



## Get the show on the road: Go-to-market strategies for e-innovations of start-ups



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### ABSTRACT

Internet-enabled service innovations (e-innovations) are the latest trend in digital entrepreneurship. E-innovation adoption is associated with high levels of uncertainty for potential customers, particularly when e-innovations are launched by start-ups. Go-to-market strategies contain information suitable to convey valuable signals for adoption decisions. Based on a systematic literature review, a historical method analysis, and expert interviews, this study explores how start-ups should design go-to-market strategies to facilitate the adoption of e-innovations. Start-ups launching e-innovations apply the service marketing mix specifically adapted to the digital context. In line with signaling theory, the findings demonstrate that the design of e-innovation go-to-market strategies should primarily signal trustworthiness and usability. For start-ups, this study proposes that trust mediates the relationship between e-innovation trustworthiness signals and adoption and that usability signals moderate the uncertainty associated with e-innovation adoption. These findings offer important managerial implications for start-ups launching e-innovations.

### 1. Introduction

The ongoing digitization process presents intriguing market opportunities for start-ups, which are new business ventures that develop and launch innovations based on entrepreneurial ideas (Heirman & Clarysse, 2007; Loch, Solt, & Bailey, 2008). As a result, an ever-increasing amount of e-innovations (EIs)<sup>1</sup> is flooding the markets (Huang & Rust, 2013). EIs are Internet-enabled service innovations that offer new and unique value propositions via the Internet (Dotzel, Shankar, & Berry, 2013), where they first emerge. For instance, the online cloud service Dropbox, launched in 2008, was such an EI. Dropbox provided a new and unique value proposition that was commercially enabled by and emerged on the Internet. This study differentiates EIs from new Internet-based services, such as online travel booking or online classifieds, that solely involve offline services provided online and for which the value proposition does not first emerge on the Internet. By definition, EIs are either radically or incrementally new to the firm and customers. Although a proliferation of EIs exists in the B2B context, this study's focus is on the B2C context, where the growth of EIs continues to soar (Hirt & Willemott, 2014).

Despite the growing relevance of EIs, up to 90% of EIs fail (Marmor,

Herrmann, Dogrultan, & Berman, 2011), which is not surprising given that the adoption of EIs implies high levels of uncertainty for potential customers, especially when start-ups launch EIs. Several characteristics inherent in EIs provided by start-ups cause this uncertainty, such as their digital nature (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003), impersonality (Dimoka, 2010), intangibility (Huang & Rust, 2013), and newness (Meuter & Ostrom, 2000), as well as unfamiliarity of the launching company (McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002). This uncertainty finds expression in privacy concerns and fear of data misuse (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003; Ha & Stoel, 2009; Sheehan & Hoy, 2000) and in doubts regarding performance (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003; Meuter & Ostrom, 2000).

Customers seek to reduce their perceived uncertainty by using the information provided about EIs (Huang & Rust, 2013). A start-up's go-to-market strategy makes such information available. Prior research shows that the go-to-market strategy largely determines innovation failure or success (Avlonitis, Papastathopoulou, & Gounaris, 2001; Langerak, Hultink, & Robben, 2004; Lee, Lin, Wong, & Calantone, 2011). Therefore, this study focuses on the challenge of designing go-to-market strategies as effective information signals for customers when launching EIs.

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<sup>1</sup> We will abbreviate the term e-innovation as EI throughout the remainder of this article.

Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) suggests that EI go-to-market strategies entail valuable signals that may encourage adoption. The present study seeks to determine the go-to-market strategy elements that help facilitate EI adoption and to investigate start-ups' motivation to employ particular go-to-market strategy elements by addressing the following research questions (RQs): What are the go-to-market strategy elements for innovations that the prior literature has identified (RQ1)? Do start-ups also apply these go-to-market strategy elements when launching EIs, or do they employ different elements (RQ2)? Which rationales do start-ups apply in the design of go-to-market strategies for EIs (RQ3)?

