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Digital channels for building collaborative consumption communities

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Abstract

Purpose – Collaborative consumption firms leverage networked peers, communicating, collaborating and even delivering services to one another through a central marketplace channel. This raises questions as to the nature of this new form of digital channel strategy and deployment from a firm's perspective. As a first step, this research seeks to help bridge the gap in knowledge by establishing an understanding of the digital channel usage of collaborative consumption firms.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative content analysis of 30 collaborative consumption firms was conducted using multiple data sources and coded into typologies against a predetermined coding scheme. These results were then compared against existing literature on digital channel usage in regards to a wider company usage.

Findings – This study identifies the digital channel usage and digital channel typology of each of the 30 firms associated within the collaborative consumption domain. The study shows a distinct increase in the use of social and community digital channels between traditional firms and collaborative consumption firms. As a result of this study, a concise definition of a collaborative consumption firm is provided, the digital channel usage of collaborative consumption firms is detailed and insights are provided for each sub-type of collaborative consumption.

Research limitations/implications – This study contributes to the understanding of the collaborative consumption phenomena, the business model of collaborative consumption firms and digital channels. This study assists in describing the shift from traditional firms to peer-to-peer systems. Finally, a theoretical model is provided that demonstrates the nuance of collaborative consumption channel choice within each subcategory for future researchers to test and reflect upon.

Practical implications – This study demonstrates how collaborative consumption firms are allowing customers to drive interaction rather than traditional business-to-customer messages. A theoretical model is provided which shows contemporary marketers how to best dictate a digital channel strategy for a collaborative consumption style initiative.

Originality/value – Contributions include: a definition of what a collaborative consumption firm and its channels pertain to and how to design a collaborative consumption digital channel strategy. This study presents a digital channel comparison between collaborative consumption firms and traditional organisations.

Keywords Direct marketing, Customer experience, Channel management, Channels, Collaborative filtering

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The birth of the internet has led to previously unheralded levels of communication and collaboration among peers. The internet hinges on the concept of a decentralised balance across the network for peers to freely exchange information. Since the conception of this decentralised network, peers have not only been connecting and collaborating but also forging online communities (Kozinets, 1999; Rheingold, 1993). These communities have displayed an increasing relevance for business as peers have gravitated toward creating and consuming digital content around the central theme of a company (Kozinets, 1999; Seraj, 2012; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

Known as branded communities in marketing literature, these communities represent the growing intersection of the online community and the firm. However, as prescribed in these communities, the role of customers and firms are still designated as it were in an Industrial-Era business model. The firm creates value, often through a product, and the customers consume that value (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muñiz and Schau, 2005). Value created during or after the consumption of that product, such as the intellectual, social and cultural value as described by Seraj (2012), hinges on the firm providing a product and brand to build a community around. Thus, the decentralised vision of the internet is largely not evident in the majority of present-day firms.

However, a growing number of new firms are leveraging the power of connected peers through the internet to build businesses. Known as collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2010), companies, such as Airbnb, Uber and Task Rabbit, operate as peer-to-peer networks to provide services traditionally provided through firms with employees (Belk, 2014). Peers drive the supply and demand with the firm receiving a small fee for facilitating the transaction. Described as the intersection of an economic and cultural model, collaborative consumption firms primarily provide the benefit of a product or service without the burden of ownership (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Belk (2014, p. 1597) builds on this by describing collaborative consumption as "people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation". However, both Botsman and Rogers (2010) and Belk (2014) emphasise the social dimensions while avoiding the firm's facilitation of this coordination. Current literature lacks a definition of a collaborative consumption firm.

Peers operating within a collaborative consumption business model interact through a central, digital marketplace on a single digital channel. Often a mobile application or website, this marketplace is the focal point for all communications between peers and with the firms. This singular channel dynamic suggests a shift in the deployment of new multi- or omni-channel strategies advocated in recent marketing research (Straker et al., 2015a; SAS Institute, 2012). The central philosophy is a unified channel strategy for the "always-on" customer who is constantly switching media (Stone and Woodcock, 2014). While a differing deployment, collaborative consumption firms appear to have the same central philosophy, yet this is facilitated through a single channel where the user can accomplish all necessary functions; a contrast to a multi-channel strategy. Furthermore, communication across these channels is peer-to-peer, rather than company-to-customer. These changes to communication styles between company and customer pose questions as to the nature of digital channel strategies and digital channel choices.

At present, little academic research has focused on the digital channel choice of collaborative consumption firms. By contrast, relevant literature has been published on the digital channel usage of traditional company to customer firms (Straker et al., 2015a, 2015b; Straker and Wrigley, 2016a; 2016b). The researchers propose an investigation of the digital channel use of collaborative consumption firms. As such, the research question at the core of this paper is:

RQ1. What digital channels do collaborative consumption firms use?

A content analysis of 30 collaborative consumption firms across six industries was conducted to understand the digital impression of a range of collaborative consumption firms. The results identified the use of 33 of the 34 digital channels as defined by Straker et al. (2015a), which was further reduced to five predetermined typologies. Through clustering the results, the researchers were then able to find a clear differentiation in digital channel deployment when compared with firms using industrial-era structures. These findings have both implications for both scholars and practitioners alike by further advancing the understanding of digital channels for a type of enterprise which is fundamentally structured differently.

2. Conceptual background

2.1 Collaborative consumption

Collaborative consumption is often described as a social, economic and technological model where groups share the financial burden of ownership and maintenance of a product or service while maintaining access to the value that product or service provides (Piscicelli *et al.*, 2015; Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Hamari *et al.*, 2015). Pioneers of the term, Botsman and Rogers (2010) organise collaborative consumption firms into three systems: product/service systems, redistribution markets and collaborative lifestyles. Differentiation between these sub groups lies in the role of the company (i.e. for profit, non-profit or public) (Mohlmann, 2015), the degree to which ownership transfers, the type of trading activity (i.e. renting or lending) and whether or not a financial transaction takes place (Hamari *et al.*, 2015). However, existing literature seems to neglect factors such as the degree of community interactions (i.e. whether peers engage during service delivery or not). *Product/Service systems* can be broadly described as the creation of a service around a pre-existing product. Firms charge per use of product rather than charging for the product itself. Piscicelli *et al.* (2015) draw parallels between product/services systems and "use-orientated' or "result-orientated" services (Tukker and Tischner, 2006). The community members either rent or borrow a product for use for a short period of time. Community members in *product/service systems* may never meet; yet, their behaviour potentially influences the next person to use a product in the system. *Redistribution Networks* operate as marketplaces for second hand items. Ownership often completely transfers from one community member to another and the firm facilitates this meeting and transaction. Community interaction may occur completely online or in person when ownership is transferred. The third subgroup, *Collaborative Lifestyles*, achieves the highest degree of community involvement as the company does little more than facilitate a connection between people who offer their own goods or services, in either a dynamic or defined marketplace where bartering and trading occurs. Usually for this secure facilitation, the company takes a cut of the transaction. Figure 1 below shows each subcategory and an example firm.

