

## Article

# Persuading Reluctant Customers: The Online Marketing Communications of Car Sharing Firms

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**Abstract:** Circular economy offers face significant difficulties when competing with traditional offers in the market. A particular challenge is the lack of consumer interest and adoption, which hinders the success of business-to-consumer (B2C) sharing business models. The study introduces an online communications framework, based on rhetoric theory, to explore how B2C car-sharing firms persuade potential customers. The framework is tested and refined through a qualitative content analysis of six major car-sharing providers in the USA and the UK. The results reveal that firms use evidence- and reason-based appeals focused on utility but have difficulty addressing consumer concerns about sharing business models, particularly regarding ownership. Interestingly, the potentially large environmental sustainability benefits of car sharing and commensurate branding are not emphasised as much as the literature on the subject would indicate; it rather appears that car-sharing firms struggle to leverage this factor in their communications. This study contributes to the literature on consumer behaviour and marketing in the circular and sharing economy by providing a theoretical perspective for understanding how firms view their offers and consumers and seek to communicate benefits and assuage worries.

**Keywords:** circular economy; sharing economy; car sharing; product–service system; consumer adoption; advertising; marketing; online communications; rhetoric theory



**Citation:** Mai, P.; Day, S.J. Persuading Reluctant Customers: The Online Marketing Communications of Car Sharing Firms. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 16651. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su152416651>

Academic Editor: Lukas Parker

Received: 13 October 2023

Revised: 3 December 2023

Accepted: 6 December 2023

Published: 7 December 2023



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## 1. Introduction

The linear economic system currently in place results in the waste of valuable resources, extensive pollution, and significant environmental damage. To address this issue, energy and sustainability are being prioritised [1,2]. This has led to a growing demand for a shift towards sustainable production and consumption, as embodied in the circular economy concept. The goal of the circular economy is to close “open loops” in the provision and consumption of products and services, incorporating various sustainability ideas [3]. There is a strong correlation between consumer behaviours that extend product lifecycles and the adoption of a circular economy [4]. These ideas include regenerative raw materials and energy, cleaner production, industrial ecology at the production stage, durability and efficient functioning at the use stage, and re-use and sharing after first use, with recycling as a last resort [5,6].

Re-use and sharing are believed to have high potentials for resource savings and pollution reduction by reducing the number of physical artefacts in circulation. However, rebound effects due to higher utilisation may offset some of these gains [7]. Despite this, the prevailing view is that re-use and sharing business models can effectively displace new production [8,9]. The emergence of the sharing economy has impacted traditional marketing activities, processes, and associated value creation outcomes [10]. Business-to-consumer (B2C) car-sharing schemes are an example of such business models [11,12] and have seen significant growth in recent years [13].

Marketing communications are a way for brand marketing to drive important purchase-related outcomes in the sharing economy [14]. More specifically, the advertising of sharing and sharing business models has been considered in multiple industries, including social media [15] and fashion [16], albeit with mixed results. Furthermore, there is very limited research on the influencing factors of consumer adoption in the sharing market [17]. This is problematic because consumer adoption of car-sharing schemes has been less than expected and is most successful with specific consumer groups in Europe, such as young, wealthy consumers or well-educated individuals in Madrid and Munich [18,19]. This challenges the commercial viability of car sharing and similar sharing business models where the provider serves as the product owner and platform mediator to keep physical artefacts in circulation [20]. Research has examined the relative advantages and disadvantages of such offers from the consumer perspective [21–25], the transition of business models and supply chains [26], the digital technologies required to support them [27–29], and whether car sharing actually results in better environmental performance [30].

The way providers advertise their offers to persuade consumers to switch has been largely ignored, with only a few exceptions [31]. It is thus not well understood which advantages or disadvantages, often identified through qualitative consumer studies, are important from the perspective of firms. While it is believed that convincing consumers of the potential benefits of car-sharing schemes and addressing their concerns is crucial for adoption, there has been little research on how firms actually do this in practice. A further issue is that research has primarily examined car-sharing schemes from the perspective of environmental sustainability, which may not match with more utility-minded consumers, creating a potential disconnect between the framing of such offers in academia and industry. Since car-sharing schemes are promoted and facilitated through digital technologies and the Internet [32], industrial insights often remain hidden [33], hindering our understanding of how the circular economy can be communicated effectively. This study aims to further explore this area and answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Which factors may influence consumer adoption of B2C car sharing?

RQ2: How do car-sharing providers communicate about B2C car sharing with prospective consumers to address these factors and improve the adoption of their services?

In order to address the two research questions, this study will first conduct a brief literature review to develop a framework that links consumer adoption factors in the B2C car-sharing context with potential communicative devices derived from rhetoric theory. The methodology is then defined as a qualitative content analysis, with detailed descriptions of data collection and analysis procedures. The results follow, presenting the interpreted empirical data in relation to the existing literature. Finally, a short conclusion summarises the study's findings and contributions and suggests avenues for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

This literature review is divided into two sections. The first section distinguishes free-floating B2C car-sharing schemes from other types of car sharing and summarises the factors that influence consumer adoption intentions. The second section demonstrates how rhetoric theory can be applied to categorise online marketing communications into persuasive appeals. The findings from both sections are then combined to create a framework that is further explored in this study.

### 2.1. Free-Floating B2C Car-Sharing Schemes from the Consumer Perspective

Two primary types of car-sharing schemes are associated with the emerging digital circular economy, which is grounded on servitised business models that revolve around Internet of Things technology [27–29]. These are B2C and peer-to-peer (P2P) schemes [34,35]. In B2C schemes, the vehicles are owned by a car-sharing firm that also maintains them, and consumers can use the vehicles on demand for a service fee [36,37]. This type of business essentially provides short-term car rental services [38]. B2C car sharing can be further divided into free-floating and stationary models [13]. Free-floating car-sharing

services allow customers to take one-way trips without needing to return the car to the pick-up location, while stationary models require customers to return the car to the pick-up location [36]. In contrast, P2P car sharing enables private car owners to temporarily share their cars with consumers who pay for short-term access, and the car owner receives a portion of the usage fee [14,35]. All three types of schemes are facilitated by websites, mobile apps, and associated Internet of Things technology [32]. The digital platforms that facilitate these transactions are a core component of these business models as they precisely match supply and demand in real time [39]. These digitally enabled schemes primarily differ in terms of flexibility and likely distance travelled and provide a compromise compared to traditional bicycle, car rental services, public transport, and others [13]. This research will focus on free-floating B2C schemes as they offer some of the highest potentials for environmental savings and currently have more users than P2P schemes [40,41].