First, a qualitative exploratory study identifies go-to-market strategy elements and their specific design for innovations via a systematic literature review of prior entrepreneurship, marketing management, and innovation research. Second, this study identifies go-to-market strategy elements and their specific designs used by start-ups for the launch of EIs by applying a historical method analysis of actual EI launches. Third, interviews with EI experts help to gain a deeper understanding of particular designs of go-to-market strategies and to discern their potential signaling functions. Finally, this study derives propositions about the influence of start-ups' go-to-market strategies on EI adoption based on the insights obtained and proposes a conceptual model.

This study contributes to the extant literature in several ways. First, this study explores the extent to which start-ups launching EIs can apply prior go-to-market strategy components. Second, this study contributes to signaling theory by deriving an understanding of the signaling functions of EI go-to-market strategy elements and their effects on EI adoption. Third, this study hones the understanding of the process of EI adoption by revealing factors that drive EI adoption as well as crucial mediator and moderator variables. Finally, this study contributes to the innovation launch practice by deriving a framework with managerial implications for start-ups launching EIs.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Signaling theory

Signaling theory originates from information economics and, generally, assumes that the levels of information of the two parties involved in a transaction are unequal (Spence, 1973). For example, sellers know the quality of their products, but buyers may not (Nelson, 1970). Similarly, start-ups are aware of the qualities of their EIs but customers may not be. The use of signals can resolve the resulting state of information asymmetry (Kirmani & Rao, 2000). Signals, when furnished in the form of, for instance, prices or warranties, by the side with more information, can serve to make non-observable information on a transaction explicit. Such signals enable the party with a low level of information to make inferences about the transaction and arrive at a decision about whether or not to engage in the transaction (Aiken & Boush, 2006). In the context of an EI launch, signals enable target customers to draw inferences about a start-up's EI with neither experience with the start-up nor usage experience with the EI. These signals can thus provide adequate information for customers to make adoption decisions (Besharat, 2010; Su & Rao, 2010). Go-to-market strategies serve as such signals.

### 2.2. Go-to-market strategies and e-innovations

The decisions related to the go-to-market strategy determine the *how* of the launch (Hultink, Griffin, Hart, & Robben, 1997). Specifically, a go-to-market strategy defines how firms should compose bundles of go-to-market strategy elements as information signals to encourage adoption (Schuhmacher, Kuester, & Hultink, 2017). Schuhmacher et al. (2017) define these decisions as related to the four marketing mix components of product, price, place, and promotion. Accordingly, a go-

to-market strategy represents the set of these integrated marketing mix components, that is, the go-to-market strategy elements, and their specific designs. For instance, product is a marketing mix component that includes the go-to-market strategy element assortment breadth, which can be designed either broadly or narrowly.

EIs are conceptualized as service innovations that provide new and unique value propositions enabled by the Internet (Dotzel et al., 2013) and have first emerged on the Internet. As such, EIs are distinct from offline service innovations (Dotzel et al., 2013), as well as from e-services with value propositions that first emerged offline (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003), such as online classifieds, agencies (e.g., placement services), channels (e.g., online travel booking services, online banking), networks (e.g., social networks), and online retailers, tools, or databases. Digital innovation, defined as “new combinations of digital and physical components to produce new products (and services) by combining digital data from heterogeneous sources” (Barrett, Davidson, Prabhu, & Vargo, 2015, p. 145; Yoo, Henfridsson, & Lyytinen, 2010), facilitates EIs.

The extant literature provides few insights about go-to-market strategies for EIs. Research on how start-ups should design their go-to-market strategies to encourage EI adoption is practically nonexistent. Instead, prior research on go-to-market strategies mainly focuses on product innovations (Ordanini, Parasuraman, & Rubera, 2014). However, insights garnered from this strand of research do not straightforwardly apply to EIs. First, EIs bear service characteristics. They differ from products in terms of intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability of production and consumption, and perishability (Lovelock & Gummesson, 2004). Thus, EIs' go-to-market strategies need to account for the extended 7P-framework, which includes the additional marketing mix components *participants*, *physical evidence*, and *process* (Booms & Bitner, 1981). The adequate design of go-to-market strategy elements for these additional components may help companies render their EIs more tangible, reducing consumer uncertainties.