Academics following Botsman and Rogers (2010) have written further in the field of collaborative consumption (Nguyen, 2014; Belk, 2014; Stene, 2014; Hamari *et al.*, 2015; Mohlmann, 2015) seeking to further define and understand the new phenomena. Because of the trans-dimensional nature of collaborative consumption, research in the area is multi-faceted across business, technology and social science streams. Furthermore, antecedent concepts which centre on the concept of communities facilitated across the internet have been studied since the conception of the internet (Garrett *et al.*, 2016). These community concepts are often referred to as online communities (Hunter and Stockdale, 2009), branded communities (Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) or communities of consumption (Kozinets, 1999), largely being viewed from a technology perspective. Social science spheres study concepts such as whether social capital is affected by internet communications (Wellman *et al.*, 2001).

In contemporary collaborative consumption literature, Hamari *et al.* (2015) describe this interplay of technology and cultural paradigms. Collaborative consumption can be viewed as a technological shift enabling previously displayed human behaviour or an emergent, new consumer behaviour. These authors introduce four dimensions of collaborative consumption each with their own interplay of technological, social and economic considerations. These four elements are: collaboration online, social commerce, sharing online and ideological considerations. These four dimensions are explored in greater depth below in Table I. Entrepreneurs have since constructed business models on the backs of these four tenants.
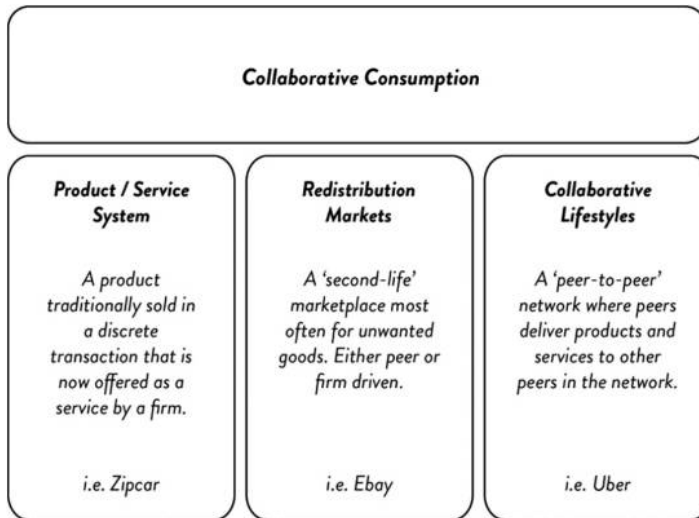
Source: Botsman and Rogers (2010)

Figure 1.
Collaborative
consumption
subcategories

Four aspects of collaborative consumption	
Collaboration online	The development and growing use of Web 2.0 technologies allowing people to create and consume and collaborate online. Communities are often decentralised and self-organising. File sharing networks and Wikipedia are examples of such collaboration
Social commerce	A form of commerce mediated by social media, where social media is used by a customer as support and assistance during the buying and selling of products and services both online and offline (Wang and Zhang, 2012)
Sharing online	Facilitated by IT-based e-commerce, online sharing has grown from sharing information to providing digital and physical products and services
Ideological considerations	Advances in information technology has enabled consumers to connect and organise collective actions or agendas. For example, growing customer awareness for ethical consumption is argued to be keen underpinnings for the Collaborative Consumption movement

Source: Adapted from Hamari *et al.* (2015)

Table I.
Four aspects of
collaborative
consumption

2.2 Collaborative consumption firms, business models and digital channels

Despite its description as a "socio-economic groundswell' (Botsman and Rogers, 2010), businesses that have built their companies on a collaborative consumption philosophy have proven to be profitable and capable of upsetting traditional industries (Boesler, 2013 in Belk, 2014). The business models of collaborative consumption firms have had little investigation in academic literature. The ability to capture that value of collaborative consumption in a business model is potentially financially lucrative yet also potentially difficult because of a critical mass of users required for the community to operate (Nguyen, 2014). Nguyen (2014), Piscicelli *et al.* (2015), Cohen and Kietzmann (2014) and Pedersen and Netter (2015) all provide insight into the make-up of a

collaborative consumption business model. These studies consider the use of channels to connect between the firm and customer and between customers. In the study of collaborative consumption fashion library business models, Pedersen and Netter (2015) found the use of a single physical channel drove all interactions. Nguyen (2014) conducted a business model analysis of five collaborative consumption firms and found word-of-mouth and social media channels common across all five. Partnerships with both customers and other firms and online communities were also apparent. The company's platform (i.e. the collaborative consumption marketplace) was not described as a channel because these authors considered the application or website as fundamental to all aspects of the business model. We, the authors argue that the central platform should also be considered a digital channel, the central channel of the firm.

With the use a single platform and often relying on word-of-mouth, partnerships and online communities, social media platforms represent the only separate and singular digital channels remaining. The very decision to use a wide array of digital channels appears counter-intuitive to the way these companies operate. While elements of other digital channels may be evident in the singular platform (Nguyen, 2014), (i.e. a "Frequently Asked Questions' Tab" inside the App Platform), the move to a platform-based business suggests the integration of many digital channels into one with remaining digital channels used to supplement the word-of-mouth approach. However, drawing these conclusions based on several case studies is inherently fraught with danger of misinterpretation (Lawrence, 2002). A larger sample is required to draw conclusions on the channel usage of collaborative consumption firms. Therefore, this study aims to understand *what digital channels do collaborative consumption firms use?* To answer this question, the authors define a collaborative consumption firm as: *a firm that seeks to facilitate the connection of peers for the acquisition or distribution of a resource for a fee or alternative compensation either for or not for profit*. This definition builds on Belk's (2014) definition of collaborative consumption by formally stating the nature of the economic entity in collaborative consumption.