Free-floating car-sharing schemes result in environmental savings by promoting more efficient distribution and usage of vehicles that would otherwise be underutilised [39] and reducing the overall number of manufactured vehicles as sharing replaces ownership [36,42]. Additionally, car-sharing providers are motivated to maintain existing vehicles instead of producing new ones. Car-sharing schemes have also facilitated the adoption of environmentally friendly technologies such as electric vehicles (EVs), which are well suited for short to medium urban journeys and further reduce fuel consumption and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions [30,40].

Car sharing and similar offers in other product categories have been extensively studied under the labels of circular economy [3], sharing economy [14], collaborative consumption [32,43], access-based consumption [21], and product–service system [27,36,39]. These studies and others have identified several factors that either encourage or discourage consumer adoption of free-floating car-sharing schemes. Synthesising the most frequently named factors in the following yields a list of potentially relevant factors bearing on the adoption of free-floating car-sharing services by consumers.

Economic benefits are one of the primary motivations for consumers to adopt B2C car-sharing services [21,23]. Consumers can achieve significant cost savings by using car-sharing services instead of other viable alternatives [32,36,44]. Since users only pay a usage fee, which can be more affordable than purchasing a vehicle depending on their usage, access to car-sharing services can replace ownership and its associated high upfront costs. This reduces the financial risk for consumers, which refers to the potential financial loss resulting from a purchase decision [45], although frequent drivers may still be better off with ownership [46,47].

Convenience is a major factor in the adoption of car-sharing services, according to a study examining the motivations of Zipcar users [21]. Car sharing can relieve users of the responsibilities of ownership [23,39]. However, there are concerns about performance risks and the availability of cars in urban settings [24]. Customers may also be concerned about the ease of use of the app and the registration process [27,29,48].

There are also concerns about the condition and hygiene of the vehicles, as they are used by multiple unknown users and may not be checked between uses [45,49,50]. This may evoke contagion concerns with pre-used cars [21,39].

Ownership can create intangible values for consumers, such as experiential and symbolic values [8,21,28,39]. These values are created through full property rights and emotional bonds formed through prolonged use and interaction with the good [45,51]. However, these values may be diminished in car sharing due to the absence of emotional involvement and the social risk associated with renting or sharing products [8,21,24,47].

The reputation and image of the service provider are also important factors in consumer adoption, providing trustworthiness to what is an unfamiliar offer for many [31,45,52,53]. Partially connected to this point are the environmental sustainability advantages that car sharing may provide in comparison to the alternatives such as car ownership and the degree to which firms frame their offers as sustainable. Studies [14,52] struggle to agree on whether environmental sustainability is an important factor from the perspective of the

consumer, but a large amount of research on car sharing and other circular and sharing economy offers assumes that consumer interest in this factor is growing. Car-sharing providers may thus wish to leverage the improved environmental sustainability of their offering to tap into this interest [14,35].

In summary, based on a review of the literature, free-floating car-sharing schemes offer distinct advantages to consumers but also grapple with multiple issues, particularly when compared to more traditional ownership-based usage regimes. Economic factors and multiple types of convenience may be at the forefront of consumers' minds, as could be worries about the physical condition of the cars. The intangible values of ownership are likely also a disadvantage; however, the firm reputation and environmental sustainability benefits may counteract such drawbacks.

## 2.2. Applying Rhetoric Theory to Online Marketing Communications

Marketing is a process that aims to engage customers, build relationships, and create value that can be monetised [54]. A key aspect of this process is communication with the audience, which can lead to cognitive and emotional responses, as well as behavioural changes [55]. In the era of e-business, these communications are often embedded in websites and other online platforms [33], which have become significant channels of communication in their own right [56]. Websites provide consumers with a wealth of information [57], and this is particularly true for car-sharing providers, who often rely on their online presence as they typically lack physical locations accessible to the public [32]. This paper will focus on the texts, images, videos, and other information available on a car-sharing provider's online presence [58].

Several theoretical lenses can be used to develop and analyse these communications. One such lens is rhetoric theory, which focuses on the use of language and other symbolic forms to influence audience behaviour [59], with an emphasis on persuasion and profound change [60]. Previous research has analysed media articles and videos through a rhetoric theory lens and drawn effective conclusions related to sustainability; the particular strength of rhetoric theory in such contexts is that it provides broad categories in which more specific meanings can be located [61]. Rhetoric theory originated from Aristotle and ancient Greek discourse and distinguishes between ethos (credibility), pathos (reason), and logos (emotion) [62]. It is believed that "wherever there is persuasion there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning' there is 'persuasion'" [63]. Studies have shown that rhetorical figures such as resonance in advertisements can significantly affect consumer responses [64]. As a result, "marketing is closely associated with persuasion and is inherently rhetorical in its communication aspects" [65] (p. 1345); this has led to calls for an integrated framework.

Ethos refers to the persona or character projected by the sender of the message [66]. There are three basic dimensions of classical rhetoric: *phronesis*, *arete*, and *eunoia*, which respectively represent expertise, trustworthiness, and goodwill based on Aristotle's rhetoric [67]. In marketing, ethos is best represented by trust, which is particularly important in online settings where it can reduce consumer perceptions of uncertainty and risk [60,68]. Trust can be divided into competency, integrity, and benevolence [69], which align closely with the conception of ethos in rhetoric theory. Expertise refers to the firm's capability to do what it says it will do—a crucial factor in online spaces [70]. Trustworthiness is defined by the sincerity, honesty, and reliability of the firm's communications and intentions. Benevolence refers to the belief that the firm genuinely cares about its consumers and their welfare [71].