Second, because of their digital nature, EIs constitute a special form of services (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003). The use of the Internet may cause EIs to become even more intangible (Huang & Rust, 2013) and impersonal (Dimoka, 2010) and, therefore, even more service-like. Companies have to respond to these challenges that are associated with the EIs' digital nature with the corresponding design of go-to-market strategy elements for specific marketing mix components, potentially *participants*, *physical evidence*, or new unknown components.

Third, existing research mainly takes on the perspective of established companies. The start-ups that launch EIs are typically smaller, mostly unknown companies. The design of the go-to-market strategy should consider the fact that a company is unknown, possibly by including new go-to-market strategy elements unique to such EIs.

Start-ups have to render their go-to-market strategies to help overcome consumers' uncertainties caused by the EIs' service characteristics (Huang & Rust, 2013), their digital nature (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003), and the lack of information on the companies standing behind them (McKnight et al., 2002). Taking the unique characteristics of EIs into account, start-ups that design go-to-market strategies for EIs have to consider all seven Ps of the services marketing mix and likely must also consider additional aspects to account for the digital nature of EIs and the fact that an unknown company has launched them. Understanding the applicability of go-to-market strategies for product innovations in the context of EIs launched by start-ups requires first understanding current knowledge about the effective design of a go-to-market strategy for any innovation.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Systematic review of launch literature

To determine the go-to-market strategy elements identified in the extant literature (RQ1), the systematic literature review follows

**Table 1**  
8 steps of the systematic literature review.

Step	Specification
1 Define topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Go-to-market strategy for EIs by start-ups</li> </ul>
2 Formulate research questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Which go-to-market strategy elements for innovations did prior research identify?</li> </ul>
3 Identify keywords	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Identification via manual search, reading through articles, and relying on a general understanding of the topic</li> <li>● Identification of general keywords related to the topic (e.g., innovation, new product, new service, launch, commercialization)</li> <li>● Crosswise combination of individual keywords with more specific keywords (e.g., price, brand, adoption, staff)</li> </ul>
4 Identify and search databases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Use of EBSCO and JSTOR databases to search for articles based on studies' titles, keywords, and abstracts, using the identified keywords</li> </ul>
5 Read and assess publications	<p>Inclusion criteria for articles in the final dataset:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Article had to be published in an academic, peer-reviewed journal classified as an A* or A journal in accordance with the Australian Business Deans Council Ranking (ABDC-Ranking)</li> <li>● Article had to be published up to and including 2015</li> <li>● Article had to investigate at least one marketing mix component</li> <li>● Investigated aspects had to be directed at customers, either directly or indirectly (e.g., through salespeople; hence, articles investigating aspects such as supply chain management or slotting allowances were excluded)</li> <li>● Inclusion of articles investigating consumer goods, industrial goods, or both</li> <li>● Conduct of additional cross-checks by assessing the articles' reference lists, using a snowballing technique: the review of the references of 10% of the selected articles led to the inclusion of four additional studies</li> </ul>
6 Create database	<p>Information captured in the review database:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Descriptive, numerical, or marked by the absence or presence of a specific characteristic</li> <li>● Sector investigated (B2B, B2C, B2B, and B2C, or unspecified),</li> <li>● Type of product (product, service, both, or unspecified)</li> <li>● Research design (qualitative versus quantitative)</li> <li>● Dependent variable(s)</li> <li>● Control variable(s)</li> <li>● Marketing mix components, comprising the seven Ps and others</li> </ul> <p>Each marketing mix category was broken down into four subcategories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Marketing mix component (e.g., product, price)</li> <li>● Go-to-market strategy element (e.g., branding for product)</li> <li>● Their specific design (e.g., brand extension vs. new brand)</li> <li>● Relevance for launch success (e.g., no significant effect)</li> </ul>
7 Test and revise categories	<p>An assessment of the categories after entering 10% of literature made it evident that no changes were necessary</p>
8 Evaluate key results	<p>After the database was completed, we summarized the articles to structure the evidence and to draw conclusions. Three researchers conducted this step independently. <a href="#">Table 2</a> and the <a href="#">Appendix</a> depict the results in a condensed manner.</p>

