discourse centered on lifestyle flexibility. Firms such as Zipcar sought to render a traditionally durable good—the automobile—as accessible, interchangeable, and convenient as an everyday consumable. This narrative resonated strongly in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, when many middle-class consumers were experiencing economic strain for the first time. In this context, the ability to temporarily access a premium vehicle, such as a BMW, through Zipcar held considerable symbolic and practical value.

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) presaged how sharing economy models would evolve toward market-exchange and increasing platformization, with Zipcar over time becoming more akin to an 'occasional rental' (Fournier et al., 2013), and eventually being bought by Avis in 2013 (Macalister, 2013). This mirrors how the sharing economy itself has matured. The sharing economy has exploded, with the global market valued at USD 343.88 billion in 2025 and projected to grow to USD 454.2 billion in 2026, reaching an estimated USD 5,556.92 billion by 2035 (Business Research Insights, 2025). It has reshaped how consumers access goods and services through platform-mediated forms of exchange. However, dominant platforms such as Airbnb and Uber now operate less as challengers and more as institutionalized market actors, raising questions about how access is governed and for whom it creates value (Atanasova et al., 2025). While Belk's (2010, Belk 2014a) conceptualization of sharing focuses on non-market, prosocial practices (intra-family resource circulation), the ABC framework has clarified sharing within the market, particularly by highlighting the roles, exchange structures, and predominantly utilitarian consumer experiences that characterize platform-mediated interactions (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2016). This has contributed to the continuing influence of the ABC construct, not only in marketing, but also across disciplines.

The core contribution of ABC goes beyond the sharing economy in the study of non-ownership. It initiated a broader academic conversation about how consumption practices and consumer behaviors change when individuals access—rather than own—goods and services (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Lamberton & Goldsmith, 2020). This shift has significant implications for foundational marketing concepts and frameworks, including understandings of consumption itself, the role of consumers as prosumers, customer journey models, access-based services, and business model design—constructs originally developed with buying, ownership, and market exchange as their core assumptions (Bardhi et al., 2025; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Morewedge et al., 2021; Papies et al., 2011; Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024). As with any foundational framework, however, ABC also has limitations. In this paper, we critically examine the static dichotomy of access versus ownership; its transactional framing; its lack of identity value and attachment; its treatment of ideology; and its reliance in one context. We further consider how the consumption landscape has evolved—particularly with the rise of digital platforms—raising questions about the continued adequacy of the original ABC conceptualization.

The concept of ABC has had an impact across multiple disciplines. Scholars in tourism, information systems, urban mobility, sustainability, and business ethics have mobilized ABC to interrogate how platform-mediated access reshapes market structures and the role of consumers within them. For instance, research in tourism shows how ABC platforms such as Airbnb reconfigure local communities, risking intensifying overtourism and contributing to gentrification and housing pressures, while also enabling alternative, care-based forms of exchange such as home swapping (Heo, 2016; Kannisto, 2017; Hamilton et al., 2022). In information systems research, studies highlight how platform architectures and technological affordances actively structure trust, participation, and value creation within access-based ecosystems, positioning platforms as key agents in governing consumer experience (Chen & Lu, 2021; Marimon et al., 2019; Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2018). Research on transportation and smart mobility further reveals how shared mobility initiatives, from bike sharing to autonomous vehicles, create new tensions between sustainability ideals and actual consumer behavior (Acheampong & Cugurullo, 2019; Fitschen et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Dowling & Kent, 2015; Pangbourne et al., 2020). Within sustainability and ethics, scholars have debated whether ABC mitigates overconsumption or, conversely, reinforces neoliberal trends, raising new questions about responsibility and accountability in platformized markets (Khalek & Chakraborty, 2023; Mercier-Roy & Mailhot, 2019; Etter et al., 2019). To capture this breadth, we have included a more detailed account of the interdisciplinary impact of ABC in Web Appendix B, along with the main research questions that have emerged and been addressed across these discourses.

To examine the evolution and impact of ABC in the field of marketing and more broadly, since its introduction in 2012, we conducted a semi-systematic, thematic literature review (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2020; Timulak, 2009). This method allows for an integrative review of diverse studies by identifying patterns, conceptual developments, and thematic shifts over time (Denyer & Tranfield, 2006). It facilitates the mapping of topics examined across multiple disciplines, the synthesis of the current state of knowledge, and the formulation of an agenda for future research (Snyder, 2019). Given the broad and interdisciplinary nature of ABC research, this approach is particularly well-suited to integrate findings across multiple domains rather than addressing a singular research question. In brief, we started our review with a general screening of the existing citations of the 2012 ABC paper, which had received 3,764 citations on Google Scholar and 1,334 in the Web of Science as of April 2025. Prioritizing the Web of Science database (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2020), we sampled all the peer-reviewed journal articles, review articles and proceedings papers that had cited the original work on ABC, resulting in 1,315 citations. From these, we concentrated our review analysis on the most impactful journals (ranked 4*, 4, and 3) following the 2024 Academic Journal Guide (Chartered Association of Business Schools) as well as those papers that engaged substantively with the ABC concept. Our final analysis draws on 156 peer-reviewed articles published between 2012 and 2025 that substantively engage with the ABC concept across marketing and other disciplines, illustrating its significant interdisciplinary reach and impact. An overview of the thematic literature review is summarized in Fig. 1 (for further details of the review methos see Web Appendix A).

The paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss the ABC concept and distinguish it from ownership as well as several related concepts. Second, we critically interrogate and expand the original conceptualization of ABC. Third, we discuss the impact that ABC has had within marketing research and in relation to contemporary empirical technology realities. Finally, we conclude with an agenda for future research and contributions.

The concept of access-based consumption

Access-based consumption (ABC) captures transactions that grant consumers temporary usage rights to products or services without transferring ownership, which may be market-mediated (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). This section highlights the strengths of the concept and distinguishes from its conceptual equivalent—ownership, as well from the other related concepts.

The theoretical framework of ABC has been impactful for a variety of reasons. First, the ABC concept was novel and relevant at the time (2012). This was one of the first consumer-behavior papers to systematically map non-ownership and to propose access as a separate mode. As such, ABC challenges the ownership assumptions in the marketing literature. It invites reflection on how much of consumer behavior research assumes possession and ownership as the default of their analysis, without asking what happens when access (and non-transfer of ownership) is the model. Second, the

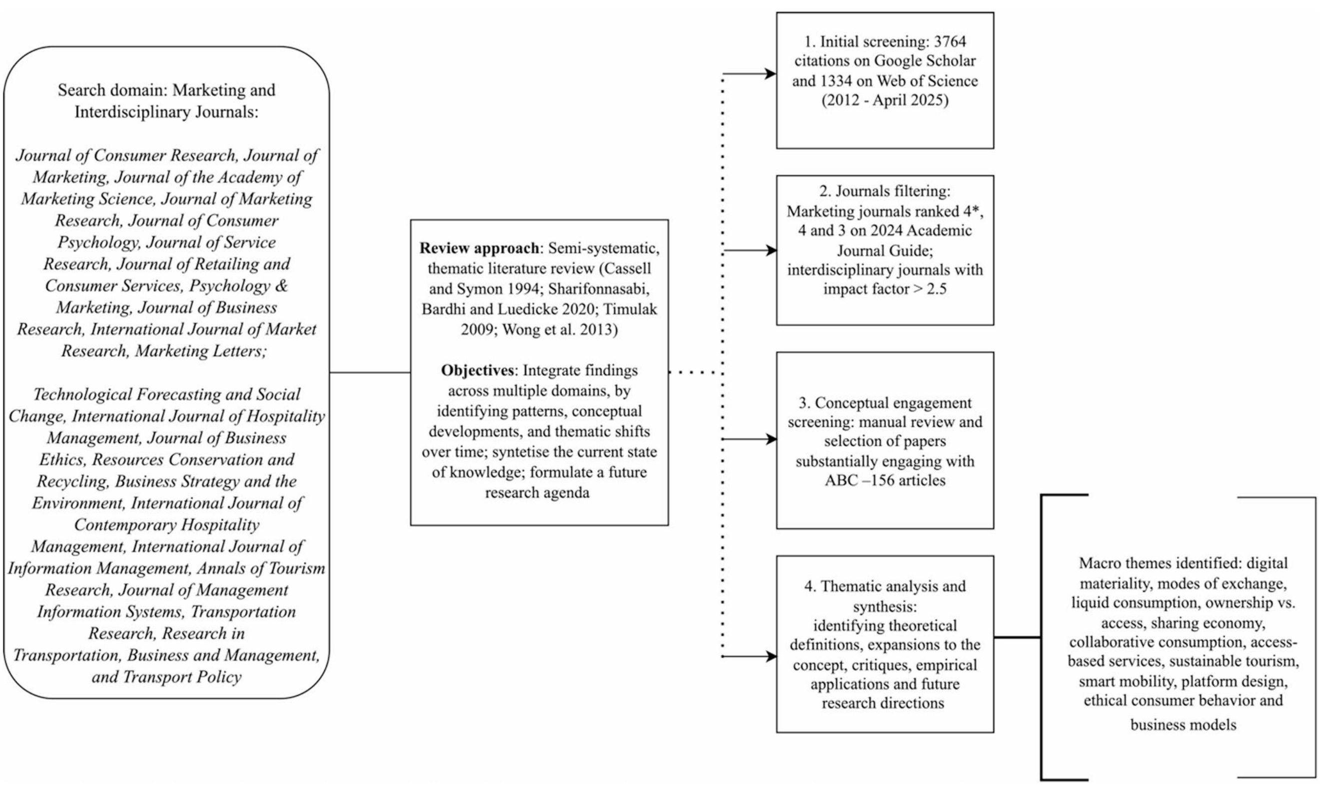

Fig. 1 Thematic literature review method overview: Selection process and analysis