3. Research approach

3.1 Method

A content analysis methodology and investigator triangulation analysis techniques were used to chart what digital channels collaborative consumption firms deploy. The authors used Straker *et al.*'s (2015a, p. 113) definition of a digital channel as technology based platforms that use the internet to:

- connect with customers via digital technology,
- provide a range of different content and purposes and
- facilitate communication with a range of different interaction levels.

Each company was purposively sampled (Sandelowski, 1995; Guest *et al.*, 2006) based on the inclusion into the collaborative consumption directory on www.collaborativeconsumption.com. This is a companion website directly developed in conjunction with the eponymous Botsman and Roger's (2010) book which indexes collaborative consumption firms. To ensure results that could lay claim to understanding the entire phenomena, companies were picked from six different industries; mobility/transportation, accommodation/real estate, hospitality/food, education, tasks and employment and specialty goods and services. These industry groups were picked as they were the most popular industries in the emerging collaborative consumption field and presented enough data to draw conclusions. Represented below in Table II is each firm categorised by industry and collaborative consumption typology.

Industry	Company	Collaborative consumption typology
Mobility/Transportation	Uber	Collaborative lifestyles
	Lyft	Collaborative lifestyles
	Zipcar	Product/Service system
	BuddyTruk	Collaborative lifestyles
	Carvana	Redistribution market
Accommodation/Real estate	Airbnb	Collaborative lifestyles
	ListingDoor	Redistribution market
	Couch Surfing	Collaborative lifestyles
	Flipkey	Collaborative lifestyles
	HomeExchange	Collaborative lifestyles
Hospitality/Food	Eatwith	Collaborative lifestyles
	FoodCloud	Redistribution markets
	Casserole	Collaborative lifestyles
	Feastly	Collaborative lifestyles
	KitchenSurfing	Collaborative lifestyles
	GrubHub	Product/Service system
Education	Apprentus	Collaborative lifestyles
	Udemy	Collaborative lifestyles
	UrbanPro	Collaborative lifestyles
	Aalizawel.com	Collaborative lifestyles
	Konnektid	Collaborative lifestyles
Tasks/Employment	TaskRabbit	Collaborative lifestyles
	HandyBook/Handy	Collaborative lifestyles
	Thumbtack	Collaborative lifestyles
	Upwork	Collaborative lifestyles
Speciality Goods/Services	SpaceBase	Collaborative lifestyles
	Swambuild	Product/Service system
	3DHubs	Product/Service system
	Tinder	Product/Service system
	Ebay	Redistribution market

Table II.
Selected firms

Data were collected from a variety of publically available online sources to reconstruct the digital channel usage of each company. For this process, the researchers used Straker *et al.*'s (2015a) predetermined list of 34 digital channels (labelled as touchpoints). Straker *et al.* (2015a) grouped these 34 touchpoints into four typologies based on a meta-analysis of the characteristics of each channel. These four typologies included functional, social, community and corporate. The conditions for this meta-analysis included the type of content, purpose, direction of communication and interaction level. The 34 digital channels, corresponding typology and definition of that typology are seen below in Table III.

An online search was conducted for each of the 34 channels for each collaborative consumption firm. The presence of each channel was recorded. To negate any potential bias in the findings, the authors used an investigator triangulation (Begley, 1996), whereby each researcher analyses the data independently. Each researcher then compared results, whereby an appropriate level of common agreement was found.

3.2 Analysis
Analysis took place over three phases. The first phase involved discovering the use of digital channels by collaborative consumption firms. This was achieved through the use of publically available sources to detect the presence of online digital channels. To ensure the complete range

Channel touchpoint		Channel typology	Typology definition
Website	Web enquiry	Functional	Functional channels which use one-way communication from a company to customer often in discrete instances
Podcast	E-Newsletter		
Tutorial	Email		
Application	Linkedin		
Live chat			
Pinterest	Reddit	Social	Social channels involve high levels of interaction with two-way communication between both customers and company-to-customer. High levels of interaction through repeat uses
Facebook	Foursquare		
Twitter	Flickr		
LiveChat	Google+		
Forums		Community	Community channels involve two-way communication between customers. Customers govern the communication and discussion topics
Blogs			
YouTube			
Vimeo			
Digital media release	Competitions	Corporate	One-way communication between customer to company or company to customer
Digital magazine	Digital campaigns		
Digital catalogues	E-Commerce retailer		
Digital feedback forms	Digital membership		
FAQS	Digital loyalty programmes		
Digital advertising			

Table III.
Digital channels:
touchpoints and
typologies

of digital sources, Straker *et al.* (2015a) list of 34 digital channels was used. The second phase involved tabulating the results of phase one and prescribing each company as using a dominant digital channel typology. The number of each digital channel currently used by each company for each typology was divided by the total possible number of channels within each typology. For example, the firm *FoodCloud*, used a total of four social-type channels out of a possible eight; therefore, its social score was 0.5. This process was repeated for each company and each company was designated a typology. Phase three involved using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns in the data. These patterns were then compared with previous research into digital channel usage.

4. Findings
4.1 Phase 1: discovering digital channel usage
The first phase of analysis involved discovering the digital channel usage of the 30 identified firms associated with the collaborative consumption. Figure 2 below reveals the use of touchpoints across the whole span of the 30 industries. As can be seen below, social media and community centred touchpoints were used most frequently out of the entire gallery of available touchpoints. Facebook and Twitter were used 100 per cent of the time across these 30 firms while Google+ was used in 83 per cent of instances. Community touchpoints also scored highly across the spectrum of companies. YouTube channels and blogs were used in over 90 per cent of companies.