Pickering and Byrne (2014). Because of the interdisciplinary nature of this topic, several literature streams have published relevant research, including innovation research, entrepreneurial research, and marketing management research. [Table 1](#) details the actions undertaken within an eight-step procedure that results in a final dataset of 131 articles (for an overview see the [Appendix](#)). Of these 131 studies, 74.8% investigate product innovations, 13.7% investigate service innovations, and 11.5% either investigate both product and service innovations or do not specify the type of innovations examined. Surprisingly, the literature review fails to identify a single study that explores the marketing mix components of EIs or of innovations launched by start-ups.

The studies in the dataset either investigate several marketing mix components simultaneously (26.0%) (e.g., [Guilinan, 1999](#); [Hultink, Hart, Robben, & Griffin, 2000](#); [Kuester, Homburg, & Hess, 2012](#)) or focus on one specific component (74.0%) (e.g., [Klink & Athaide, 2010](#); [Talke & O'Connor, 2011](#)). None of the identified studies covers all seven marketing mix components simultaneously. Of the specific marketing mix components, promotion is explored most (58.0% of all studies; e.g., [Talke & Snelders, 2013](#)), followed by pricing (35.1%; e.g., [Kuester, Feurer, Schuhmacher, & Reinartz, 2015](#)), product (29.0%; e.g., [Wooder & Baker, 2012](#)), and place (17.6%; e.g., [Chiesa & Frattini, 2011](#)). The additional three Ps for services are explored less often, as 13.7% of the studies investigate participants (e.g., [Hultink & Atuahene-Gima, 2000](#)), 3.1% investigate process (e.g., [Avlonitis et al., 2001](#)), and only 2.3% investigate physical evidence (e.g., [De Brentani, 2001](#)).

[Table 2](#) provides a detailed overview of the 131 studies investigating go-to-market strategy elements based on the marketing mix component, go-to-market strategy elements, specific design, and empirical relevance to launch. For example, *product* is one marketing mix component. Studies focus on seven different elements of the product marketing mix component: configuration of the product/service,

assortment breadth, product bundling, brand architecture, brand name, brand image strength, and degree of customization. Of these, studies most frequently examine the brand architecture element (see [Table 2](#)). Specific designs of this element include, for instance, brand extension ([Prins & Verhoef, 2007](#)) and new brand ([Klink & Athaide, 2010](#)). Several studies in [Table 2](#) show differing effects of the specific designs of go-to-market strategy elements, depending on the different dependent variables employed. For example, [Hultink and Robben \(1999\)](#) find a positive impact of penetration pricing on market performance, but a negative impact of penetration pricing on product performance. Moreover, because of the impact of moderators, the effects of the marketing mix elements on customer adoption reported in specific studies can vary. For instance, [Chakravarti and Xie \(2006\)](#) find a positive impact on the adoption of both comparative and non-comparative message foci, depending on the moderator variable that they call “competition for standards in the market.”

### 3.2. Historical method

To assess the go-to-market strategy elements identified by prior research that start-ups actually employ for launching EIs (RQ2), this study follows the case study approach proposed by [Eisenhardt \(1989\)](#), which enables theory building from case studies and is especially suitable for under-researched areas ([Eisenhardt, 1989](#)). [Ravenswood \(2011\)](#) highlights the validity of [Eisenhardt's \(1989\)](#) approach and the significant impact of this approach on business research. The historical method is appropriate for a systematic analysis of the cases ([Golder, 2000](#)). This qualitative analysis intends to investigate real-world business examples in five steps: (1) topic specification and collection of evidence, (2) source evaluation, (3) evidence content evaluation, (4) content analysis and interpretation, and (5) presentation and