concept can be celebrated for its conceptual clarity. ABC is clearly defined and the use of the case study method helped make it accessible and clear to a wide audience. The "six dimensions" framework (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012) gives a useful way to differentiate types of access (duration, anonymity, etc.) rather than treating all non-ownership as the same. Third, it is also empirically grounding. The use of car-sharing gives concrete data and field insights rather than purely speculative argument. Finally, ABC is linked to broader social changes. The paper situates access in the "liquid modernity" context drawing on Bauman (2000) and the changing labor and asset regimes (Rifkin, 2001; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Kalleberg, 2009), arguing that as everyday life has shifted from being stable and secure to being more uncertain and rapidly changing, access and the liquid consumer lifestyles associated with it have become more prevalent (Gruen & Bardhi, 2025; Mimoun & Bardhi, 2022). ABC highlights the increasing prevalence of consumption modes that depart from traditional ownership and instead embrace more flexible, on-demand access. This contextualization gives the ABC concept a broader sociological relevance.

Distinguishing access from ownership

Conceptualizing access as an alternative to ownership is one of the core contributions of ABC to the marketing research literature which had until then remained anchored in the assumption that ownership constitutes the ultimate consumer desire (Belk, 2010), an assumption that continues to underline most marketing and consumption theories and concepts (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). ABC argued that access is different from ownership (see Table 1), which refers to the legal right or recognized control over an object, idea, or resource (Snare, 1975).

Ownership means that a consumer or an entity has the authority to possess, use, manage, transfer, or dispose of their object of ownership as they wish within the limits of the law or a contract (Snare, 1975). In contrast, access refers to the ability or permission to use something without necessarily owning it. Access gives consumers use rights, but not ownership rights (Bardhi et al., 2025). It can be temporary, conditional, and shared. Access is the ability to use something owned by someone else. Ownership occurs when one has legal ownership of a home, for example, while access refers to situations in which a consumer rents or uses a home booked on a home-sharing platform (e.g. Airbnb). This distinction also applies outside the physical goods/items' realm. Streaming music on Spotify is another example of ABC, where consumers access music via a subscription to the platform instead of owning it. Ownership takes place when a consumer buys a song file and stores it locally (the consumer owns a copy) (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2007; Papies et al., 2011).

Table 1 Distinguishing ownership from access

Aspect	Ownership	Access
Ontology (what it is)	A relationship of possession: the consumer and the object are bound by rights and control.	A relationship of permission: the consumer and the object are connected through temporary or conditional use granted by another.
Agency and Control	Provides autonomy and self-determination, the consumer decides how the object is used, modified, or disposed of.	Involves interdependency: the consumer's use depends on other users as well as the provider's conditions, availability, and rules.
Temporality	Permanent and stable, ownership endures over time.	Temporal and fluid, access is short-term, revocable, or situational. (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Chen, 2009)
Privacy vs. Publicness	Private: owned objects are typically exclusive and personal (Chen, 2009).	Public or shared: accessed objects often circulate among multiple users, reducing exclusivity. (Yang & Ozanne, 2025)
Emotional and Symbolic Value	Intimate and identity-defining: ownership fosters attachment, commitment, and self-extension. (Harding et al., 2019; Morewedge et al., 2021)	Detached and circumstantial: access encourages utilitarian or instrumental engagement, especially when sharing with strangers. (Lteif et al., 2023)
Social Orientation	Reflects individualism, appropriation, and distinction. Possessions signal personal identity and social status.	Reflects mobility, flexibility, and temporary use value. Access aligns with fluid lifestyles and the sharing ethos (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Status is signaled via access to premium/luxury as well as experiences rather than possessions (Bardhi and Eckhardt forthcoming).
Effort and Commitment	Entails long-term involvement, maintenance, and skill investment. Ownership demands care and responsibility.	Entails low commitment and convenience. Users engage as needed, without maintenance obligations.
Social Perception of Value	High perceived value: owned products are often cherished, personalized, and emotionally invested in.	Lower perceived value: accessed items are treated as interchangeable, disposable, or situationally useful.
Business Model Implications	Encourages asset accumulation, stability, and legacy.	Encourages subscription, sharing, and platform-based consumption, emphasizing experience and flexibility over possession.

Ownership is more private, permanent, and characterized by an intimate relationship with the object, whereas access is more temporal, public, and characterized by a temporary relationship (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Chen, 2009; Yang & Ozanne, 2025). Ownership implies individualism, appropriation, and distinction, while access stems from mobility, flexibility, temporary use value and detachment. Consumers associate ownership with an enduring commitment and as such more demanding in terms of time, skills and involvement needed towards owned products (Mimoun & Bardhi, 2022). Accordingly, owned products are often perceived as more valued and tied to identity (Atasoy & Morewedge, 2018; Harding et al., 2019; Morewedge et al., 2021), whereas access may entail lower levels of attachment and identification, particularly when objects are shared among strangers (Lteif et al., 2023). We summarize the ways ownership and access compare and contrast in Table 1.

Distinguishing access from related concepts

ABC's conceptualization and diffusion are intrinsically embedded within the context of the *sharing economy*; however, ABC and the sharing economy are distinct concepts and do not capture the same phenomenon. The sharing economy is defined as *"*a scalable socioeconomic system that employs technology-enabled platforms to provide users with temporary access to tangible and intangible resources that may be crowdsourced*"* (Eckhardt et al., 2019, p. 7). It represents a macro-level transformation of markets, institutions, and value creation for consumers, which access stands in relation to ownership, and both govern the way consumers relate to objects of consumption. Unlike traditional market systems centered around ownership, sharing economy is built on platformization of access, changing how value is created, exchanged, and consumed (Vignali et al. forthcoming). It enables both providers and consumers to engage in exchanges that prioritize access instead of ownership, where the platforms themselves act as the core intermediaries, connecting users with underutilized assets and facilitating a system of peer-to-peer exchange (Caliandro et al., 2024; Perren & Kozinets, 2018). Within this macro system, ABC captures the micro-level consumer transactions through which individuals participate in temporary, often digitally mediated, exchanges that replace ownership with access. Thus, ABC can be used to explore consumer behavior and ownership related questions in the context of the sharing economy, while the notion of sharing economy and platforms are better suited to examine macro-level studies of governance, power, monetization, etc., dynamics.

ABC inspired and is related to the subsequent construct of *liquid consumption*, defined as ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialized form of consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Liquid consumption situates ABC within the wider socio-economic transformations of digitalization, mobility, and precarity, showing that access is one dimension of a more profound shift in how consumers attach to and circulate value in a continuum of solid to liquid consumption.

ABC also differs from other concepts that have been used to describe or capture various aspects of the sharing economy, including collaborative consumption, sharing and pseudo-sharing, and access-based services (see Table 2). First, *collaborative consumption* constitutes forms of exchange that occur within a triangle of actors: the platform, the service provider, and the customer (Benoit et al., 2017). It highlights the collaborative nature of exchange as facilitated by platforms in the P2P exchange. In contrast, ABC highlights the access/ownership dimension of these exchanges without necessarily a focus on platform-mediation, and it can apply to broader exchanges than P2P transactions.

Second, *sharing* refers to non-market, pro-social and relationally driven forms of access. Belk (2007, 2010) introduces the concept of sharing as an alternative to gift-giving and commodity-exchange, defined as voluntary lending, pooling, and usage of collectively owned resources (Belk, 2007). Sharing economy services are described as a form of pseudo-sharing (Belk 2010, 2014b) because they do not engage in the core features of sharing as a prosocial resource circulation, being profit-oriented and market-based instead. Sharing relates to access as it constitutes a form of access-based resource circulation practice, in which consumers acquire consumption through non-market mediated practices, such as sharing or borrowing (Bardhi et al., 2025). This understanding departs from Belk's (2010) original conceptualization of sharing, but reflects how the concept has been refined over the past decade and a half through research on ABC. In this sense, although sharing remains conceptually distinct from both access and ownership, it can be understood as a practice through which access is acquired.