Functional touchpoints received a mixture of both high and low usage. Websites received universal usage (100 per cent of firms), while both email and LinkedIn touchpoints were found in over 80 per cent of firms. These results are also characterised by a low usage of
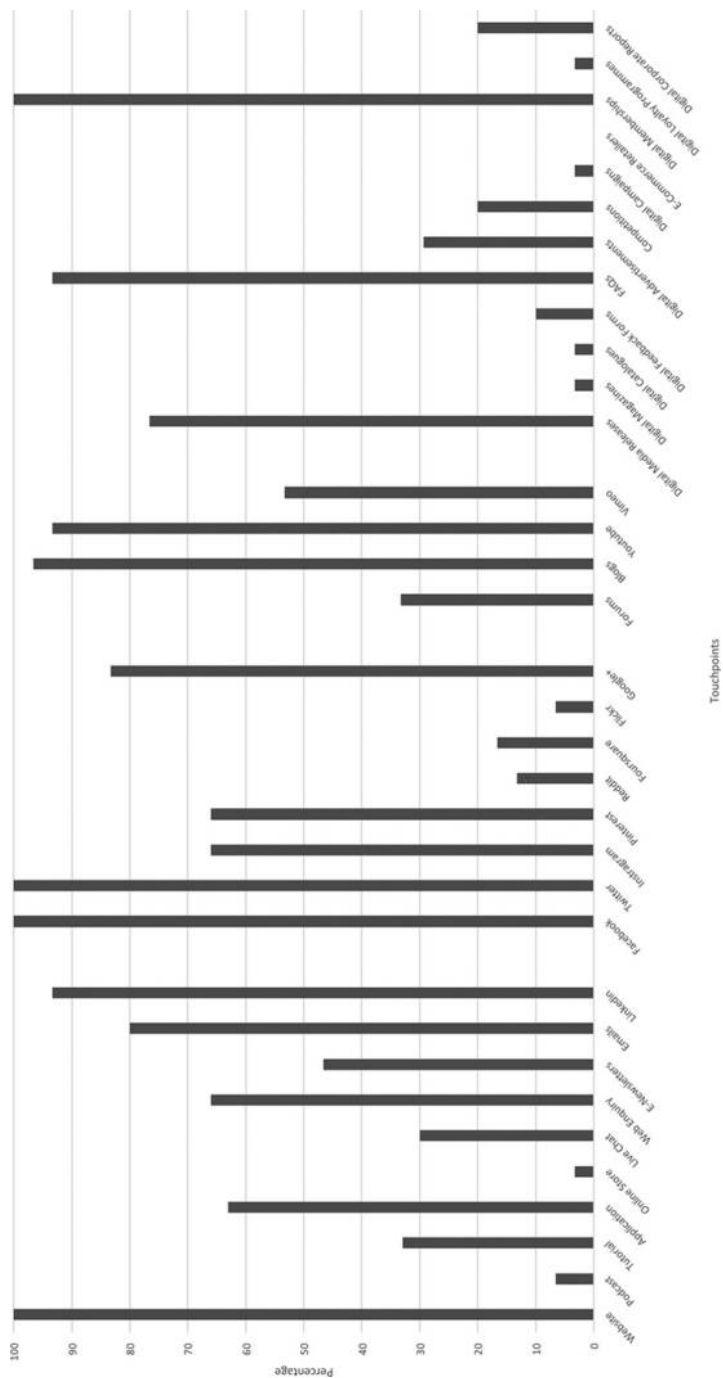
Figure 2.
Touchpoint usage

corporate touchpoints. Despite the ubiquitous usage of online memberships (100 per cent of firms) and high usage of online FAQs (90 per cent of firms), many of the corporate touchpoints received relatively low levels of use. The next highest was online advertising with 35 per cent of firms using this corporate channel.

4.2 Phase 2: discovering digital channel typologies
The second phase involved analysing the specific touchpoints used by each company to synthesise a channel typology. This process of describing a company as using a digital channel typology involved dividing the identified channels found in phase one by the total number of digital channels in each typology. The two highest scoring digital channels typologies were then assigned to each company. An example of the coding system can be seen in Appendix 1, with the complete data pool in Appendix 2.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of typologies to emerge from the data. Five separate typologies were found from the analysis of the 30 companies. These typologies were social/community, community/corporate, functional/social, functional/community and corporate social. In total, 46.6 per cent of firms had the digital channel typology of social/community. The next highest typology was functional/social with 23.3 per cent of firms using this strategy. Functional/Community typology was found to be present in 16.6 per cent of cases. Community/Corporate and Corporate/Social was found to be used in 6.6 per cent and 3.3 per cent of cases, respectively.

4.3 Phase 3: comparing collaborative consumption firms to traditional industries
The final step of the analysis involved the use of a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) approach to decipher trends within the data and compare these results with those in traditional firms and industries. For our main point of comparison, the authors use the results of the study from Straker *et al.* (2015a). Figure 4 shows the distribution of channel usage across traditional industries and collaborative consumption firms.

The authors discovered two relevant findings in the comparison with traditional industries. First is the high use of social and community channels which corresponded to the majority of firms being classified as either a social/community typology or functional/social typology. Second, is the use of specific functional and corporate channels.
Collaborative consumption firms display a discernible increase in the usage of social and community digital channels when compared with traditional firms. This demonstrates a fundamental shift in the way collaborative consumption firms view digital channel deployment. While traditional business logic suggests a tight control of channels to customers, with particular emphasis on the promotional mix (Mangold and Faulds, 2009), collaborative consumption firms give control to their users when deploying digital channels.

Despite this trend towards the use of community and social digital channels, collaborative consumption firms still use a select number of functional and corporate channels. This suggests that while collaborative consumption firms wish their operations to be as peer-networked as possible, the truth that these firms are not organically peer conceived remains evident. Functional and corporate channels are useful for those stakeholders beyond the immediate peer-to-peer network such as researchers, potentially investor and governments. Websites and e-newsletters are particularly useful for new seeking foundational information before engaging with the community.