Logos is the aspect of communication that deals with logical and rational appeals. This concept has been explored in marketing under various labels, such as "rational advertising" [72], "cognitive information processing" [73], and "analytical information processing" [74]. These concepts are based on the assumption that consumers make logical and rational decisions based on their self-interests and personal goals [75]. As a result, informativeness is a crucial component of logos-type marketing communications, as it bridges the gap between the consumer and the product or service [76].

Logos persuasion devices in marketing communications take three interconnected forms. The first focuses on attributes and how consumers weigh the comparative advantages and disadvantages of a product or service [54]. The second focuses on evidence, such as scientific explanations [77], while the third focuses on reason, as demonstrated through clear argumentative logic [78].

Pathos, on the other hand, embodies emotional appeals that increase the level of persuasion by impacting the emotions of the audience. In marketing, emotions are considered to be of great importance and can be influenced through advertising and branding that target the needs of the target market [79]. For example, Airbnb hosts may use affective words such as “warm”, “secure”, and “comfortable”, as well as social words such as “welcome”, in their hosting information to appeal to customers who desire sociability when using Airbnb [80]. However, few studies have attempted to identify specific tools for modern emotional marketing. One exception is a study that synthesised four main emotional branding strategies in the fashion industry: sensory branding, storytelling, cause branding, and empowerment, which have been described in the literature in some detail [81] and which we summarise in the following: Sensory marketing appeals to the consumer’s senses and elicits emotional responses [82], while stories establish an emotional connection with consumers by tapping into touchpoints in their lives [83]. Cause-related marketing offers consumers opportunities to purchase for reasons other than personal benefits, such as social and moral beliefs. Empowerment aims to create a feeling of empowerment among consumers by increasing self-esteem and self-efficacy [84].

In summary, rhetoric theory offers a universal and intuitive lens that can categorise the more specific and nuanced marketing communications of firms. A particular strength of this approach is that the underlying mechanism through which the consumer is supposed to be persuaded to opt for the product or service is already reflected in the three labels ethos, logos, and pathos.

### 2.3. Building the Framework

By systematically combining insights on the factors that influence consumer adoption of free-floating car-sharing schemes with the use of rhetoric theory to analyse online marketing communications, a conceptual framework can be developed (Table 1). Research has indicated that these influencing factors have a significant impact on consumers [61]. This framework will be used to determine how B2C car-sharing providers attempt to persuade consumers to adopt their services.

**Table 1.** Online marketing communications framework applied to B2C car sharing.

|   | Ethos (Expertise, Trustworthiness, Goodwill) | Logos (Benefits/Harms, Evidence and Factual Information, Reason/Logic) | Pathos (Sensory Appeal, Storytelling, Cause-Related Marketing, Empowerment) |
|---|--|--|---|
| <b>Economic factors</b>                               |  |  |   |
| Convenience (responsibility)                          |  |  |   |
| Convenience (availability)                            |  |  |   |
| Convenience (ease of use)                             |  |  |   |
| <b>Physical product condition</b>                     |  |  |   |
| Intangible value of ownership (emotional involvement) |  |  |   |
| Intangible value of ownership (negative social image) |  |  |   |
| <b>Firm reputation</b>                                |  |  |   |
| Environmental sustainability advantage                |  |  |   |



### 3. Methodology

A content analysis was performed to populate the previously developed consumer adoption framework and address the research questions. The objects of this analysis were online marketing communications, which consist of complex symbols, meanings, and cultures [84]. These objects are not homogeneous, as they include texts, videos, and images, making them difficult to analyse quantitatively and necessitating a qualitative approach. This research followed Krippendorff's advice on structuring content analyses, which he describes as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" [85] (p. 18). Qualitative content analysis (QCA) focuses on analysing heterogeneous data by constructing meaning from the material and systematically interpreting this meaning. This is done using a coding frame with different categories of meanings, and the materials are systematically classified into the frame, with multiple codes being used to interrogate the meaning from different angles [86]. The following describes how this process was approached in the data collection and analysis stages.

#### 3.1. Data Collection

In this study, the marketing communication content of several B2C car-sharing firms was extracted from their websites and online presences. A purposive sampling method was used to select suitable firms for data collection and analysis [87]. Larger firms by revenue were chosen from the population of B2C car-sharing operators, as their communications are likely to be more mature and comprehensive, providing sufficient data for the study.

Given the overlap in language skills between the two authors, two developed English-speaking countries, the USA and the UK, were selected for the study due to their mature car-sharing markets and the presence of some of the most successful schemes [42]. This also had the benefit of removing non-central issues from our analysis; in particular, both the USA and the UK are Anglo-Saxon countries featuring relatively similar cultural and legal systems with similarly neutral public policy stances on free-floating car sharing. A total of six firms' marketing communications were collected and analysed to allow for a meaningful comparison and theoretical saturation [80]. Three firms per country were chosen based on brand awareness, as identified by Statista [88]. These included Zipcar, Enterprise Car Share, and Car2go in the USA and Enterprise Car Club, DriveNow, and Co-wheels in the UK. Firms operating under similar brands in both countries were only included in one country category to avoid duplication. Peer-to-peer sharing providers were also excluded.

Data from these firms' online presences were recorded and categorised into text, images, videos, and audio. Web links to the respective objects were assigned during the recording along with a descriptive title. All relevant data were carefully captured from the firms' websites, excluding legal, organisational, or other information not intended for marketing purposes. The focus on websites (instead of mobile applications) was due to consumers first having to sign up to use the firms' offers on the websites, making the websites and their marketing communications the primary opportunity for firms to convince potential consumers. Marketing communications aimed solely at corporate clients were also excluded. Social media accounts were not considered due to the different nature of communications on these platforms. To maintain the integrity of the data, as websites are updated frequently, the data collection was begun and completed within two weeks in July 2019.

#### 3.2. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, all data were gathered and stored in a central data collection file, separated by car-sharing firm. This file contained text excerpts, links to videos and images, and other collected data. Each data point was then roughly categorised as either ethos, logos, or pathos within the rhetoric marketing communication framework and then coded for measurement [89]. Patterns

were identified and codes refined according to the framework to converge on more specific types of persuasive devices [86]. The devices shown in Table 1 were used as a starting point for codes, but new codes could emerge from the data if necessary. All valuable communication content that could be recorded and saved in text or non-text form was captured in alignment with content analysis best practice [90]. Data were analysed with Nvivo software (version 11) [91].