Third, *renting* captures market-mediated acquisition practices where consumers pay a price (fee, rent, or subscription) for temporary access (Durgee & Colarelli O'Connor 1995; Moeller & Wittkowski, 2010; Bardhi et al., 2025), offering flexibility, cost-advantages and use-value without the burdens of ownership. As indicated in the original article and subsequent studies, renting constitutes the main practice of market-mediated access-based acquisition (Bardhi et al., 2025). Finally, the notion of access-based services was also inspired by the ABC concept and the idea that services are mainly access based. This notion specifies how service transactions are structured and delivered, highlighting the service-oriented, provider-controlled arrangements through which consumers access goods, facilities, labor, or spaces for a defined period without assuming ownership (Schaefers et al. 2016a).

Table 2 below summarizes the related constructs and their differentiating characteristics, situating ABC within the broader ecosystem of concepts that define the contemporary access economy.

Critical interrogation and extensions of the original concept of ABC

Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) paper provides a seminal conceptualization of ABC and offers a helpful framework for thinking about non-ownership consumption modes. However, as is typical for a foundational work, there are limitations: a static dichotomy of access vs. ownership, strong reliance on one context, under-explored heterogeneity, and the fact that the consumption landscape has evolved considerably since its publication especially with digital platforms. Later research builds on and refines ABC, adding nuance around ABC's relation to ownership, transactional assumptions, its implications for identity and attachment, and its variations across consumer heterogeneity. We interrogate five such cornerstones of the original ABC concept here.

Continuous versus dichotomous relationship between access and ownership

Early conceptualizations of ABC positioned access and ownership as distinct and opposing modes of consumption

Table 2 Glossary of core definitions for ABC and related constructs

Concept	Definition	Focus	Key insights
Sharing Economy	"A scalable socioeconomic system that employs technology-enabled platforms to provide users with temporary access to tangible and intangible resources that may be crowdsourced" (Eckhardt et al., 2019, p. 7)	Emphasizes the macro-context of the sharing economy, highlighting shifts in market institutions, processes, and value creation.	Temporary access, transfer of economic value, platform mediation, expanded consumer role, crowdsourced supply, reputation systems, and peer-to-peer exchanges.
Access	"A form of consumption characterized by transactions that are "market mediated in which no transfer of ownership takes place" (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, p.881).	Highlights the utilitarian nature and outcomes of exchanges within the sharing economy, focusing on the consumer experience.	Emphasizes temporary use over ownership, identity, or long-term ties; fits mobile, digital lifestyles; focuses on the provider-consumer dyadic relationship.
Access-Based Services	Market-mediated transactions allowing consumers to "access a good, physical facility, network, labor, or space for a defined period of time, in return for an access payment, while legal ownership remains with the proprietor, who is often the service provider" (Schaefers et al. 2016b, p. 4).	Highlights the service-oriented, provider-controlled structure of access, emphasizing resource sharing, co-creation, and the conditions under which consumers access and use resources without ownership.	Centers on the dynamics of access while outlining how design, governance, and consumer–provider interactions shape value creation and consumer experiences; stresses that access may involve shared resources, co-use, and platformized service ecosystems.
Liquid Consumption	"We define liquid consumption as ephemeral, access based, and dematerialized, and solid consumption as that which is enduring, ownership based, and tangible" (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017, p. 582).	Highlights that access is one aspect of a variety of socio-economic transformations that are shaping consumption and marketing, such as digital/platforms and consumer mobility.	Consumer value moves to acquisition, use and circulation states of the consumption cycle; ephemeral attachment; temporary value; facilitated by digitalization, increased mobility and precarity.
Renting	"Market-mediated acquisition practice where a consumer gains temporary access to a resource by paying a price for it, known as a fee, royalty, subscription, or rent" (Bardhi et al., 2025, p. 12; Durgee & Colarelli O'Connor 1995; Moeller & Wittkowski, 2010)	Indicates a form of acquisition of products and services typical of access-based consumption.	Can be short-term, long-term (leasing) or P2P; it indicates market-mediated access; provides consumers with use-value, cost advantages and flexibility.
Sharing	"The act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use and/or the act or process of receiving or taking something from others for our use" (Belk, 2007, p.126)	A form of non-market-mediated access, indicating the voluntary lending, pooling, and usage of collectively owned resources.	It is pro-social and relationally driven; it allows for the mutual ownership of an object without direct market transactions.
Collaborative Consumption	Defined as "collective exchange" involving a collaborative, market-based relationship between a platform, peer service provider, and customers without ownership transfer (Benoit et al., 2017, p. 219).	Examines the relational and interactive dimensions between platform, consumer, and provider, focusing specifically on peer-to-peer interactions.	Triadic setup linking platform, provider, and consumer; peer-to-peer interactions framed by market logic rather than prosocial intent.
Pseudo-Sharing	"A business relationship masquerading as communal sharing. It is not sharing, despite promoters often employing a sharing vocabulary" (Belk 2014b, p. 11)	It indicates short-term rental activities typical of the sharing economy (e.g. carsharing).	Characterized by profit motives, absence of community feeling, and expectations of reciprocity.

(Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Access was defined primarily "*without ownership transfer*," emphasizing its difference from traditional ownership. However, recent scholarship challenges this dichotomous framing, arguing that access and ownership are not mutually exclusive categories, but rather interconnected modalities situated along a continuum of consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Bardhi et al., 2025; Lamberton & Goldsmith, 2020). Access and ownership represent various manifestations/alternative forms of governance that guide consumers' relationships to things/possessions, and thus, should be conceptualized as two ends of a continuum (Bardhi et al., 2025). Bardhi et al. (2025) proposes such a continuum with access and ownership as its extreme positions, arguing that it allows for a better re-thinking of acquisition practices (i.e., that is how consumers acquire/obtain things). Access does not lead to a transfer of ownership, and consumers can gain the right to use the object via a multitude of exchange practices.

In this way, Bardhi et al. (2025) expands the original definition of access to encompass a conceptual space that includes a variety of market-mediated access practices such as renting (including traditional, occasional, or P2P renting types), leasing, and streaming, as well as other non-market mediated practices, such as sharing and borrowing (Bardhi et al., 2025). While access excludes ownership-transfer practices such as buying, bartering, or gifting, it includes numerous temporary arrangements that vary in duration, control, and social embeddedness.

By moving beyond a strict binary opposition, this dynamic conceptualization allows for the exploration of *hybrid and transitional* forms of consumption (e.g., long-term leasing, subscriptions) examining how consumers may shift along the access–ownership spectrum over time (Bardhi et al., 2025). Access may be "temporary" in theory, but switching costs (e.g., playlists, reviews, social graphs) create quasi-ownership dependencies the original framework undertheorizes. How do consumers move into and out of access modes? What kinds of hybrid models emerge, such as long-term leases or subscription-based offerings that may feel closer to a psychological sense of ownership? While such models can create tensions by blurring the boundaries between access and ownership, they may also offer benefits to consumers, for instance by allowing them to pay only for the features or services they actually use. Future research is needed in this area.

Another variation of ownership/access is the *bundled* one, a legal, technical, or commercial structure where rights of possession, control, and usage of an asset are combined or separated between parties. A typical example of bundled ownership has emerged through servitization, the process by which a company shifts from selling products to providing services, or combines products and services into integrated solutions (Van der Burg et al., 2019; Visnjic Kastalli and van Looy, 2013). Firms are increasingly servitized even traditionally ownership-based products by layering access components onto them. For example, in the automotive industry, manufacturers now integrate on-demand digital services that require additional subscriptions to unlock features previously built into the vehicle—such as heated seats or advanced assistance systems. These models blur the line between ownership and access: consumers purchase the physical good, but its full functionality becomes contingent on ongoing payments mediated through digital platforms. Research indicates that consumers are frustrated and often confused by the conflict that emerges between owning the physical part of the bundle (e.g., the car), however, having to pay for various features of it to gain access to services. Future research is needed to unpack the various forms and relationships that such layered forms of access and bundled ownership provide for consumers.

Such hybrid ownership/access models also raise important questions about the value consumers derive from their consumption and about the broader accessibility and sustainability of these models. As more product functionalities become *subscription* dependent, these arrangements may offer benefits to consumers by allowing more personalized and flexible payment for features, particularly when not all functionalities are needed. At the same time, there is the risk of consumers experiencing subscription fatigue when they feel overwhelmed by the multitude of subscriptions as well as their increasing costs (Koenigsberg, 2023). Another negative consequence is that standard physical goods also become subject to negative platform dynamics. Enshittification, a concept introduced by Cory Doctorow (2025), highlights that platformized services that initially offered value may progressively degrade once users are locked in, as firms seek to extract greater profits, resulting in a deterioration of the consumer experience. This suggests that the platformization of goods may not simply expand consumer choice but may also introduce new forms of dependency and economic strain, reshaping how consumers evaluate value, fairness, and trust in brands. Future research is needed to explore such risks and the evolving consumer experience across hybrid/bundled models.

Transactional framing of the ABC concept

The original definition of ABC narrowly framed access as an individual, market-driven activity, noting that such consumption models provide consumers with temporary and often anonymous access to consumption objects through market mechanisms. It focused on and highlighted the marketization of access (i.e., how firms monetize temporary use) as well as the individual and utilitarian nature of access—emphasizing convenience, flexibility, and efficiency (Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2022). Its findings noted the lack of identity attachment and social connection that typically may accompany exchange. However, this view overlooks the social exchange forms of access as well as its social embeddedness. Other scholars have argued that this early framing of access was too transactional, neglecting the social and communal aspects of access practices (Arnould & Rose, 2016; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2016).