5. Discussion – collaborative consumption digital channel typologies
At a broad level, this research suggests a concurrence with and departure from previous research into collaborative consumption business models, notably Pedersen and Netter (2015) and Nguyen (2014). Collaborative consumption firms were found to use a singular, core channel to facilitate the majority of interactions between peers and between peers and the firm. Many functional and
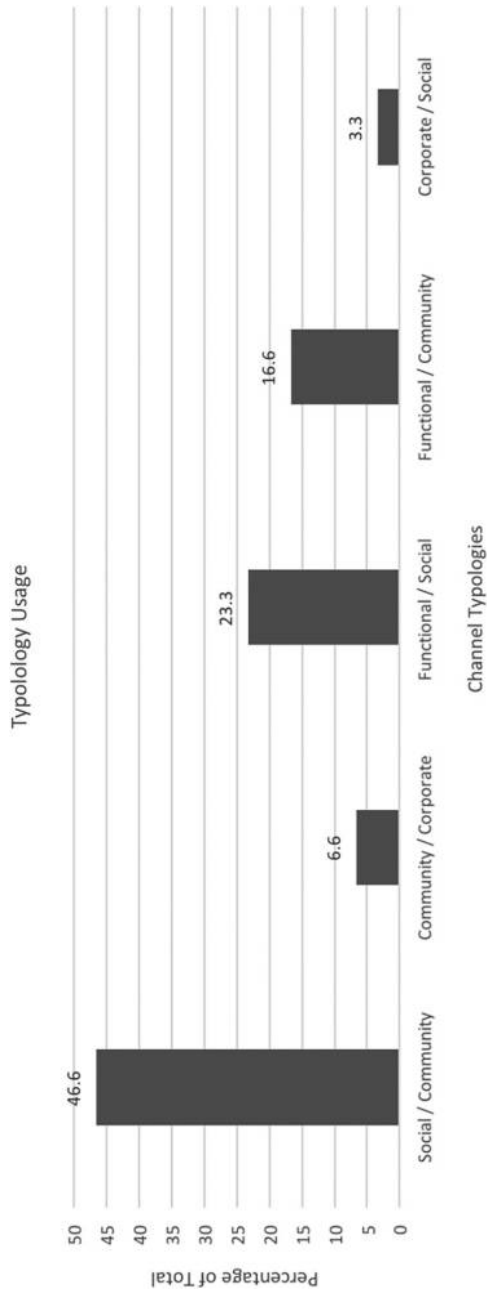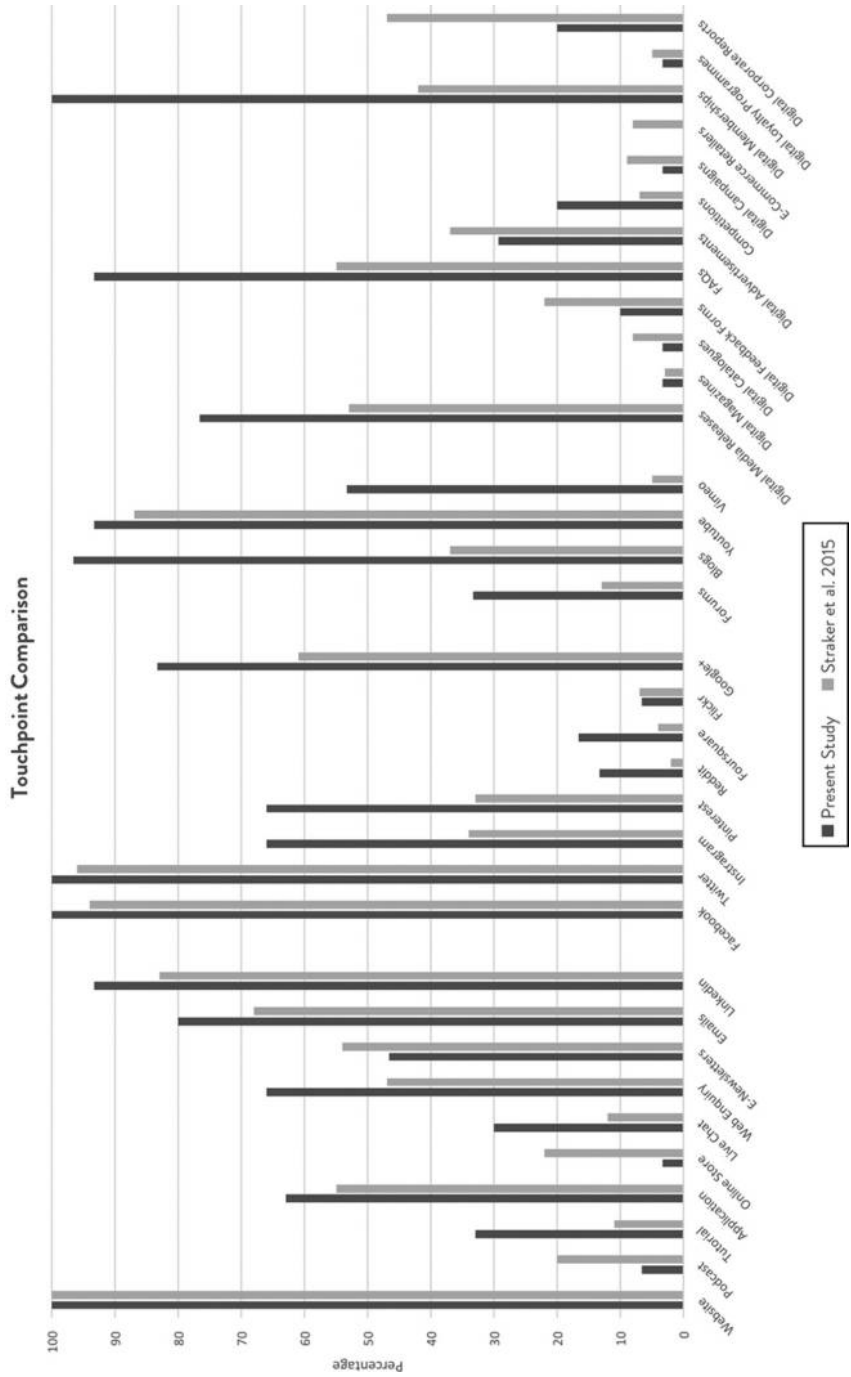
Figure 3.
Channel typologies

Figure 4.
Touchpoint usage
comparison

corporate channels were integrated within the singular marketplace channel. Supporting channels included the use of social and community channels which enabled peer-to-peer communication both with (social) and without (community) central governance from the firm. The choice of these digital channels align with the central philosophy of collaborative consumption by allowing communication for a decentralised group of peers who seek to share the burden of ownership (Botsman and Rogers, 2010) or redistribute assets for reimbursement (Belk, 2014). However, the collaborative consumption movement and the firms who leverage it are nuanced, evident in the three sub-types suggested by Botsman and Rogers (2010). As such, the following three sub-sections seek to examine each collaborative consumption typology before delving into a single collaborative consumption case study firm from each of the three sub-types (*product/service systems, redistribution markets and collaborative lifestyles*) exploring their digital channel usage in greater depth.