### 3.3. Validity and Reliability

In the second stage, a comparison analysis was conducted in which the interpreted results from the six car-sharing firms were cross-examined to identify larger patterns. The results provide more details on this process. Validity was addressed through the procedures used for data collection and analysis, which followed best practices in QCA methodologies and case sampling logic. The generalisability of the results from the narrowly defined sample will be discussed in the study limitations, but the benefits of a homogeneous sample for internal validity and cross-comparison are clear. Researcher bias is a concern in QCA methodologies, as data interpretation is subject to one's own perspective. To address this issue, the authors followed the advice of Krippendorff and Schreier by providing examples and evidence of the richness of the data and its interpretation in the study to demonstrate how codes were applied [85,86].

## 4. Results

The results of the study are presented in the order of the factors proposed to influence consumer adoption of car sharing, as outlined in the previously developed framework. To maintain the readability of the paper, we relegate illustrative images of the firms' websites to the Appendix A but provide an overview in the following Table 2.

**Table 2.** Overview of illustrative examples reflecting communications about the factors.

| Factors  | Illustrative Example |
|--|----------------------|
| <b>Economic factors</b>                                      | Figures A1 and A2    |
| <b>Convenience (responsibility)</b>                          | Figure A3            |
| <b>Convenience (availability)</b>                            |                      |
| <b>Convenience (ease of use)</b>                             |                      |
| <b>Physical product condition</b>                            | Figure A4            |
| <b>Intangible value of ownership (emotional involvement)</b> | Figure A5            |
| <b>Intangible value of ownership (negative social image)</b> | Figure A6            |
| <b>Firm reputation</b>                                       | Figure A7            |
| <b>Environmental sustainability advantage</b>                |                      |

All firms emphasise the potential cost savings of switching from traditional car ownership to car sharing. For instance, DriveNow invites consumers to “Discover how affordable car sharing is” in large letters and supports this claim with cost information (Figure A1).

All firms frequently use hooks that focus on reducing financial barriers and commitment. For example, Zipcar offers a “FREE Zipcar membership” and “FREE gas and insurance”. All firms also describe the cost-saving benefits in simple language. DriveNow states that “everything’s included in the rental price—insurance, fuel, parking, road tax, and the rental of a premium BMW or MINI”. Enterprise Car Club summarises the economic appeal as “you only ever pay for a vehicle when you need it, not when you don’t”. Cost calculators are often available so that consumers can estimate the cost of a typical journey based on their usage profile. Firms also frequently support their claims with research and data. Zipcar cites a study by business consulting firm Frost & Sullivan that claims “car sharing can reduce the total transit costs for its members by 70%”, while Enterprise

CarShare argues that car sharing may “reduce your college or university’s transportation cost by 30% [...] pilot examples have seen reductions as high as 34% in overall costs”. Enterprise CarShare combines the argument against car ownership with the argument for car sharing (Figure A2). Overall, firms only use persuasive devices belonging to the logos category for this factor.

In terms of convenience-related factors, firms use ethos, logos, and pathos techniques in their marketing communications to demonstrate how car sharing can relieve consumers of unwanted responsibilities. For instance, Co-wheels Car Club argues that traditional car ownership involves “finding a reliable car, organizing bank loans, getting a parking space” and “insurance, cleaning, servicing and refueling”, making “owning a car a hassle”. Firms combine these appeals with the promise that their fleet management systems have the capability to take this hassle away from consumers, corresponding to an ethos argument. Sensory appeal and storytelling are also frequently used. Car2go’s promotional videos feature a storyteller saying “I can just choose when I want to use it, I can leave it whenever I want, and after I am done with it, it’s not mine anymore” (Figure A3).

Availability, another convenience factor, is communicated through ethos and logos devices. For example, DriveNow refers to their expertise and capability to offer “more than 20,000 vehicles” in “more than 30 major cities worldwide”, while Co-wheels claims to be “the UK’s biggest car club now in 60 locations”. Car2go refers to its predictive demand forecasting abilities to argue that cars will be readily available to consumers. In addition to demonstrating their capabilities, Enterprise Car Club provides evidence: “Our latest survey shows that our member’s first choice of vehicle was available in more than 80% of cases [and when] our members’ first choice of vehicle isn’t available, 99% of members are able to book an alternative vehicle close by for the time they wanted”.

Ease of use is demonstrated through logos and pathos appeals. Co-wheels provides an example of a logos argument by emphasising that their “application [...] is quick and easy”. Co-wheels and some of its competitors state the number of business days it takes for consumers to be able to use the service. Zipcar summarises: “No reservations required. No long lines. . .no need for keys. . .no need to return”. Firms also use sensory appeal techniques to enable customers to intuitively feel the ease of use. For example, most firms use videos to show how to apply for and use the service. In these videos, the processes are visually depicted with continuous and coherent steps and presented with high-tempo background music. As a result of the hearing and sight senses of the audience being engaged in this way, customers are more likely to perceive the processes as quick and easy as shown in the video.

In the analysis of the data, another convenience-related factor that emerged was the variety of vehicles offered by firms. Firms primarily use ethos to demonstrate their ability to provide a diverse range of cars and logos to show the benefits to consumers of having a variety of choices. Some examples of empowerment are also present. For example, Enterprise CarShare highlights its diverse fleet with the statement “Enterprise has the world’s largest and most diverse fleet of vehicles” and interprets this for the benefit of consumers: “We offer a wide selection of vehicles for whatever your day has in store. . . help you cart shopping bags, haul furniture, or skip town for a few—on your schedule”.

In terms of the physical condition of the product, newness is only addressed by Enterprise CarShare with a simple statement, but without a specific persuasive device: “Enterprise has a newer and larger fleet of vehicles compared to any of our car-sharing competitors”. Hygiene and safety issues are addressed by some firms through logos techniques, with evidence provided to assure consumers. Enterprise Car Club explains that “vehicles are cleaned and safety-checked in their bays or taken to local branches for a full valet every 14 days. All valets and safety checks are digitally recorded by our specialist fleet team, who adhere to the highest possible standards”. Enterprise Car Club also provides information about safety recall procedures (Figure A4). Both DriveNow and Car2go also highlight the various safety features of their cars.