Recent research has noted the social embeddedness of access, particularly those practices that are peer-to-peer, collective, or community-based, by demonstrating that they are not purely transactional but are shaped by norms of reciprocity, mutuality, and trust (Lteif et al., 2023; Yang & Ozanne, 2025). For example, Yang and Ozanne (2025) support the idea that when objects are accessed, the relationship with them is temporal, shared, and often embedded in communal or civic value systems rather than purely individual appropriation (Yang & Ozanne, 2025). Bardhi et al. (2025) expand the narrow focus on market-mediation of access by proposing that it can be carried out through social exchange, including practices of sharing, borrowing, to be part of ABC. Additionally, access can also take place via public services (e.g. public libraries, public gardens, etc.) (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2016).

Consumer participation in access-based arrangements can express collective identity, moral commitment, and community belonging, especially when resources circulate among peers or within local communal networks (Arnould & Rose, 2016; Kromidha et al., 2025). Others have argued that social motives drive preference for ABC as consumers are seeking a marketplace that provides greater intimacy, community, and moral obligation (Caldwell et al., 2020; Stofberg & Bridoux, 2019). However, it remains unclear what types of ABC are more likely to be driven by these social and communal motives.

Acknowledging these relational dynamics reframes access-based practices as having the potential to foster connection and cooperation especially at the local level (Kromidha et al., 2025) rather than detachment and anonymity. Such potentialities, as well as how to design for them, constitute an important area for future research if we want to contribute to policy or the activist agenda of curbing the negative effects of market mediated access. While there is research on discrete access-based practices (e.g., renting, sharing), there is still little investigation into access-based consumption outside market exchange, particularly regarding its nature and relationship to public services and social exchange. These forms have received limited attention but illustrate that access is not inherently commercial; rather, it represents a broader social and institutional condition of contemporary consumption. From this viewpoint, access should not only be understood as a market mechanism, but also as being derived from social exchange and embedded in ongoing interactions and shared meanings (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2016).

Reconsidering identity and attachment in ABC

Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) positions ABC as characterized by *weak identification* and *utilitarian orientation*, arguing that consumers in short-term, anonymous access contexts (such as car sharing) display little attachment and avoid sense of ownership toward accessed goods. ABC argues that identity shifts from *what you own* to *what you access and display*. The study of identity and psychological ownership in access remains complex. Follow-up research has found that psychological ownership, the feeling that a non-owned product is "theirs" (Pierce et al., 2003, p. 85), can still develop via service use, involvement, personalization, etc. even in ABC contexts and serve as a substitute for material possession, reinforcing access-based service usage (Fritze et al., 2020). In this way, Fritze et al. (2020) note that psychological ownership can mitigate the barrier caused by the absence of legal ownership. In a different context, Debenedetti et al. (2014) find that emotional bonds associated with place attachment can also be formed towards accessed commercial settings (e.g., cafes, restaurants, bars, and local businesses) because of three key factors–familiarity, authenticity, and security. Gruen (2017) highlights design as another factor which can generate a sense of psychological ownership in access. In her exploration of a French city's car sharing program, she finds that the anthropomorphic design of shared cars helps generate a relationship towards the cars.

Recent research shows that access to luxury goods, digitally mediated possessions, and longer-term subscriptions or leases can evoke meaningful identity and attachment processes, albeit in forms that differ from ownership-based consumption (Belk 2014a; Fritze et al. 2020; Denegri-Knott et al. 2023). For example, users of fashion rental platforms often mobilize accessed goods as for their sign value for self-presentation, while participants in digital streaming or gaming environments can sustain enduring attachments through personalization, curation, and continuity rather than physical possession (Denegri-Knott et al., 2023). Repeated or long-term access can also foster psychological ownership, stewardship behaviors, and community participation even in the absence of legal ownership (Bardhi et al., 2025; Pierce & Peck, 2018).

These findings indicate that the original ABC framework has under-theorized the roles of identity in relation to how consumers experience access. They suggest that under certain conditions, personalization and curation can nurture a sense of belonging and identity expression towards accessed goods. However, research also shows that developing attachment and psychological ownership in access remains difficult and may impact differently owners and consumers in access-based platforms. For instance, contamination concerns–fears that previous users have left germs or residue on accessed products, create significant psychological barriers to adoption, especially when shared items are used close to the body (Hazée et al., 2019). Product attachment in P2P rentals indicated as attachment cues of an owner's emotional investment deter prospective renters (Graul & Brough, 2021). Renters are often reluctant to assume the responsibility of handling a cherished item, which contrasts with owners' beliefs that attachment will increase the product's appeal.

Ideology of access and ownership

The ideology of access and ownership was not the focus of the original paper and is missing from its analysis. The original study did highlight that ownership remains normative; but subsequent research raises the question of whether access may increasingly become normative (or at least accepted) in some domains and how it shapes consumer behavior. For example, research in housing is exploring the assumed ideological hierarchy between ownership and access (Zhang, 2023). This research suggests that the meaning and desirability of ownership have become increasingly unstable. Zhang's (2023) reconceptualization of housing tenure is particularly interesting: the author demonstrates that the owning–renting divide no longer maps neatly onto security, autonomy, or status, as both forms have been progressively financialized and subjected to similar market logics. This resonates with Ronald's (2008) argument that the cultural hegemony of homeownership is historically and culturally manufactured rather than natural, and increasingly fragile under contemporary conditions. In this view, what appears as a binary opposition between owning and accessing is better understood as a continuum shaped by consumers' relation to financial markets and broad socio-political phenomena, rather than by legal relations.

Bringing this insight back into ABC, it raises the question of whether access can become not just a practical alternative but an ideological repositioning, especially in domains where ownership entails high financial risk, volatility, or debt (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Mimoun & Bardhi, 2022). Indeed, as Eckhardt et al., 2019 show, access-based models cultivate their own normative discourse—one that frames flexible lifestyles, reduced commitment, and platform-mediated convenience as culturally legitimate and even superior to ownership. This tension opens space to consider how hybrid arrangements (e.g., long-term leasing, subscription-based mobility, fractional ownership) may cultivate new cultural ideals around flexibility, reduced responsibility, or "de-risked" consumption, suggesting an emerging ideology where access is neither inferior nor transitional, but a legitimate and sometimes preferable mode of participating in markets.

Importantly, this emerging ideology is not only cultural but also political-economic. The rise of access-based models redistributes value, responsibilities and risks among market actors. While platforms and firms benefit from recurring revenue streams and increased control over consumer behavior through data and algorithms, consumers may bear greater uncertainty and ongoing financial commitments. In this sense, access can be understood as part of a broader process of responsibilization and individualization characteristic of the modern risk society (Beck, 1992), in which risks historically managed through traditional forms of ownership or embedded in collective structures (such as class, family, or welfare institutions), are increasingly shifted onto individuals. As these social anchors erode, individuals are required to navigate uncertain market conditions with fewer stable resources to absorb or manage risk. These dynamics are unlikely to be evenly distributed. For some consumers, access may be experienced as flexibility and convenience; for others, it may entail constraint, dependency or a lack of security, particularly in precarious contexts shaped by inequality in income or resources. This perspective highlights the need to examine ABC not only as a consumption model, but as a socio-political formation that influences how power and value are distributed in contemporary markets.

The original paper also finds access is embraced when consumers are aware of the burdens/costs of ownership, such as the perceived financial, performance, social, and emotional risks associated with owning (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Schaefers et al. 2016a). That is, consumers adopt access when ownership is perceived as too costly or demanding, using access as a practical mechanism to avoid financial burdens, maintenance responsibilities, and the identity commitments associated with owning. At the same time, access comes with its own obligations, particularly associated with its social interdependence (e.g., sharing use or collaboration with others/strangers) as well as its temporariness (Hazée et al., 2017, 2019), and may carry negative associations, be difficult to use, or perform inconsistently (Berry et al., 2002). These barriers are intertwined with the utilitarian and opportunistic attitudes of consumers engaging in ABC (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012), which negatively affects the perceptions of consumers towards other consumers, due to the deep interconnection that consumers experience (Perren & Kozinets, 2018; Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024) and often results in careless usage and low product durability (Ackermann & Tunn 2024). From a psychological standpoint, absence of exclusivity may evoke a fear of contamination stemming from others' previous interactions with the product—since physical touch plays a key role in fostering a sense of ownership (Peck & Shu, 2009). Additionally, the inability to exert full control can create a psychological distance from the item (Argo et al., 2006).

This line of research has only begun to explore the social construction of the "burden" of access or ownership, which can be class, societal, technology or more macro-oriented. Recent work by Rosenberg et al. (2023) refines our understanding of what "freedom from ownership" entails, showing that ABC can introduce new forms of consumer burden. In their study of Finnish clothing libraries, they find that users face increased care responsibilities, associated with treating clothes as shared communal property, time pressures due to return policies, and unexpected emotional attachments to borrowed items. These findings complicate the notion of ABC as a lighter, more flexible and intrinsically utilitarian form of consumption, and highlight the need for service design that acknowledges the everyday complexities of non-ownership.