5.1 Product/Service system

The digital channel usage of product/service systems was found to be varied across all examined firms. However, given this variance and the comparatively small sample size of product/service system firms, the authors are reluctant to draw extensive conclusions as to whether there exists a definitive digital channel configuration specific to the typology. However, the authors offer an explanation for this variance. The authors propose that this variance is because of the existence of the product/service system literature prior to foundation literature on collaborative consumption. Product/Service system literature precedes that of initial writings on collaborative consumption and many of its fundamental tenets such as Web 2.0 collaboration (Hamari *et al.*, 2015). Mont (2002) describes the product/service system as a system of products, services, supporting networks and infrastructure that is designed to be: competitive, satisfy customer needs and have a lower environmental impact than traditional business models. This definition includes little mention of connected peers in a decentralised network. Both research and industry are limited by existing business pedagogy about what a product/service system actually entails. It is therefore more likely, that product/service systems, especially those that predated the rise of collaborative consumption in the general lexicon would use traditional methods to connect with customers.

5.1.1 Zipcar. Zipcar is an example of a collaborative consumption firm and can be categorised as a product/service system. Founded in 1999, the firm predates collaborative consumption including many of its fundamental tenets, notably widely accessible mobile communications and social networking. Zipcar provides short and long term car rental to users across a diverse range of countries. Zipcar retains ownership of the automotive asset and charges a fee for rental. Customers gain the value of mobility without the large financial costs of purchasing and owning a vehicle.

Zipcar's digital channels were coded under the functional and social typology. While the social typology represents a congruous relationship with the collaborative consumption philosophy of two-way, peer-to-peer communication, the use of functional channels appears inconsistent to the underlying movement. Indeed, this is the case for a number of other collaborative consumption firms across the data with four of five product/service systems coded as using traditional functional or corporate channels.

While potentially because of the aforementioned age of the product/service system concept and Zipcar, a factor which may contribute to the usage of industrial and traditional business practices, the use of traditional channels appears endemic in product/service systems in the automotive industry. In a hypothetical situation, Williams (2006) envisaged three key structural changes with the inclusion of product/service systems in the automotive industry; a changing notion of ownership, changes in product design and service and new forms of producer-consumer

interactions. However, the same authors (Williams, 2006, 2007) state that product/service systems in the automotive industry offered little in terms of progress at a system level. No firms were able to force change in ownership structure or firm-to-customer interactions with only minor changes to vehicle design.

With this knowledge, it seems logical that a product/service system within the automotive industry would deploy traditional channel configurations because of resilient organisational structures. However, Zipcar was still able to score highly in its usage of social digital channels. Further investigation of these digital channels concluded that Zipcar often used social channels as promotional channels rather than fostering rich interpersonal interactions. Evidence of interaction (i.e. "likes" or comments) on each channel were low. This aligns with Schultz and Peltier (2013) and Gómez and Borges (2015) view that many marketers view social media as a promotional tool, rather than using it as rich source of peer to peer interaction. Apparent from this analysis is that further investigation is needed into the specifics of the product/service system business model in light of the rise of collaborative consumption. Initial data on channel usage and content suggest that product/service systems are only a small step from traditional consumer-supplier business logic.

5.2 Redistribution market

Examination of the channel choices of redistribution markets revealed that channel typologies varied across the five examined firms. Although a small sample, the authors posit that this can be explained by returning to key precursor theory on second hand markets. Even though the transaction in a redistribution market occurs between peers in a network, ownership of the product shifts from one party to another, not unlike like traditional transactions.

It is therefore logical that like traditional firms, the channel choice is dictated by traditional channel strategies where the market is segmented, customers are identified and channels are deployed to best appeal to that customer (Straker *et al.*, 2015a; Musso, 2010). Companies choose channels that can best push a message about a specific product (Shankar and Malthouse, 2007), rather than a customer seeking second hand items. FoodCloud is a Redistribution Market that displays this trend.

5.2.1 FoodCloud. FoodCloud operates as a central actor that connects food producers and distributers with various organisations requiring food. Links between organisations are made through the platform to facilitate the transaction. Ownership of the product (i.e. foodstuffs) is transferred from one party to another.

FoodCloud was classified as using the functional and social typology to appeal to its main customers. Despite having the same score in community channels, the company was coded as "social" because of the higher levels of activity (i.e. posting and responding) on social channels. As a not-for-profit and primarily business-to-business firm, the company lacks many traditional corporate channels. The company has little interaction directly with the individuals it aims to help but operates as a business to business intermediary. As such, community channels are minimized. The company processes formal requests through its functional channels (i.e. Website) to other traditional organisations.

5.3 Collaborative lifestyles

Collaborative lifestyles appear as the most authentic version of the collaborative consumption belief of sharing the value of products and reducing the burden of ownership. Peers do more than simply communicate and collaborate, but exchange goods and provide services for other peers in the community. Unlike the previous two collaborative consumption subtypes, a dominant channel typology emerged from the data; the use of a social/community channel.

Insight for the reasoning behind this channel choice is reflected in the nature of collaborative lifestyles. The theoretical foundation for collaborative lifestyles can be found

within online and branded community literature. Bodies of literature have established sharing as the key activity of an online community (Di Gangi *et al.*, 2012; Sheng and Hartono, 2013; Chiu *et al.*, 2012; Hsu *et al.*, 2007). Sharing is often called referred to as "knowledge sharing"; few collaborative consumption firms have proved that communities have superseded simply sharing knowledge but are now services facilitating real life interactions. While much online community literature emphasises human factors, such as trust and reciprocity, between members of online communities as fundamental determinants for success (Abouzahra and Tan, 2014; Chan and Li, 2010; Chen and Hung, 2010), system quality and the simple ability to communicate is necessary (Lin, 2008). Without adequate communication channels, the online community cannot share.

Considering this aspect, the choice of community and social digital channels would serve to facilitate the sharing dimension necessary for online community health. Community and social channels are two-way communication methods, one with company moderation and one without. Peers are able to communicate with one another more effectively than through social or corporate channels. Airbnb is an example of a collaborative lifestyles initiative.