**Table 2**  
Literature-based overview of go-to-market strategy elements for innovations.

Marketing mix component	Go-to-market strategy element	Specific design	Relevance for launch	Service innovation articles	
Product	Product/service configuration	Simplicity	[21] <sup>d</sup>	[126] <sup>d</sup> ; [82] <sup>+</sup>	
		All relevant features included	[21] <sup>d</sup>		
	Assortment breadth	New functionality	[66] <sup>ms</sup> , [81] <sup>ms</sup> ; [131] <sup>+</sup> , [81] <sup>+</sup>		
		Pre-existing functionality	[66] <sup>+</sup> , [131] <sup>+</sup>		
		Visual design	[100] <sup>+</sup>		
		Peripheral innovation locus	[86] <sup>ms</sup> , [86] <sup>+</sup>		
		General	[54] <sup>ms</sup> ; [54] <sup>-</sup>		
		One application	[8] <sup>+</sup>		
		Narrow	[46] <sup>d</sup> , [56] <sup>d</sup> , [57] <sup>d</sup>		
		Equal	[56] <sup>d</sup> , [57] <sup>d</sup>		
		Broad	[46] <sup>d</sup> , [56] <sup>d</sup> , [57] <sup>d</sup> ; [55] <sup>+</sup> , [58] <sup>+</sup> , [73] <sup>+</sup>		
		Product bundling	[103] <sup>+</sup> , [109] <sup>+</sup> , [110] <sup>+</sup>		
Product introduction	Product bundle fit	[103] <sup>+</sup> , [109] <sup>+</sup>			
	Default	[72] <sup>+</sup>			
Brand architecture	New brand	[11] <sup>d</sup> , [46] <sup>d</sup> , [56] <sup>d</sup> , [57] <sup>d</sup> ; [54] <sup>ms</sup> ; [54] <sup>-</sup> ; [18] <sup>+</sup> , [67] <sup>+</sup> , [98] <sup>+</sup>			
	Brand extension	[1] <sup>d</sup> , [46] <sup>d</sup> , [55] <sup>d</sup> , [56] <sup>d</sup> , [57] <sup>d</sup> ; [108] <sup>-</sup> ; [9] <sup>+</sup> , [18] <sup>+</sup> , [24] <sup>+</sup> , [31] <sup>+</sup> , [43] <sup>+</sup> , [44] <sup>+</sup> , [58] <sup>+</sup> , [67] <sup>+</sup> , [73] <sup>+</sup> , [98] <sup>+</sup> , [107] <sup>+</sup>			
Price	Brand name	Brand name	[98] <sup>+</sup>		
		Serial	[9] <sup>+</sup> , [18] <sup>+</sup>		
	Brand image strength	Co-branding/combined branding/sub-branding	[11] <sup>ms</sup> ; [9] <sup>+</sup> , [11] <sup>+</sup> , [65] <sup>+</sup>		
		Fit	[56] <sup>d</sup> , [57] <sup>d</sup> ; [55] <sup>+</sup>		
	Degree of customization	Company brand	[56] <sup>d</sup>		
		Generic brand	[5] <sup>+</sup>		
	Price level	Verbal	[5] <sup>ms</sup>		
		General	[114] <sup>+</sup>		[25] <sup>d</sup> [23] <sup>ms</sup> [29] <sup>ms</sup> [40] <sup>ms</sup>
	Pricing administration	Standardization	[36] <sup>-</sup>		
		Customization	[55] <sup>d</sup> , [56] <sup>d</sup> , [57] <sup>d</sup> ; [126] <sup>+</sup>		
	Pricing strategy	High	[55] <sup>d</sup> , [56] <sup>d</sup> , [57] <sup>d</sup> ; [114] <sup>-</sup>		
		Equal	[55] <sup>d</sup> , [56] <sup>d</sup> , [57] <sup>d</sup> ; [8] <sup>ms</sup> ; [24] <sup>+</sup> , [36] <sup>+</sup>		
Pricing strategy	Low	[127] <sup>d</sup> ; [33] <sup>ms</sup> ; [15] <sup>+</sup> , [51] <sup>+</sup>		[35] <sup>+</sup>	
	Appropriateness of price level	[46] <sup>d</sup>			
Pricing strategy	Leasing	[46] <sup>d</sup>			
	Rebates	[21] <sup>ms</sup> , [74] <sup>ms</sup> ; [74] <sup>-</sup>			
Pricing strategy	General	[46] <sup>d</sup> , [55] <sup>d</sup> , [56] <sup>d</sup> , [57] <sup>d</sup> , [113] <sup>d</sup> , [116] <sup>d</sup> , [125] <sup>d</sup> ; [39] <sup>ms</sup> , [54] <sup>ms</sup> ; [2] <sup>+</sup> , [14] <sup>+</sup> , [28] <sup>+</sup> , [47] <sup>+</sup> , [54] <sup>+</sup> , [58] <sup>+</sup> , [64] <sup>+</sup> , [71] <sup>+</sup> , [73] <sup>+</sup> , [84] <sup>+</sup> , [89] <sup>+</sup>			
	Low introductory price/Penetration	[125] <sup>d</sup>		[40] <sup>+</sup>	
Pricing strategy	Comparative	[46] <sup>d</sup> , [56] <sup>d</sup> , [57] <sup>d</sup> , [113] <sup>d</sup> , [116] <sup>d</sup> , [125] <sup>d</sup> ; [39] <sup>ms</sup> , [52] <sup>ms</sup> ; [14] <sup>-</sup> , [28] <sup>-</sup> ; [52] <sup>+</sup> , [55] <sup>+</sup> , [70] <sup>+</sup> , [71] <sup>+</sup> , [85] <sup>+</sup>		[93] <sup>+</sup>	
	Premium/Skimming	[14] <sup>+</sup>			
Pricing strategy	Encouraging cust. acceptance	[14] <sup>+</sup>			