Firms also detail their policies on user responsibilities, implying that users may be charged if they leave a car in poor condition. Zipcar asks consumers “Before you start driving, you must inspect your Zipcar inside and out and report any problems. This will help ensure our vehicles get the care they need”, and other firms have similar appeals. Overall, firms use ethos and logos techniques to assure potential adopters of the safety and hygiene of their car fleet.

To address the potential issue of a lack of emotional connection with the products, firms employ various strategies such as using texts, videos, and pictures to place the car in emotionally charged situations. For instance, DriveNow frequently depicts the car being used to visit a loved one in their promotional videos (Figure A5). Car2go and Zipcar also utilise storytelling to demonstrate how cars enable users to engage in social contexts that involve laughing, hugging, and gift-giving. These stories focus on a user rather than an owner but still allow for a sense of implied ownership and emotional attachment. For example, Co-wheels Car Club shares a customer’s story of how “my children and I use the car on Aberdeen Road in Bristol religiously. We have named her ‘Wanda’ and she is almost part of the family. We use her for days out, trips to school, and business meetings”. It is evident that pathos appeals are employed here.

In relation to the social stigma often linked with consumption without ownership, only a handful of firms specifically address this issue. Zipcar, for instance, promotes car sharing as the future and specifically targets early adopters with the following statement: “By 2025, car sharing is expected to be the primary mode of transportation for 10% of the population”. Co-wheels highlights that “41% of members belong to demographic groups with incomes below the UK average”, a fact intended to underscore the service’s affordability. However, this does little to alleviate concerns about social status. On the other hand, Co-wheels Car Club identifies their potential consumers using more appealing categories such as “affluent professionals” and “metropolitan living” (Figure A6). It is clear that logos appeals are the only type employed for this factor, and even then, only sparingly.

Regarding firm reputation, all providers strive to project themselves as future-focused businesses that prioritise the interests of consumers. The firms employ several persuasive devices from the ethos, logos, and pathos categories to achieve this. For instance, Co-wheel asserts that customer service, rather than profit, is the firm’s primary focus: “Profit is not the end goal, but a means to develop new opportunities and expand existing services”. Similarly, Enterprise Car Share states that “we are committed to serving our customers as if they were part of our family”. Firms also aim to establish trustworthiness, often by highlighting awards (Figure A7) and positive media coverage or by associating with a highly reputable parent firm: “Car2go is a subsidiary of Daimler, which also owns Mercedes-Benz, one of the world’s most renowned luxury car manufacturers”.

Last, all firms describe the environmental sustainability benefits of car sharing over traditional car ownership. Devices from the logos and pathos categories are used in the form of benefits and evidence and, to a lesser extent, cause-related marketing techniques. However, it must be noted that this point is not emphasised by the firms in their communications, and the relevant information is typically not found on the landing pages of the websites. Rather, such information is found deeper in the websites; for example, Enterprise Car Club lists an award for green mobility together with other awards instead of a dedicated space for environmental sustainability (Figure A7). There is little communication focused on this point specifically and firms rather mention, for example, statistics connected to product lifecycle carbon emissions when focusing on other factors, such as affordability. Examples of benefit appeals are also common, with Co-wheels Car Club mentioning “Drive less, pollute less and be healthier by walking, cycling and using public transport much more”, but again, such communications are scarcer than affordability- and convenience-related communications.

## 5. Discussion

A summary of the data results in the refined online marketing communications framework that provides an overview of how various factors influencing the adoption of B2C car sharing are addressed by persuasive devices (Table 3). An analysis of the data reveals some inconsistencies between the consumer factors that may influence car-sharing adoption, as identified in the literature, and what car-sharing firms actually emphasise in their marketing communications. We consider such differences in the following.

**Table 3.** Refined online marketing communications framework applied to B2C car sharing.

|  | <b>Ethos</b>                | <b>Logos</b>     | <b>Pathos</b>                  |
|--|-----------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>Economic factors</b>                                      | /                           | Benefit Evidence | /                              |
| <b>Convenience (responsibility)</b>                          | Expertise                   | Benefit Evidence | Sensory appeal<br>Storytelling |
| <b>Convenience (availability)</b>                            | Expertise                   | Evidence         | /                              |
| <b>Convenience (ease of use)</b>                             | /                           | Benefit Evidence | Sensory appeal                 |
| <b>Physical product condition</b>                            | Expertise                   | Evidence         | /                              |
| <b>Intangible value of ownership (emotional involvement)</b> | /                           | /                | Sensory appeal<br>Storytelling |
| <b>Intangible value of ownership (negative social image)</b> | /                           | Evidence         | /                              |
| <b>Firm reputation</b>                                       | Trustworthiness<br>Goodwill | /                | Sensory appeal                 |
| <b>Environmental sustainability advantage</b>                | /                           | Benefit Evidence | Cause-related marketing        |

The negative social image associated with sharing, particularly when it comes to status symbols such as cars, is only sparsely addressed. Similarly, the lack of novelty factor, which likely interacts with the social image issue, is not comprehensively addressed through communications. This suggests that firms either do not see these issues as impactful or have struggled to find effective ways to persuade consumers that these two negative factors are not a concern, despite previous research with consumers repeatedly demonstrating their significance [14,24,32,39]. As a result, firms may prefer to minimise references to these factors so as not to prime consumers with reasons against participating in their schemes. Following this explanation, the firms appear to hope to offset such negatives with the advantages of car sharing that are advertised through various persuasive devices. Car variety, a sub-dimension of convenience, is one such advantage that was only sparsely mentioned in the literature in the context of cars [23], although sharing business models in fashion also feature variety as a prominent draw [8] and we can confirm the importance of this factor in the car-sharing context.