5.3.1 Airbnb. Airbnb acts as an intermediary between travellers and home owners. Home owners who have excess space or an excess property can rent out the asset to travellers. Airbnb plays little role in the service delivery, with peers supplying and delivering the service to other peers. Ownership of the space is only temporarily transferred or shared from one peer to another.

The digital channel data suggest Airbnb is trying to elicit sharing in a similar way to an online community through the use of digital channels. Social and community channels both emphasise two-way communication between peers and with the firm if needed. A closer investigation of each digital channel, functional and corporate channels appear to be tailored to new potential customers, with existing customers returning exclusively through the marketplace channel platform (i.e. website and application).

6. Implications

Unlike traditional industries, collaborative consumption firms have emphasised peer-to-peer communication over one-way communication methods. This research has begun the process of unearthing the digital channel usage not only of collaborative consumption firms but also their three subcategories. The discussion section highlighted the need for further research into each collaborative consumption subcategory. For example, a redistribution market like FoodCloud which operates primarily as a B2B intermediary, would have different business model elements when compared with EBay, which operates as both a B2B and C2C redistribution market. In turn, the digital channel configuration would be different to engage with different customer groups.

Building on this available data, the authors posit that customer needs and motivation for using each of the three subcategories would be different because of different intricacies of each type of collaborative consumption business model. Below in Table IV each collaborative consumption sub-category is shown with its purpose and ideal touchpoint configuration to satisfy a customer need (abstracted from the data). The sub-types of product/service systems and redistribution markets are split into two further subcategories to better describe their digital channel usage in relation to a potential customer.

The authors propose a model for practitioners and future researchers to test. Taking into account the customer needs, and the intricacies of each collaborative consumption subcategory, the authors suggest the ideal typology required to best communicate and therefore best satisfy customer's needs and expectations. This model takes into account the diverse typologies found in the product/service system and redistribution market

Collaborative consumption subcategories	Purpose	Typology	Customer need
Product/Service systems (firm-led)	Access to a product over a limited period of time from a registered firm	Functional/Social	Customer is seeking the reliability and security of using a firm with the cost benefit of using a product/service system Potentially a first time user of a Collaborative Consumption venture
Product/Service systems (community-led)	Access over ownership. Access to a product over a limited period of time from a centralised community bank of products	Community/Social	The customer is seeking the unique experience of using community provided product or potentially a unique product that firm-led product/service systems cannot provide
Redistribution markets (B2B)	The complete transfer of ownership from one entity of another without contribution to the environmental burden of production. Goods come from one firm and are sold to another	Functional/Corporate	The customer is a firm who wishes to collaborate with another firm in order to utilise second hand goods
Redistribution markets (C2C or C2B2C)	The complete transfer of ownership from one entity of another without contribution to the environmental burden of production. Goods are sold between community members, or sold from community members to a central firm, who then sells on to the community	Social/Community	The customer is the one seeking the cost benefit of obtaining a second hand good or seeking a unique second hand product
Collaborative lifestyles	Access over ownership. Peers in a community network receive a product for temporary use or are delivered a service by another member of the community	Social/Community	The customer is the one seeking a product or service from the community, which requires the community's collective expertise

Table IV.
Collaborative consumption typology, channels and customer needs

subcategories while building on the dominant typology found when investigating the collaborative lifestyles subcategory.

7. Summary
This research contributes to the current limited understanding of collaborative consumption firms and their business models. As a first step, the research seeks to establish a single premise, *what digital channels do collaborative consumption firms use?* Through this work, the researchers define what a collaborative consumption firm is, identified the digital channel usage of 30 collaborative consumption firms and found evidence to suggest greater deployment of two-way communication channels that enable a dialogue between peers in a networked customer base and between firm and customer. This suggests a distinct shift in the marketing mentalities of collaborative consumption companies who give control to their customers. Furthermore, the researchers propose a model to guide industry practitioners and provide an avenue for future research. It is expected that this research will contribute to a broader understanding of marketing in collaborative consumption firms and the business model design of collaborative consumption firms. Further research must examine the nuances of each sub-type. Similarly, this research sought to survey the digital channel usage of collaborative consumption firms and further investigation of the specific content communication across the digital channels is required.

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Appendix 1

Industry	Company	Collaborative consumption typology	Functional channels	Social channels	Community channels	Corporate channels	Code
Tasks/Odd-jobs/ Employment	TaskRabbit	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, app, tutorials, web enquiry, LinkedIn	Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest, Foursquare	YouTube, Vimeo, blog, forums	FAQs, digital media releases, online memberships	
Score			5/10 Functional channels Functional score: 0.5	6/8 Social channels Social score: 0.75	4/4 Community channels Community score: 1	3/11, Corporate channels Corporate score: 0.27	*Social/Community*

Table AI.
Example coding
scheme – task rabbit

Appendix 2

Industry	Company	Collaborative consumption typology	Channels Function	Social	Community	Corporate	Code
Mobility/ Transportation	Uber	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, application, LinkedIn, live chat (drivers), email, newsletter	Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Youtube, Instagram, Pinterest, Foursquare	Vimeo, blog	Digital advertising, FAQS, press releases, corporate reports, online account/membership	*Functional/Social*
	Lyft	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, app, LinkedIn, podcast, tutorials, email, web inquiry	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter	Blog, forums, Vimeo, Youtube	Digital newsletter, digital campaign, FAQS, online account/membership	*Functional/Community*
	Zipcar	Product/Service system	Website, app (iOS and andriod), email, phone, LinkedIn	Facebook, Google+, Instagram, Twitter, Foursquare	Youtube	Annual report, ` FAQ sheets, digital advertising, online account/memberships, online magazine, digital media release	*Functional/Social*
	BuddyTruk	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, app (iOS and android), web enquiry, live chat, LinkedIn	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Reddit, Google+	Youtube, Vimeo, blog	FAQs, Newsletter, online memberships/account	*Social/Community*
	Carvana	Redistribution market	Websites, app websites, online store, phone, LinkedIn, email, online enquiry	Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, Instagram	blog, Youtube	Digital media release, online account/membership	*Functional/Social*

Table AII.
Complete data pool

Table AII.