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Marketing mix component	Go-to-market strategy element	Specific design	Relevance for launch	Product, service and product, and unspecified innovation articles	Service innovation articles
Price	Pricing strategy Pricing practice	Dynamic	[116] <sup>d</sup> ; [34] <sup>+</sup> ; [48] <sup>+</sup> ; [108] <sup>+</sup>	[95] <sup>d</sup>	
		Value-based	[127] <sup>d</sup> ; [59] <sup>+</sup> ; [60] <sup>+</sup>		
	Pricing policy	Competition-based	[59] <sup>ms</sup> ; [60] <sup>ms</sup>		[69] <sup>d</sup>
		Cost-based	[59] <sup>ms</sup> ; [60] <sup>ms</sup>		[69] <sup>d</sup>
		Market-pricing	[113] <sup>d</sup>		[69] <sup>d</sup>
	Trial/samples Freeware	Single price			[77] <sup>ms</sup> ; [40] <sup>+</sup>
		Segmented price	[125] <sup>d</sup> ; [8] <sup>+</sup> ; [61] <sup>+</sup>		[77] <sup>ms</sup>
	Pricing of complementary products/Services	Individual price	[46] <sup>d</sup>		
			[21] <sup>ms</sup>		
	Place	Distribution channel	Direct	[46] <sup>d</sup> ; [92] <sup>+</sup> ; [102] <sup>+</sup>	[40] <sup>+</sup>
Indirect					
Distribution structure		• Task autonomy			
		General	[46] <sup>d</sup> ; [102] <sup>+</sup>		
		New	[54] <sup>ms</sup> ; [58] <sup>ms</sup>		
		Current	[46] <sup>d</sup> ; [56] <sup>d</sup> ; [57] <sup>d</sup> ; [55] <sup>+</sup> ; [101] <sup>+</sup>		
		New and current	[46] <sup>d</sup> ; [55] <sup>d</sup> ; [56] <sup>d</sup> ; [57] <sup>d</sup>		
Distribution intensity		Exclusive	[57] <sup>d</sup> ; [4] <sup>+</sup> ; [55] <sup>+</sup>		
		Selective	[46] <sup>d</sup> ; [55] <sup>d</sup> ; [57] <sup>d</sup> ; [116] <sup>d</sup>		
		Intensive	[46] <sup>d</sup> ; [55] <sup>d</sup> ; [57] <sup>d</sup> ; [89] <sup>d</sup> ; [116] <sup>d</sup> ; [4] <sup>+</sup> ; [73] <sup>+</sup> ; [114] <sup>+</sup>		[35] <sup>+</sup> ; [115] <sup>+</sup>
Sales force intensity Distribution expenditures Channel management	Functions	[56] <sup>d</sup> ; [57] <sup>d</sup> ; [54] <sup>ms</sup> ; [55] <sup>+</sup> ; [58] <sup>+</sup>			
	Choice of channel	[21] <sup>ms</sup>			