Future research can account for changing societal norms regarding access and ownership from a more sociological take on ownership that explores the interplay of ownership and access ideology (Giesler, 2006). Such an approach raises critical questions regarding the motivations, meanings, and social implications of these movements, particularly in contexts where access and ownership coexist or intertwine, such as hybrid or collective ownership models. Taken together, this perspective positions access not merely as a functional alternative to ownership, but as part of a broader ideological and political-economic context, shaping how power, risk and value are organized and experienced among market actors.

Reconsidering access across consumer heterogeneity

The robustness of the concept needs to be explored empirically to account for different consumer segments, motivations, object types, cultural contexts. The original paper points out clearly that the consumer–object relationship differs in access contexts but says less about how this differs across consumer heterogeneity (e.g., by age, culture, income, identity orientation). More recent research has shown that the outcomes Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) found (e.g., lack of identification, deterrence of brand community) may not hold in other contexts (e.g., fashion renting, digital goods) (Sinclair & Tinson, 2017), identifying some of the boundary conditions of the original ABC framework.

More recent research has contributed to this by exploring the variety of *consumer motivations* for embracing access. Consumers who prefer access are motivated primarily by variety-seeking motives, followed by economic motives, and then sustainability or ethical motivations (Datta et al. 2018; Schaefers et al. 2016a; Ek Styvén and Mariani 2020). Variety-seeking drives access adoption because access is associated with experimentation rather than commitment and is thus perceived to carry lower risks than ownership (Datta et al., 2018). Sustainability and ethical motives emerge as key drivers of preferences for access as, for many consumers, access is perceived as a more sustainable consumption model and a better fit with their lifestyles (Hartl et al., 2020; Maraj & Bardhi, 2023; Ek Styvén & Mariani, 2020). However, research, particularly in peer-to-peer settings, suggests that the role of sustainability differs across participation roles: while environmental identity can motivate some consumers to act as providers and offer access, it does not appear to significantly drive adoption among those who participate primarily as users, whose decisions are more strongly shaped by economic motivations (Hartl et al., 2020).

Similarly, *cultural/institutional context* (different countries, regulations, asset roles) may moderate how access is experienced, something not deeply addressed in the 2012 paper. Cultural and contextual variations influence the conditions under which consumers choose ABC versus ownership. For instance, Ulrich et al. (2024) show that consumers in France engage in daily clothing rentals supported by digital technologies, while in Mexico, apparel renting is more occasional and driven by collectivist cultural norms. Across geographies, environmental motivations, economic conditions, and product category characteristics shape how consumers embrace or resist ABC (Ni, 2021; Schaefers et al., 2018). Therefore, ABC strategies cannot be one-size-fits-all. For instance, in Europe's urban centers, daily apparel rental is intertwined with digital platforms and professional identity work, while in collectivist contexts, occasional rental is more about situational usage and maintaining social traditions (Jiang & Tian, 2018). At the Base of the Pyramid, short-term access can be a strategic alternative that reduces nonconsumption and addresses financial risks associated with ownership (Schaefers et al., 2018). Such insights encourage marketers to adopt culturally appropriate approaches, tailoring platform design and services characteristics to local values and consumption norms.

Moreover, *temporal dynamics* remain underexplored. The 2012 study implicitly assumes that access is short-term and episodic, yet many emerging access models—such as vehicle subscriptions, software ecosystems, and long-term leases—are structured around *recurring or continuous access*. These configurations call for longitudinal research examining whether and how identification, attachment, and responsibility evolve over time. In such contexts, temporary access may become progressively *ownership-like* as familiarity, personalization, and usage duration increase. Future studies should therefore identify the conditions under which access yields meaningful identification, considering variables such as object tangibility, identity centrality, duration, visibility, and control, and how these dynamics reshape responsibility and engagement in post-ownership consumption systems.

Temporal considerations also shape the decision between access and ownership as access is preferred in consumption activities that are episodic rather than an ongoing part of consumers' daily lives. Lee and Park (2022) show how framing the service period affects perceived scarcity and anticipated enjoyment, underscoring that cues around time and availability can significantly influence consumer-brand relationships. Such findings underline the importance for firms to manage consumer engagement, such as the reduction of excitement for a novel service, enhance the overall experiential value of ABS, potentially increasing not just one-time usage but also long-term loyalty.

ABC implications for marketing scholarship

This section discusses the core implications of ABC concept across the marketing research and highlights some of the dynamics and potential avenues for future research.

Role of consumers shifting towards prosumers

A central implication of the ABC concept is that it argued for an expanded role of the consumer into that of the prosumer (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). ABC highlights that rather than acting as passive recipients of value, consumers increasingly become active participants in the functioning and governance of access-based arrangements. This expanded role is captured by the notion of prosumption, which acknowledges that economic activities consist of both production and consumption as they co-exist in a spectrum (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Prosumers "innovate, produce products, offer advertising content, rent personal possessions in digital marketplaces, and co-create market value" (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017, p. 591). Consumers' involvement extends beyond usage: they become co-producers and co-governors of the system, offering business package/service bundles and operating them as a business (Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2022), and assuming new responsibilities for the care, maintenance, and circulation of shared resources (Eckhardt et al., 2019).

For instance, in mobility platforms (such as car-sharing services), consumers determine when and where to terminate use, and how to ensure that the vehicle they accessed is suited for the next user, without the direct supervision of the provider (Prieto et al., 2022). The responsibility for ensuring service quality and functionality is therefore to some extent redistributed among consumers themselves, who are asked to check vehicles, report damages, and comply with usage rules. This illustrates how access-based models rely more heavily on consumers' capacity to self-govern, to orchestrate their own needs with those of others, and to collectively sustain the system's operation (Nøjgaard et al., 2025).

As a result, the relationship between service providers, consumers, and the target of consumption are reconfigured. The interaction between providers and consumers becomes more indirect, as products are used without supervision and control is mediated through digital platforms and peer feedback mechanisms (Schaefers et al. 2016b). Consumers are embedded in, and deeply interconnected with, the experiences and actions of other consumers (Perren & Kozinets, 2018), which can have a significant impact—especially when these interactions involve lack of care and misbehavior (Danatzis et al. 2024; Nøjgaard et al. 2025; Schaefers et al. 2016b), or even mismanagement by the platform itself. Finally, the relationship between consumers and the target of consumption becomes more instrumental and temporary, typically implying weaker attachment and a reduced sense of ownership (Schaefers et al. 2016a). All these ABC dynamics will demand increasing levels of consumer work across platforms and throughout the whole consumption process, as well as potentially greater governance.

ABC points out that consumers assume multiple roles in platforms, including the role of workers. While platforms provide access to income-generating opportunities, these are often unstable and lack the protections associated with employment. In this sense, gig work can be understood as access to work rather than employment (Schor & Vallas, 2021). However, ABC does not fully capture, nor adequately theorize, the labor dynamics associated with gig work, including precarity, algorithmic management, control, and exploitation (Wood et al., 2019). As a consumer-centric framework, it is well suited to analysing consumer domain platforms (e.g. Spotify), but it can break down in the study of labor dynamics of prosumers, such as Uber drivers or AirBnB hosts. Thus, labor theories extend beyond the explanatory scope of the original ABC concept.

Increased ambivalence of responsibility and governance in access

Issues of governance and responsibility remain ambivalent in ABC contexts. ABC often takes place amongst strangers and without platform employees present, raising the question of who carries out the responsibility: the consumer/user, the provider/firm, or the platform. A prerequisite of efficient functioning of access platforms is responsible consumer behavior, where consumers are asked to not damage shared or accessed possessions, not overuse assets, and leave them in good shape for others to use (Belk 2010; Schaefers et al. 2016b). Research argues that consumer misbehavior can be limited by fostering communal identification and consumer accountability (Gong & Zhang, 2023; Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2022). Thus, it becomes fundamental for brands to build trust, offering personalized co-creation and community, collaborating with consumers to ensure that the experience aligns with their expectations and provides value (Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2022). Moreover, ratings systems emerge as a potent non-monetary tool for maintaining service quality and promoting prosocial behavior (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). For instance, ShareNow, a well-established German carsharing company, part of Free2Move, invites consumers to check for any damages and report them before starting each trip, even uploading photos and earning points and discounts. These activities are framed as acts of care and community engagement, positioning consumers as contributors to the service and as necessary actors in enabling others' use and enjoyment of the shared resource (ShareNow, 2025). These practices, highlight how ABC is more dependent on consumers' willingness to act as responsible stewards of shared goods and as co-maintainers of the overall functioning of the system.