Industry	Company	Collaborative consumption typology	Channels Function	Social	Community	Corporate	Code
Accommodation/ Real estate	Airbnb	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, app, LinkedIn, web enquiry, phone, email	Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, Instragram	blog, Vimeo, Youtube, FAQs	Newsletter, competition (recommend a friend), digital press releases, annual report, online account/membership online advertising	*Social/Community*
	ListingDoor	Redistribution market	Website, web inquiry, email, LinkedIn	Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+	Youtube, Vimeo, blog	FAQs online account/Membership	*Social/Community*
	Couch Surfing	Collaborative lifestyle	Websites, app (both iOS and android), LinkedIn, web enquiry	Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, Flickr	Blog, Youtube	Online account/Membership, FAQs, feedback from	*Social/Community*
	Flipkey	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, app (iOS and android), tutorials, web enquiry	Facebook, Pinterest, Foursquare, Google+, Tumblr, Twitter	Forum, blog, Youtube	Enewsletter, Media releases, advertising, competition, corporate report, online account/membership, FAQS	*Social/Community*
	HomeExchange	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, live chat, online enquiry, LinkedIn	Facebook, Twitter, Google +, Pinterest, Instagram, Pinterest	Blogs, Youtube	FAQS, online press releases, corporate report, online account/memberships forums	*Social/Community*

Industry	Company	Collaborative consumption typology	Channels Function	Social	Community	Corporate	Code
Hospitality/Food	Eatwith	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, application (hosts only), web enquiry, email enquiry, LinkedIn, e newsletter	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter	Blog, Vimeo, YouTube	FAQs, online press releases, forum (hosts only), corporate media releases, online account/membership	Functional/Community
	FoodCloud	Redistribution markets	Website, newsletter, applications, email, phone, web enquiry, LinkedIn	Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Instagram	Blog, YouTube	FAQs, digital media releases, online account/memberships	Functional/Social
	Casserole	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, email support	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn	Blog, Vimeo	FAQs, online account/memberships	Social/Community
	Feastly	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, tutorials, emails	Google+, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, Facebook	Blog, Vimeo	E-Newsletter, FAQS, online account/memberships, digital media releases	Social/Community
	KitchenSurfing	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, application, tutorials, online chat, email, LinkedIn	Pinterest, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Google+	YouTube, Blog	FAQ, newsletter, digital media releases, online account/memberships	Functional/Social
	GrubHub	Product/Service system	Website, app (android and iOS), live chat, web inquiry, email, LinkedIn	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Flickr, Google+	Blog, YouTube	FAQs, corporate reports etc, digital media releases, digital adverts, coupons/competitions, online account/marketplace	Corporate/Social

Table AII.

Table AII.

Industry	Company	Collaborative consumption typology	Channels Function	Social	Community	Corporate	Code
Education	Apprentus	Collaborative lifestyles	Website Web Enquiry LinkedIn	Twitter Google+ Soundcloud Facebook	Blog YouTube Vimeo	Online Media Releases FAQs Online Feedback Forms Digital Memberships E-Newsletter	*Community/Social*
	Udemy	Collaborative lifestyles	Website Applications (iOS and Android) Tutorials Email Enquiry LinkedIn	Facebook Twitter Instagram Pinterest Google+	Blogs Vimeo YouTube Forums	Online Membership/Marketplace Digital Press Releases Digital Ad Newsletters FAQS	*Social/Community*
	UrbanPro	Collaborative lifestyles	Website Apps (iOS and Android) Web Enquiry Email Contact Phone Tutorial LinkedIn	Facebook Google+ Twitter Pinterest	Youtube Blog	Online Account/Membership FAQS Online Press Releases	*Function/Social*
	Aalizawel.com	Collaborative lifestyles	Website Web Enquiry Email Line LinkedIn	Facebook Twitter Google+	Blog YouTube	FAQS Online Membership	*Functional/Community*
	Konnektid	Collaborative lifestyles	Website Podcast Email LinkedIn	Facebook Twitter Pinterest Google+ Instagram	YouTube Vimeo Blog	Online Memberships Online Press Releases FAQs	*Social/Community*

Industry	Company	Collaborative consumption typology	Channels Function	Social	Community	Corporate	Code
Tasks/Odd-Jobs/ Employment	TaskRabbit	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, app, tutorials, web enquiry, LinkedIn	Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest, Foursquare	YouTube, Vimeo, blog, forums	FAQs, digital media releases, online memberships	*Social/Community*
	HandyBook/Handy	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, app (iOS + android), email, LinkedIn	Facebook, Instagram, Google+, Pinterest, Reddit, Twitter	Blog, Vimeo, YouTube	Digital media releases, online membership, FAQS, online competitions	*Social/Community*
	Thumbtack	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, email support, phone support, app for pros and users, live chat, email enquiry, LinkedIn, email	Facebook, Google+, Twitter, RSS Feeds, Pinterest, Instagram	Blog, Youtube	Digital media releases, FAQs, online membership	*Functional/Social*
	Upwork	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, live chat, email enquiry, LinkedIn	Google+, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest	forums, blog, YouTube	FAQS, online membership, newsletter, online media releases	*Social/Community*

(continued)

Table AII.

Table AII.

Industry	Company	Collaborative consumption typology	Channels Function	Social	Community	Corporate	Code
Speciality Goods/Services	SpaceBase	Collaborative lifestyles	Website, Linkedin, live chat, web enquiry, email	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Foursquare	Youtube, Vimeo, blog	Online membership, online press release, newsletter	*Social/Community*
	Swambuild	Product/Service system	Website, Linkedin, forums, email, web enquiry	Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Reddit	YouTube, blog	competition, online membership, FAQs	*Functional/Community*
	3DHubs	Product/Service system	Website, tutorials, web enquiry, Linkedin, email	Instagram, Twitter, Google+, Reddit, Tumblr, Linkedin, Facebook	Youtube, Vimeo, blog, forums	FAQs, online memberships, online press releases, corporate reports	*Social/Community*
	Tinder	Product/Service system	App, website, email, Linkedin	Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest	Youtube, Vimeo, blog	Digital advert, online membership, online press release	*Functional/Community*
	Ebay	Redistribution market	Website, app, tutorials, Linkedin, email, live chat	Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, Tumblr	Forums, Youtube	Newsletter, online press releases, corporate reports, FAQs, ads loyalty programme competitions, digital catalogues, online account/ membership, digital advertising, FAQs	*Corporate/Community*