Formal external promotional program	Activity management	[21] <sup>ms</sup>			
	On-time delivery	[33] <sup>+</sup>			
	Technical support	[33] <sup>+</sup>			
		[46] <sup>d</sup>			
Promotion	Advertising expenditures	General	[30] <sup>-</sup> ; [87] <sup>-</sup> ; [15] <sup>+</sup> ; [30] <sup>+</sup> ; [33] <sup>+</sup> ; [73] <sup>+</sup>	[6] <sup>+</sup> ; [23] <sup>+</sup> ; [25] <sup>+</sup> ; [97] <sup>+</sup> ; [115] <sup>+</sup>	
		Timing	[49] <sup>d</sup> ; [55] <sup>d</sup> ; [56] <sup>d</sup> ; [57] <sup>d</sup> ; [54] <sup>ms</sup> ; [7] <sup>+</sup> ; [12] <sup>+</sup> ; [19] <sup>+</sup> ; [32] <sup>+</sup> ; [47] <sup>+</sup> ; [92] <sup>+</sup> ; [114] <sup>+</sup> ; [119] <sup>+</sup> ; [128] <sup>+</sup>	[41] <sup>+</sup> ; [97] <sup>+</sup>	
	Advertising strategy	Targeted	[42] <sup>-</sup>		
		Commercial	[49] <sup>+</sup>		
	Source of information	Non-commercial	[46] <sup>d</sup>		[123] <sup>d</sup>
		Non-comparative	[46] <sup>d</sup>		[123] <sup>d</sup>
	Message content	Comparative	[17] <sup>+</sup> ; [20] <sup>+</sup>		
		Retrospective	[130] <sup>+</sup>		
		Anticipatory	[130] <sup>+</sup>		
		Feature-based	[76] <sup>+</sup> ; [120] <sup>-</sup> ; [8] <sup>+</sup> ; [12] <sup>+</sup> ; [16] <sup>+</sup> ; [20] <sup>+</sup> ; [31] <sup>+</sup> ; [78] <sup>+</sup> ; [102] <sup>+</sup> ; [103] <sup>+</sup> ; [121] <sup>+</sup>	[40] <sup>+</sup>	
Promotion tools	Benefit-based	[46] <sup>d</sup> ; [8] <sup>ms</sup> ; [8] <sup>+</sup> ; [16] <sup>+</sup> ; [24] <sup>+</sup> ; [31] <sup>+</sup> ; [76] <sup>+</sup> ; [78] <sup>+</sup> ; [91] <sup>+</sup> ; [99] <sup>+</sup> ; [120] <sup>+</sup> ; [121] <sup>+</sup>	[69] <sup>+</sup>		
	Financial (e.g., money-back-guarantee, financing)	[46] <sup>d</sup> ; [111] <sup>+</sup> ; [120] <sup>+</sup> ; [121] <sup>+</sup>			
	Mass media promotion (TV, radio, print, outdoor, cinema, retail display)	[56] <sup>d</sup> ; [116] <sup>d</sup> ; [8] <sup>ms</sup> ; [54] <sup>ms</sup> ; [58] <sup>+</sup> ; [114] <sup>+</sup>	[123] <sup>d</sup> ; [97] <sup>+</sup>		
	Social media	[102] <sup>+</sup> ; [104] <sup>+</sup>			