The role of brands and consumer-brand relationships becomes increasingly relevant in this context. On one side, a perceived higher risk and lack of trust towards other consumers in the system may take place, as prosumers on platforms can no longer guarantee full accountability and management of the service itself. However, strong and trustworthy brand cues can mitigate contamination fears (Hazée et al., 2019), encourage personal investment in product care through various strategies – such as improving the information flow and facilitating contact between providers and consumers, increasing consumers' awareness of product care requirements and effects, creating an online community of users (Ackermann & Tunn, 2024), and reducing the perception of risk.

Platforms introduce new forms of responsibility-shifting in ABC as they shift risk and responsibility onto consumers (insurance, damage, compliance), providers and gig workers as well as local communities (externalities, congestion) (Barron et al., 2021). This resonates with Bardhi and Eckhardt's insight that ABC often involves outsourcing burdens. Under platforms, outsourcing of responsibility becomes systematized and algorithmically enforced risks, where liability for damages, reputational evaluation through rating systems, and compliance with platform rules becomes individualized (Doctorow, 2025; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Schor & Vallas, 2021). This shifting of responsibilization to the consumer has started to make the consumer experience in platforms, such as Uber and Airbnb, worse rather than better over time (Binns et al. 2025; Doctorow, 2025).

Implications for digital ownership

Digital consumption constitutes predominantly a context of ABC as consumers cannot gain legal or full ownership of digital possessions (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017) and consumers increasingly shift from ownership models to use/access models (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Digital goods accelerate this shift with streaming replacing music ownership, cloud gaming replacing disc-based games, and SaaS (Software as a Service or cloud computing) replacing software ownership, for example. Our literature review indicates that traditional notions of possessions and ownership are being reshaped in the digital environment because of their tokenization, their materiality, and design (Belk et al., 2022; Mardon et al., 2023). We discuss these three dynamics here.

First, *technologies such as blockchain* enable access without traditional ownership, thus aligning with access-based models and providing an alternative structure to control and manage digital goods. These technologies are considered a force that reduces the need for ownership by enabling various forms of access-based and liquid consumption (Hofstetter et al., 2022; Lianidis et al. 2023). NFTs, cryptocurrencies, and decentralized systems transform how consumers think about, acquire, and benefit from digital assets. For example, Belk et al. (2022) argue that owning an NFT (or other digital collectible / asset) does not automatically equate to owning the "object" in the same sense as owning a physical object or a conventional artwork. For instance: unlike a physical painting, where owning it typically gives control over the work (to display, modify, sell, destroy), NFT-based "ownership" often does not grant users comparable rights. Often the buyer doesn't get intellectual property rights and may only have a token that "points to" a digital file. NFTs claim to confer a strict form of uniqueness and exclusivity: because each token is non-fungible, the owner can prove they are the only rightful possessor of that token (Hofstetter et al., 2022). NFTs authenticate and certify ownership of digital art or collectibles while also enabling new forms of fractionalized property, where multiple individuals hold stakes and potential profit rights in the same asset (Belk et al., 2022). This fractionalization complicates the meaning of "owning" something: owning an NFT might entitle consumers to some financial or symbolic claim, but not the full bundle of rights associated with traditional ownership.

In contrast to traditional ownership, digital ownership is characterized by fragmentation. While property rights theory conceptualizes ownership as a comprehensive bundle of coexisting rights–such as the right to use, control, derive income from, and transfer an object (Snare, 1975)–digital ownership increasingly disaggregates these rights, turning them into separable micro-rights rather than an all-or-nothing condition. Digital ownership can therefore mean holding only a part of a product's full bundle of property rights. Whereas traditional ownership might include the right to use, modify, derive income from, and ultimately dispose of an object, fractional ownership divides these rights into separate, sometimes tradable units. Digital ownership depends on corporate infrastructures of the platforms rather than property law. This partial disassembly of ownership has implications: it not only challenges legal and conceptual frameworks of ownership but also creates new forms of emotional attachment and speculative value (Belk et al., 2022).

Furthermore, blockchain decentralizes some functions while platforms re-centralize others. NFTs decouple ownership and distribution from centralized intermediaries (retailers, galleries, auction houses, distribution networks). This could democratize access: creators and consumers no longer need to go through conventional gatekeepers. Digital goods (or even digitized physical goods) can be minted, sold, resold without traditional infrastructure (Hofstetter et al., 2022). This emerging research highlights that ownership in the digital age may decouple from "possession," "use," "rights," or "utility," and instead become more about uniqueness, traceability, social value, identity, and market dynamics (Hofstetter et al., 2022). It is important to call attention to this transformation, urging future research to reconsider what "ownership" means in the digital era.

Second, a *materiality perspective* also sheds light into how the design of digital objects shape consumer relationships and ownership towards them. For example, Mardon et al. (2023) argue that digital materiality lacks durability, transferability, or tangible authenticity, pushing consumers either to accept a more detached, utilitarian approach toward these digital items or to seek ways to restore a sense of meaningful attachment. They conclude that the nature of ABC relationships is co-produced at the intersection of consumer expectations, object affordances, and the evolving strategies platforms use to shape user experiences.

Third, *the design of digital objects/interfaces perspective* matters in context when consumers desire deep emotional bonds and long-term loyalty to digital possessions. Prior research has shown that a sense of psychological ownership may be enhanced through personalized interfaces, algorithmic recommendations or social sharing features (Morewedge et al., 2021; Belk, 2013). For example, Sinclair and Tinson (2017) show that users of music streaming services often develop strong personal connections to playlists and recommendations even though they do not "own" the music files. Psychological ownership emerges from investing time, personalizing collections, and exerting a sense of control over one's digital environment. Mardon and Belk (2018) reveal how companies "materialize" digital collectibles to mimic scarcity and authenticity, helping online items feel more like prized possessions. By designing digital objects and experiences, marketers can recreate the joys and rituals of collecting in an intangible form, facilitating long-term engagement and emotional investment. Future research on ABC can focus more on the complex relationship between ownership, identity value, and attachment in digital consumption.

Platformization of access

Platforms influence ABC as they promote the liquification of consumption, making it more fluid, accessible, and ephemeral rather than based on ownership (Caliandro et al., 2024). At the same time, platforms are not just intermediaries; they make ABC economically viable by lowering transaction costs and policing behavior (Frenken & Schor, 2019; Srnicek, 2017). Most access-based consumption today, such as ride-hailing, bike-sharing, coworking, rental apps, car-sharing, fashion rental, exists because platforms supply the coordination infrastructure. Platforms provide matching (users ↔ assets ↔ providers), friction reduction (streamlined payments, identity, insurance), asset utilization algorithms (optimizing supply/demand), reputation systems, governance and rule enforcement (Perren & Kozinets, 2018).

Digital platforms shape ABC through a complex interplay of technological affordances and cultural logics along five dimensions, including algorithmic governance, instrumental sociality, datafication, concentration, and precarity (Caliandro et al., 2024; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Srnicek, 2017). First, a defining feature of platforms is that consumption is algorithmic driven, that is curated and shaped by algorithms (Caliandro et al., 2024; Mardon et al., 2023). For example, recommendation systems on Netflix or Spotify guide what users see. Rankings, feeds, and search results structure choice. Research in algorithmic culture shows that choice is not neutral or fully autonomous and platforms actively steer attention and behavior (Schwarz, 2025). In this way, platform consumption becomes partly co-produced by algorithms, not just individual preference. The ABC framework assumes market mediation is neutral and it does not interrogate how platforms structure choice, extract rents, or shift risk onto users. This constitutes a major shift in understanding platformized ABC, and future research needs to examine how algorithms structure consumer choice as well as customer journeys.

Second, platforms reshape the sociality of ABC. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) argued that ABC tends to be low-commitment and instrumental with no sense of brand community. Platforms often reinforce this through algorithmic governance that structures interactions in access-based platforms, through data and algorithmic driven rules and ratings (Doctorow, 2025; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2022). Ratings and reputations substitute for social ties, creating "algorithmic trust" as governing access (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Exchanges become standardized, transactional, and data-driven, not communal. Platforms frame participation in market logic rather than shared identity or community values (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2016). In short, platforms amplify the "non-sharing" nature of ABC as they strengthen the market logics and reduce the social logics of exchange.

Third, platforms extract value through data, not ownership. One of the biggest ways platforms influence ABC is through datafication: when one consumes on platforms, they are also producing data. Every click, skip, rating, or pause becomes input where platforms like Amazon and Netflix use this to refine recommendations and strategy. User activity becomes a key source of economic value and scholars have argued that consumption is simultaneously a form of unpaid digital labor as data becomes a key asset in platform economies (Fuchs, 2014). This is a major shift from traditional consumption, where value extraction largely ended at purchase. Further, platforms do not need to own the assets accessed, but they own user data, which becomes the primary source of competitive advantage (Srnicek, 2017). Monetization of access through datafication mediated by platforms becomes a form of data-based surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). Datafication dynamics pose challenges to the explanatory power of the ABC framework which is at the individual level of analysis (consumer perspective). The study of platform value extraction through datafication and associated power asymmetries and governance systems falls outside the ABC conceptual scope.