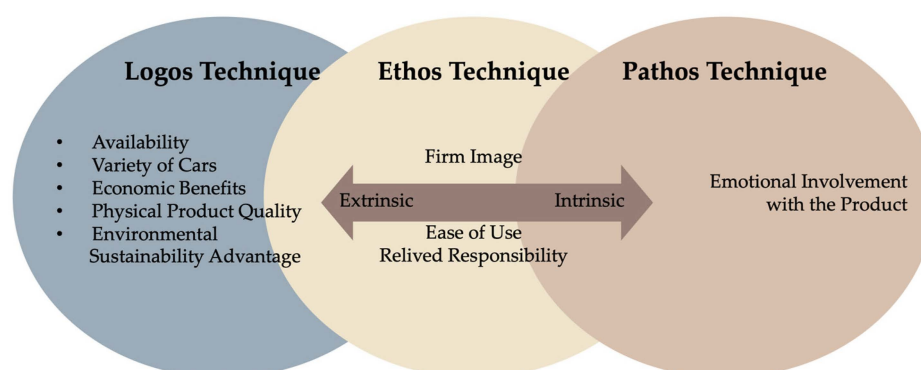
Most other factors are consistently addressed through marketing communications across surveyed firms' communications and reflect provider thinking as well as previous studies with consumers. In terms of persuading potential users, car-sharing providers frequently emphasise their technological and organisational expertise. This is particularly evident when discussing their offerings. Firms recognise that their service offering must work consistently, with the user assuming most of the responsibilities that would typically be borne by service employees in conventional car rental [45]. To assuage perceptions of risk emphasised in the literature [23,46], users are reassured through demonstrations of expertise that processes are robust. Commensurate with this communication emphasis, car-sharing providers typically do emphasise their branding as tech firms with some social and, to a lesser extent, environmental messaging. Indeed, this latter point is an interesting finding of our work; previous findings indicate that sustainability is often not a critical factor for consumers [14], and we see that car-sharing firms also do not leverage this factor as much as the associated literature would expect. This finding may be caused by a genuine lack of interest in this factor by the consumer. But the collected data rather also suggest that

firms struggle to find compelling persuasive devices to “sell” environmental sustainability advantages, especially when compared to the sophisticated storytelling regarding the intangible value of ownership factor and the very prominently featured communications on potential cost savings.

Logos appeals are the most prevalent overall. The primary attraction remains the utilitarian economic argument, and providers are aware of this, reflecting previous findings with consumers [8,39]. The ideal user is portrayed as an urban, “smart” consumer interested in on-demand transportation, who requires demonstrable logic or evidence that they will be better off financially and in terms of quality of life without owning a car. Descriptions of the benefits of car sharing are therefore supported by numerous case examples, calculators, and other tools that attempt to demonstrate that such expectations will be reliably met if the user adopts the service. Environmental sustainability advantages are also most frequently and strongly communicated through logos techniques.

Pathos-related persuasive devices are less common and appear to play a lesser role than the other two. Creating emotional attachment when usage is short is challenging. As a result, such appeals focus heavily on the users and their activities, with unknown effectiveness. However, we argue that pathos appeals are more important than they may initially appear. This is because they are the only communications capable of bringing warmth to both the service and the brand, as other communications largely focus on the “hard” factors of processes and products. This also applies to the providers’ environmental and social image. Although research is divided on the actual benefits of car sharing over conventional alternatives [30], the potentially significant draw of environmental sustainability [14,52] is seemingly difficult to communicate using pathos techniques even though, in principle, this category appears most suitable. This study helps to contextualise previous findings that question the commitment of consumers to environmental sustainability; it appears that car-sharing firms struggle to craft compelling persuasive devices belonging to the pathos category.

An examination of how different factors are addressed by car-sharing providers reveals an interesting pattern. Many studies investigating consumer motivations in the sharing economy categorise consumer motivations according to their extrinsic or intrinsic nature. Extrinsic motivation is driven by external rewards or desires [92,93], with economic drivers such as monetary rewards being the most prominent extrinsic motivation. In contrast, intrinsic motivation arises from internal wishes or desires and is driven by the consumer’s interest and innate psychological needs [94]. The following Figure 1 shows that intrinsic and extrinsic consumer factors are addressed differently by firms in practice. Specifically, logos devices are applied to extrinsic factors such as economic benefits, while pathos devices are used to address intrinsic factors such as the intangible value of ownership. Ethos devices are then applied to other factors that bridge the extrinsic/intrinsic divide.



**Figure 1.** Main relationships between persuasive devices, consumer factors, and types of motivations in car sharing.

## 6. Conclusions

This study examines the ways in which B2C car-sharing firms use persuasive marketing communications to increase consumer adoption. Two research questions were posed:

RQ1: Which factors may influence consumer adoption of B2C car sharing?

RQ2: How do car-sharing providers communicate about B2C car sharing with prospective consumers to address these factors and improve the adoption of their services?

The first question is answered by the consumer factor framework for B2C car sharing, which was first synthesised based on literature and then refined with empirical data (Table 3). This framework is the first half of the primary contribution of our work and can serve as an overview of how B2C car-sharing providers understand and seek to address the factors relevant to consumer adoption of their services. The second question was addressed via a cross-comparison of the content analysis and applied persuasive devices (adapted from rhetoric theory), which revealed that firms follow a fairly consistent approach to persuading consumers of B2C car sharing (Figure 1). The figure and associated pattern form the second half of the primary contribution of our work.

These findings have implications for both academia and practice. The conclusions of this study complement many previous related studies [14,21,39] and provide a new lens through which to view the efforts of industry to penetrate the market and understand the corporate view of the consumer [23,25,26]. The rhetoric theory lens used in this study also complements existing research, such as the adoption of design frameworks to classify marketing communications [31]. Most importantly, from the perspective of the providers of B2C car sharing, this study reveals how these firms themselves see and seek to address adoption factors. Future researchers can thus make sense of the advertising mix of B2C car sharing and other circular and sharing economy offers. For example, there are various sharing business models for clothes; our study's framework would predict availability concerns to be addressed through logos techniques in such a context as well, as the fundamental concern on the consumer side appears similar.

From a practical standpoint, this study may be useful to firms that provide circular and sharing economy offers, particularly B2C car sharing. The frameworks generated by this study can help firms highlight the benefits of their offers while also addressing consumer concerns. Since many consumers may be hesitant, persuading them to consider such offers is a critical step in practice. Rhetoric theory can help reframe these offers in the consumer's mind, and firms can use the insights from this study for guidance. A particular point is the difficulty in compellingly communicating the environmental sustainability advantage of car sharing and the question of whether firms are not being overly cautious in framing their offering as sustainable instead of affordable and convenient.