Fourth, concentration refers to how platforms bring together various consumption-related practices, clustering them in specific digital spaces (Caliandro et al., 2024). This concentration of access to multitude of consumer lifestyle options, payment mechanisms and credit options enables personalized environments where users can discover, discuss, and reimagine consumption objects. At the same time, this may lead to overconsumption and overreliance on platforms (Wang 2025), an area less explored in consumer research. Moreover, in doing so, platforms blur boundaries: on Uber, is it access to transport or labor exploitation? On Airbnb, is it access, micro-entrepreneurship, or real estate investment? The ABC framework struggles with hybrid models that emerge as platforms concentrate consumption and activity. ABC as a concept alone cannot untangle these multi-sided dynamics.

Finally, platform consumption can be characterized by precarity and conditional access. Access can be revoked (e.g., account bans, low ratings) or can be unequally distributed (e.g., algorithmic visibility, pricing discrimination). As Scaraboto and Fischer (2024) illustrate, platformization redistributes who controls and defines certain practices (e.g., craft work), influencing how prosumers adapt to altered temporalities and spatial arrangements of their activities. Rather than viewing platformization as confined to any single domain, they illustrate a holistic approach that sees platforms as integrative environments influencing a "bundle" of consumption-related practices both online and offline. Thus, platformized ABC is not as equal as it may appear to its users as it introduces new, algorithmic forms of exclusion and dependencies (Doctorow, 2025).

In sum, ABC has been amplified as a logic of platforms as platforms don't just facilitate access, they shape, control, monetize, and institutionalize it. The ABC framework helps explain why users adopt platforms and explore the nature of platform consumption. A platform perspective however shifts attention to the infrastructural and organizational role of digital platforms, highlighting issues of control, governance, and power—these fall outside the scope of ABC. While these perspectives have different emphasis and levels of analysis, they highlight a change in consumer orientation toward access and a transformation in market structures driven by platform intermediaries. The ABC framework remains valuable as a starting point for the consumer experience layer, but platform research increasingly requires multi-theoretical approaches to capture the full picture.

Implications for marketing of ABC brands and services

Marketing access in a way that positively affects both firms and society at large requires strategic planning. First, firms can facilitate a cooperative and responsible approach to have a beneficial impact on society (Atanasova et al., 2025), utilizing more equitable business models that are able to decentralize the marketplace, competing less directly with established brands, fostering a more transparent relationship with consumers through authentic narratives, and building institutional partnerships through value creation outside of market logics (Atanasova et al., 2025). Firms can also invest in strengthening their direct relations with consumers—launching for instance their own flagship platforms—to regain portions of control lost with the establishment of large digital providers such as Amazon or Google Shopping (Wichmann et al., 2022). Accordingly, firms can facilitate consumer crowdsourcing (Wichmann et al., 2022), meaning the value that consumers derive from platform participants such as brands, other consumers or third-party businesses, and crowd sending–the value that consumers provide to these participants.

In the context of P2P business models, marketing can adopt provider-focused marketing communications, instead of a platform-focused one. This approach helps consumers feel empathically connected to providers' needs and increases their willingness to pay (Costello & Reczek, 2020), where providers are owners who rent out their belongings to other peers (Ross et al., 2026). Consumers manage to shift their focus to the provider's perspective, recognizing how the monetary exchange benefits an individual, rather than an anonymous, typically for-profit entity. Being exposed to a smile on the provider's picture, for instance on Airbnb, can have a positive halo effect on consumers by strengthening their sense of emotional closeness with the provider (Zhang et al., 2025). This, in turn, can positively influence the transaction, for example by reducing uncertainty about the service or increasing demand. This empathy effect also works in the opposite direction, as providers can feel empathically connected to consumers, even at the expense of their own gains (Ross et al., 2026). Ross et al. (2026) explain that providers' willingness to accept is often lower than consumers' willingness to pay, leading them to set lower prices. Providers are motivated–almost pro-socially–by the idea of sharing their possessions as part of a community, rather than being solely driven by financial gain (Ross et al., 2026).

Introducing a parallel access offering alongside an established brand can also be beneficial. Baumeister et al. (2015) demonstrate that while service-related factors like convenience often outweigh brand effects in access contexts, brand prestige and parent brand equity can still significantly enhance the perceived value of access offers—especially when price and brand cues are consistent. Their findings further show that existing brand owners, particularly in prestige categories, tend to evaluate access offers more positively, viewing them as innovative extensions rather than threats to exclusivity. Importantly, these access offers can also enhance perceptions of the parent brand's innovativeness, particularly when introduced under a distinct but connected brand identity. This underscores the strategic importance of aligning access initiatives with brand positioning.

Access-based businesses require specific strategic assets and customer journey models (Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024). This is due to the very foundational characteristics of access-based forms of exchange, where consumers actively co-produce value for both brands and other consumers (Eckhardt et al., 2019; Dellaert, 2019), performing tasks and engaging in productive activities. ABC is also shaped by a utilitarian consumer attitude (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012), and by instrumental sociality–characterized by individualistic and opportunistic relations between consumers (Perren & Kozinets, 2018). These dynamics, along with the temporary and circular flow of resources between platforms and consumers (Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024), lead to a loss of control by platforms themselves. As a result, access-based consumer journeys differ significantly from ownership-based ones, which presume full firm control over consumers, whether through direct exchange of ownership-based assets or co-creation of services with consumers (Ostrom et al., 2021).

Future research directions

Our review highlights several areas for future research in marketing. More broadly, we argue that future research should move beyond applying ownership-derived constructs (e.g., identity, attachment, possession) to access contexts, and instead, aim to develop concepts and questions that are specific to access. In particular, access raises distinct questions regarding who exerts control, how control is distributed across actors, market mechanisms, algorithms, institutions, etc., and how consumers develop meaning, care, and responsibility in the absence of ownership. We also point to the need to better conceptualize the relationship between access and ownership as a dynamic and continuous one with intermediate configurations, such as in hybrid, bundled, layered, collective forms. At the same time, while ABC offers a lens to examine how consumers experience non-ownership, it is less suited to account for macro-level processes of value extraction and distribution of power among market actors especially in platforms. This clarification provides a foundation for more theoretically precise future research agendas.

ABC and the circular economy

ABC has always been an important part of sustainability conversations within marketing. Recently, the focus has re-oriented toward circularity (Vargo, 2021). Circularity is a model of production and consumption which involves sharing, reselling, reusing, repairing, and recycling existing materials and products for as long as possible (Pera & Ferrulli, 2024). A circular economy emphasizes the efficient use and reuse of resources, products, and materials to minimize waste and pollution. Vargo (2021) argues that the circular economy should be viewed as a system involving various actors, including customers, competitors, suppliers, governments, and activists, who all contribute to and benefit from circular value creation. Access is not circular in and of itself, but it can contribute toward circularity when rental systems encourage repair and longer, or infinite, product lifecycles (Brooks et al., 2025).

The growth and success of ABC have enabled the success of the circular economy. Underpinned by the circular principles of repair, reuse, share, and pay-for-use (Fehrer et al., 2024), it is surprising to find that little scholarly attention has been paid to the value that consumers cocreate through their consumption activities in the circular economy (Kemper & Ballantine, 2023; Vargo, 2021) via peer to peer ABC platforms such as By Rotation and Pickle in the fashion industry (Brooks et al., 2025).

Future research in the circular economy can focus on how consumers and platforms can work together to co create value via ABC platforms. Brooks et al. (2025) for example highlight that establishing a relationship of reciprocity between consumers as they access each other's wardrobes via these platforms is key to the system providing value to both customers and the firm. What are the key elements of platform design that can enable this, beyond giving consumers the ability to accrue attention capital for example?

Consumer trade-offs

ABC research has highlighted consumer trade-offs, especially in relation to sustainability, dynamic pricing, and stewardship. The first trade-off relates to sustainability. Originally, access-based business models were promoted and designed as more sustainable consumption models as they reduce ownership and encourage sharing of resources. However, empirical studies have not confirmed or are contradictory with regard to their sustainability impact (Martin, 2016). The original ABC research showed that consumers do not engage with ABC for sustainability motivations, however, they expected the company to engage in such initiatives (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). More recently, researchers that look at the negative externalities of the sharing economy have also found that it has led to potentially more cars on the road for example as it reduces the number of people taking public transportation (Jin et al., 2018; Tarnovetckaia & Mostofi, 2022). Future research in the ABC relation to sustainability is needed to explore this gap.

Another potential area of future research relates to the dynamic pricing often adopted by access-based platforms. Originally, access was promoted as cheaper than ownership and was embraced by many consumers as a way to facilitate a more affluent lifestyle (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012), by accessing luxury fashion brands that they could not afford to buy for example (Brooks et al., 2025). However, consumers have also started to observe that in the long-run, access can be expensive especially through monthly and annual subscription service costs (Fisher, 2024). For high involvement products and services, ownership can be cheaper in the long run. This helps to explain why there is a recent flourishing in the market for buying and owning DVDs, which cost about two pounds on Amazon, as compared to paying monthly subscription fees on Netflix (Thorp, 2024). More research is needed in exploring how consumers value each of these services and consider the long- and short-term costs of access versus ownership.