This research is not without limitations. First, the fact that firms struggled to address some factors assumed to be important to consumers suggests that further work is needed. Apart from the point about the value and way to emphasise environmental sustainability advantages of car sharing, future research should also focus on clarifying whether factors such as "newness of the product" and "negative social image" are (a) irrelevant from the consumer's perspective, (b) irrelevant from the provider's perspective, or (c) difficult to address through marketing communications.

Second, the car-sharing firms were selected based on their English language communications and their market leadership with a mind to removing non-central factors that would be potentially introduced by selecting firms from very different countries. While the market leadership position of the firms indicates that they represent best practice, this does not prove that their communications are effective. The sampling choice also limits the findings as the efficacy of the communications may be conflated with other factors. A future study should assess this through a quantitative study to rank the relative importance of different factors and the efficacy of the persuasive devices employed by firms, ideally in less culturally and politically similar country pairs such as the USA and China.

Third, this study's empirical basis was B2C car-sharing schemes. While the findings regarding rhetoric theory can be transferred to other product categories with similar

characteristics (high upfront cost, strong intangible and tangible benefits, intermittent usage regimes), it would be beneficial to see how firms in different sectors persuade consumers of circular and sharing economy offers.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualisation, P.M. and S.J.D.; methodology, P.M.; data collection, P.M.; analysis P.M.; writing—original draft preparation, P.M.; writing—review and editing, S.J.D.; supervision, S.J.D.; funding acquisition, S.J.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research (excluding APC) was funded by the China Postdoctoral Science Foundation, grant number [2022M712732].

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

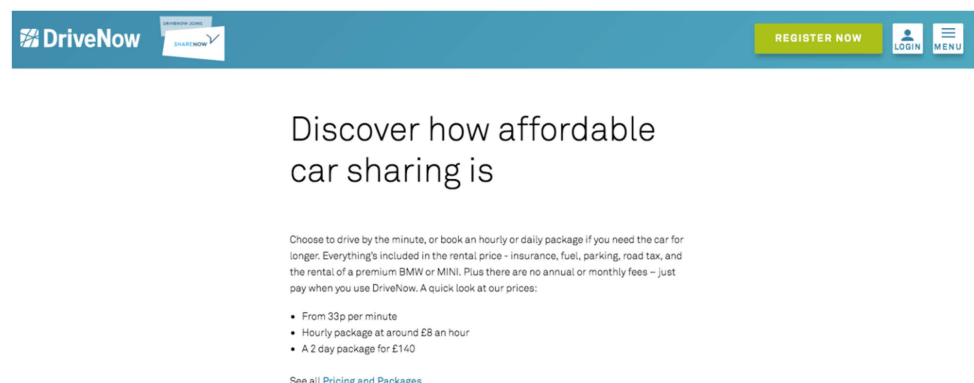
**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available in the article and Appendix A. An overview of the analysed data is available from the authors upon request.

**Acknowledgments:** We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions, which led to a significant improvement of the work.

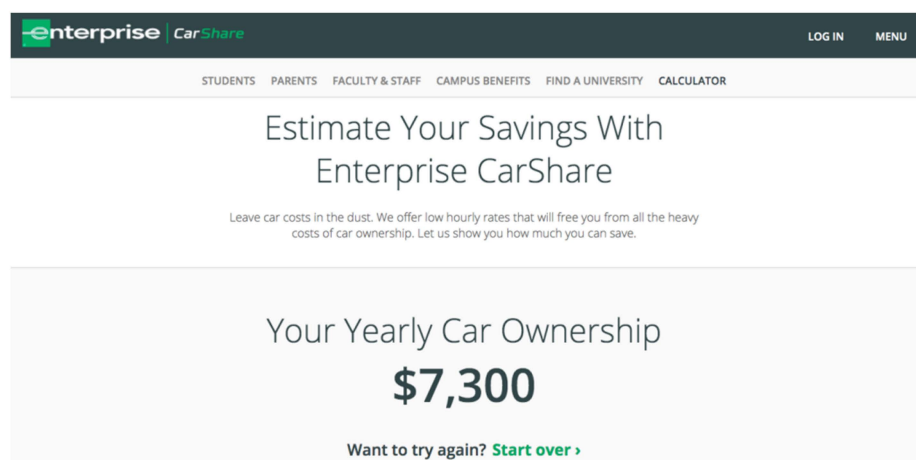
**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A



The screenshot shows the DriveNow website header with the logo and navigation links (REGISTER NOW, LOGIN, MENU). The main heading is "Discover how affordable car sharing is". Below this, a paragraph explains the rental options: "Choose to drive by the minute, or book an hourly or daily package if you need the car for longer. Everything's included in the rental price – insurance, fuel, parking, road tax, and the rental of a premium BMW or MINI. Plus there are no annual or monthly fees – just pay when you use DriveNow. A quick look at our prices:". A bulleted list follows: "• From 33p per minute", "• Hourly package at around £8 an hour", and "• A 2 day package for £140". A link "See all Pricing and Packages." is at the bottom.

**Figure A1.** DriveNow website, affordability information.



The screenshot shows the Enterprise CarShare website header with the logo and navigation links (LOG IN, MENU). The main heading is "Estimate Your Savings With Enterprise CarShare". Below this, a paragraph explains the savings: "Leave car costs in the dust. We offer low hourly rates that will free you from all the heavy costs of car ownership. Let us show you how much you can save." A large box displays "Your Yearly Car Ownership" with the value "\$7,300" in large green text. At the bottom, a link "Want to try again? Start over >" is shown.

**Figure A2.** Enterprise Carshare website, savings information.





Figure A3. Car2go website, promotional video.

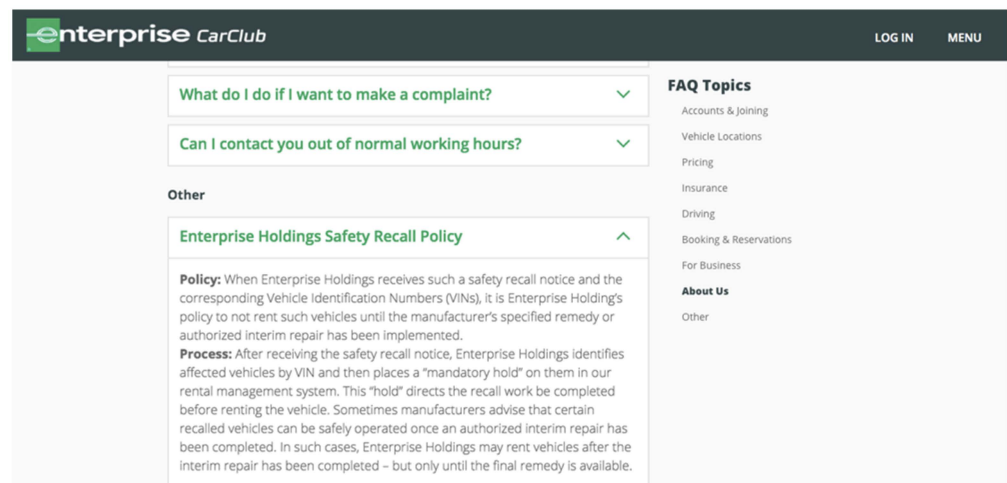


Figure A4. Enterprise Car Club website, FAQs.

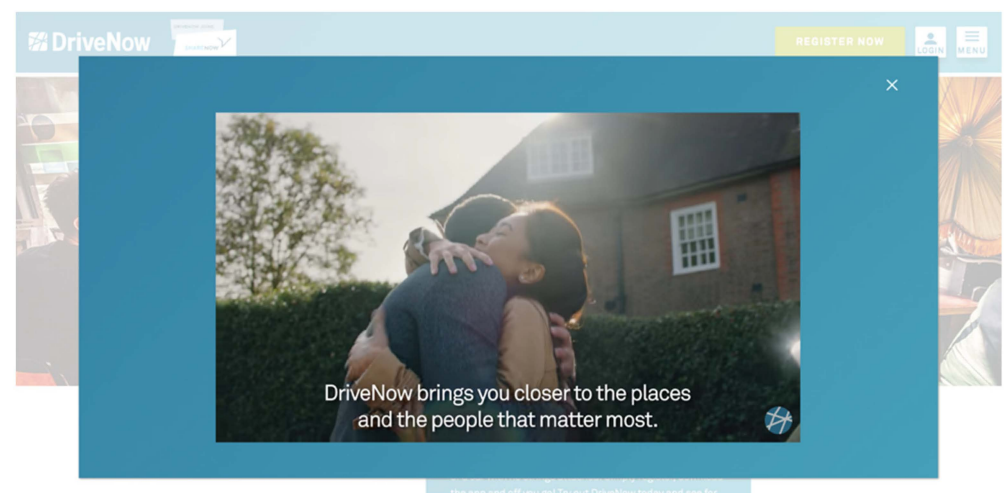


Figure A5. DriveNow website, promotional video.

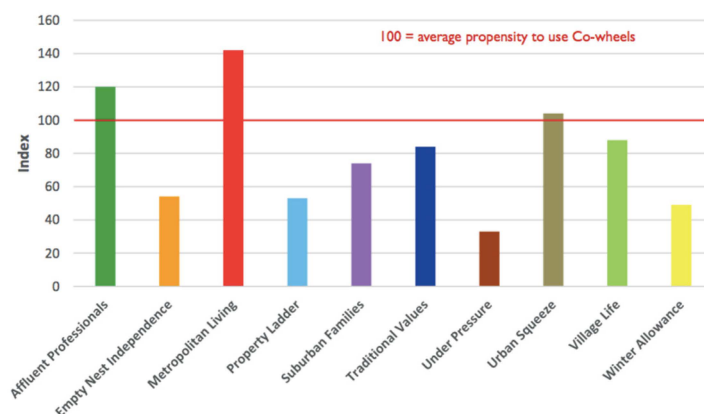


Figure A6. Co-wheels Car Club website, Impact Report 2015.

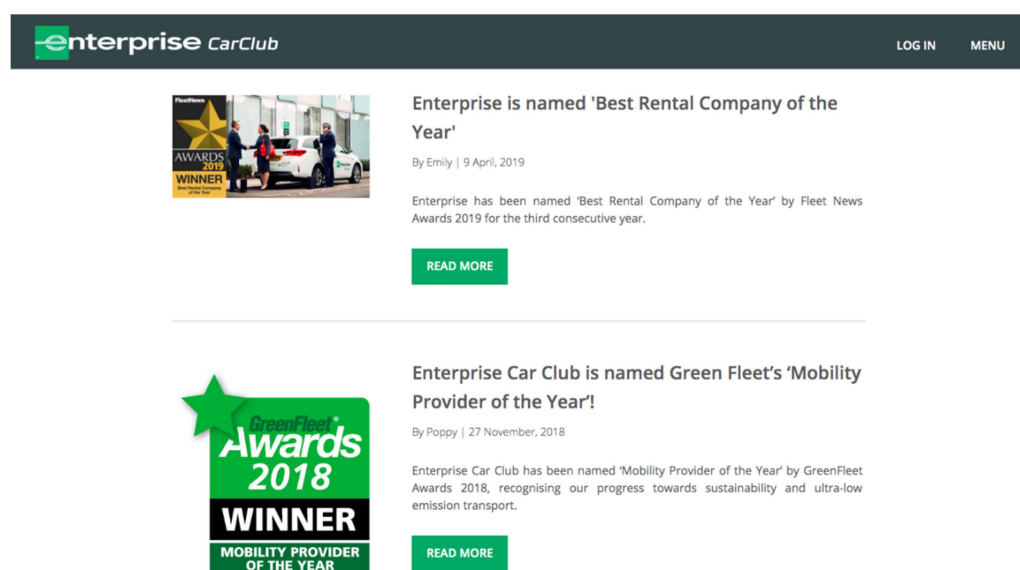


Figure A7. Enterprise Car Club website, firm awards.

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