Another future research area relates to tensions around stewardship/care in contexts of ABC. Prior research has documented that there is a lack of care towards accessed objects and in general consumers tend to use them for more use-value and undervalue them (Ackermann & Tunn 2024; Schaefers et al. 2016b). However, activating a sense of care towards shared objects is important in terms of preservation of these objects and enabling their continued use as well as in general caring for the common good and each other (Chatzidakis et al., 2025; Peck et al., 2021). Thus, one of the challenges for ABC remains how to encourage a sense of care and individual or collective stewardship when we do not own things, an issue not explored by Chatzidakis et al. (2025).

ABC and urban planning and smart cities

The sharing economy and digital transformations have brought about serious considerations and disruptions for cities and urban planning. Sharing of resources opens up discussions around public interest and public goods as well as social impact, including, but not limited to, the tragedy of the commons, the problem of self-interested individuals exploiting shared resources (Hardin, 1968) (Vith et al., 2019, p. 1024). Thus, ABC has become a major topic across urban planning scholars and practitioners. This has predominantly been in relation to housing and accommodation especially associated with the dominance of Airbnb in urban areas (Shabrina et al., 2022), and in transportation where scholars have documented how sharing platforms and services have disrupted and reduced patronage of public transport services (Tarnovetckaia & Mostofi, 2022).

Several scholars have raised concerns about disruptive effects that the sharing economy especially via Airbnb has had to housing shortages in major cities. Taking an economics perspective, these studies have argued for a wider suite of possible externalities associated with 'home-sharing' which will continue to require more traditional forms of urban regulation and planning (Maginn et al., 2018). More recently, to tackle the housing crisis often associated with the Airbnbing of cities (Atanasova and Eckhardt 2024), we have started to observe the implementation or enforcement of new regulatory regimes devised by municipal authorities concerned with limiting the detrimental effects of Airbnb, like in Barcelona, Spain. It is expected that the way to manage the externalities is by embedding the sharing economy within the existing government and regulations (Vith et al., 2019). This is an important area for future research to explore the implications of the housing crisis and the externalities of access for cities and urban consumers.

Homeownership is increasingly out of reach for many, particularly younger generations, leading to greater investment from municipalities and a growing consumer demand for rental spaces, often shared (Cavendish, 2025). For instance, new forms of all-inclusive living and co-living are spreading, where consumers do not need to own anything and typically live in smaller private units, while having access to a range of shared spaces available on demand, e.g., gyms, cinemas and party rooms, or co-working areas (Atanasova and Eckhardt 2024). This raises questions about how living arrangements are being designed around access, and how such solutions impact housing shortages in global cities and influence consumer experiences in critical areas such as housing conditions. Moreover, it is necessary to understand whether these access-based models help navigate the precarious experiences caused by the housing crisis, and what legal and policy frameworks are needed to support and regulate them effectively.

Another consideration for city planning is the arrival of self-driven cars and smart cities which promote access rather than ownership. In other words, self-driven cars are emerging as access-based platforms rather than owned transportation means, having the potential to streamline waiting times, queues, numbers of cars in cities but also eliminating the need for parking spaces/buildings around cities (Acheampong & Cugurullo, 2019). This shift opens possibilities for reimagining urban design and addressing challenges related to sustainability and housing crises (Zakharenko, 2016). It also invites marketing scholars to examine how ABC models may hinder or facilitate the development of smart cities. More broadly, it creates opportunities for interdisciplinary research between marketing and transportation scholars to ensure that transportation and urban planning consider the consumer and are designed to be consumer friendly.

Taken together, these developments highlight the broader systems within which access operates. At the same time, future research should more explicitly distinguish between ABC and platformization. While platforms have amplified and facilitated access, they are not synonymous with it. ABC can exist outside platform contexts (e.g., traditional renting or public services), whereas platforms introduce additional layers of mediation, control, and value extraction. For example, the monetization of access through datafication raises questions of surveillance and power asymmetries that exceed the explanatory scope of ABC. While these dynamics are central to contemporary markets, they require analytical frameworks that move beyond the consumer-level focus of ABC.

ABC and public services

ABC opens up questions surrounding public services, like public transportation, public libraries, and other services offered to all via government or semi-privatized organizations. For example, Ozanne and Ozanne (2011) examine the family use of toy libraries as a context of the consumption of a shared collective good and show that such consumption enables parents to mediate the relationship their kids form with the market. Our original ABC paper as well as related conversations in the sharing economy argues that public services have always operated on an access-based model. In other words, we access services seemingly for free or for a small fee without any transfer of ownership through government organizations that have been subsidized by taxation. Such transactions are not purely market exchanges nor non-market, social exchange, but rather somewhere in between (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2016). While they constitute a significant part of consumers' daily lives, marketing scholars have paid little attention to how consumers engage with them, as well as more traditional marketing/services related questions. Future research is needed to explore consumers relationship towards public services, especially across cultural contexts, specifically their relation towards the object, services providers or brands, as well as each other. Further, questions about the nature of consumer trust, service quality, customer satisfaction, customer journey, etc. are in need of examination in the context of public services.

ABC and brand relationships

Research has consistently shown the importance of building successful brands, to design and communicate a competitive identity, that is recognized and trusted by consumers (Keller, 1993). Traditionally, brand relationships have been theorized as relatively stable forms of identification and loyalty, building on ongoing interactions between brands and consumers (McAlexander et al., 2002). Yet, this stability has been questioned, particularly as contemporary consumption contexts reveal more utilitarian and liquid forms of relating between consumers and brands (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). ABC exemplifies this shift, as it fosters individualized and more functional interactions with brands, where their symbolic and relational dimensions are significantly diluted (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Rather than acting as focal points of identity or belonging, these platform-brands often operate as infrastructure, to mediate between consumers and their accessed goods or services, risking losing their points of differentiation and becoming interchangeable (Wichmann et al., 2022). This results in weaker relational bonds, as consumers perceive platform-brands primarily as service providers or governing infrastructures rather than facilitators of social connections or identification (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012).

This underscores the paradoxical nature of the sharing economy—where the prosocial character of sharing resources is replaced by a form of access that unfolds within an "impersonal community of distant and anonymous others" (Eckhardt et al., 2019 p.20). While some degree of collaboration and care is required (Rosenberg et al. 2023; Schaefers et al. 2016b)—such as in the case of carsharing, where users are responsible for returning the car on time or refueling it—there is a lack of brand-consumer relations, marked by the absence of shared rituals and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Research has explored strategies and practices for nurturing brands regardless of the weak and ephemeral involvement of consumers, particularly in the non-profit sector (e.g. the Red Cross) (Gruber & Deschênes, 2024; Wichmann et al., 2022). However, there remains significant room to investigate how brands can strategically cultivate relationships with consumers, especially in platforms. What are the most effective brand strategies for fostering stronger relations and engagement in low-commitment, access-driven environments? How can these strategies be adapted to platforms where traditional markers of brand loyalty may be absent?

Contributions and conclusions

This paper revisits the original ABC concept, traces some of its contributions to core marketing theory and practice as well as critically interrogates some of its original assumptions. ABC has moved away from a focus on explaining the sharing economy and now focuses on its relationship to ownership and its distinct or related consumption implications. In terms of critique and updating ABC, we demonstrate a continuous and dynamic rather than dichotomous relationship between ownership and access which allows for the exploration of hybrid forms of consumption, such as long-term leasing, or the layered forms of access and bundled ownership. Second, we revisit the narrow transactional framing of the original concept, acknowledging that access can now be gained via social exchange, not just market exchange, and that it can be socially embedded. Third, we show how recent research is reconsidering the identity and utilitarian orientation of the original concept, acknowledging that personalization, ongoing engagement, ritualization, the type of product, and the design of ABC can produce a sense of psychological ownership. Fourth, the ideology of access and ownership needs to be considered in understanding consumer behavior associated with each. Finally, ABC as a concept is still robust, and can be examined across various consumer segments, cultural contexts, platforms, and temporal dynamics.

Since the original definition of access-based consumption, there has been more precarity and instability in the world (Atanasova et al., 2023). The rise of the sharing economy was due in part to the effects of the economic crisis of 2008. That is, there was an economic reason why it made sense to access goods and services to avoid the cost of ownership. As society becomes more precarious, will consumers go back to ownership, perceiving it as a safety net against precarity (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020), or instead derive greater meaning from ownership as it becomes rarer and more effortful, and therefore more valued (Beverland et al., 2024)?

ABC continues to be an important concept since its introduction in 2012. This is because accessing has now become a part of everyday life with increased digitization and platformization of consumption. Car sharing, peer-to-peer renting, streaming services, and other forms of on-demand access to goods and services are now embedded in consumers' day to day. Marketing research must reflect the increased dominance of access-based consumption as well as its relationship to ownership. The ABC framework remains valuable to study the consumer experience across platforms, but platform research increasingly requires multi-theoretical approaches to capture the full picture. It is our hope that this review of access-based consumption stimulates new thinking and studies on different forms of ABC, and that this research field continues to thrive.

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