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Table 2 (continued)

Marketing mix component	Go-to-market strategy element	Specific design	Relevance for launch	Product, service and product, and unspecified innovation articles	Service innovation articles
Promotion	Promotion tools	Direct marketing	[56] <sup>d</sup> , [54] <sup>ms</sup> , [58] <sup>ms</sup>	[123] <sup>d</sup> , [40] <sup>+</sup> , [97] <sup>+</sup>	
		Opinion leaders/Reference adopters (Online) Word-of-mouth	[8] <sup>+</sup>	[40] <sup>+</sup>	
		Reference sites	[116] <sup>d</sup> ; [94] <sup>ms</sup> ; [12] <sup>+</sup> , [22] <sup>+</sup> , [26] <sup>+</sup> , [83] <sup>+</sup>	[77] <sup>+</sup>	
		POS advertising campaign	[8] <sup>+</sup>		
		Firm-hosted online brand communities	[116] <sup>d</sup>		
		• Open	[45] <sup>+</sup>		
		• Discerning	[45] <sup>+</sup>		
		Trade shows and demonstrations	[46] <sup>d</sup> , [56] <sup>d</sup> , [58] <sup>ms</sup> ; [15] <sup>+</sup> , [33] <sup>+</sup> , [111] <sup>+</sup> ; [50] <sup>o</sup>	[40] <sup>ms</sup>	
		Trade promotion	[56] <sup>d</sup> , [58] <sup>ms</sup> ; [54] <sup>+</sup>		
		Events	[15] <sup>+</sup> , [33] <sup>+</sup>		
		Discounts/coupons	[46] <sup>d</sup> ; [110] <sup>ms</sup> ; [15] <sup>+</sup> , [33] <sup>+</sup> , [78] <sup>+</sup> , [111] <sup>+</sup>		
		Public relations	[56] <sup>d</sup> , [54] <sup>ms</sup> ; [58] <sup>ms</sup>		
		Advertising alliances	[105] <sup>+</sup>		
		Free gifts	[111] <sup>ms</sup>		
		Self-related	[27] <sup>+</sup>		
Other-related	[27] <sup>+</sup>				
Word	[37] <sup>+</sup> , [38] <sup>+</sup>				
• Abstract	[121] <sup>d</sup> ; [129] <sup>+</sup>				
• Concrete	[121] <sup>d</sup> ; [129] <sup>+</sup>				
Picture	[37] <sup>+</sup> , [90] <sup>+</sup>				
General	[124] <sup>+</sup>				
	[46] <sup>d</sup> , [117] <sup>d</sup> ; [8] <sup>ms</sup> , [76] <sup>ms</sup> ; [19] <sup>+</sup> , [63] <sup>+</sup> , [75] <sup>+</sup> , [89] <sup>+</sup> , [105] <sup>+</sup> , [106] <sup>+</sup>		[40] <sup>ms</sup>		
Integrated marketing campaign	Message content	Message content	[46] <sup>d</sup> , [76] <sup>+</sup> , [78] <sup>+</sup>		
		• Awareness creation	[76] <sup>+</sup> , [78] <sup>+</sup>		
		• Customer education	[46] <sup>d</sup> , [96] <sup>d</sup> ; [112] <sup>+</sup>		
		• Feature-based	[46] <sup>d</sup> , [52] <sup>ms</sup>		
		• Risk-based	[52] <sup>+</sup>		
		• Benefit-based	[117] <sup>d</sup> ; [52] <sup>ms</sup> ; [52] <sup>+</sup> , [73] <sup>+</sup>		
		Intensity	[68] <sup>+</sup>		
		Timing	[62] <sup>+</sup> , [118] <sup>-</sup> ; [80] <sup>+</sup> , [118] <sup>+</sup>		
		• Early	[62] <sup>+</sup> , [80] <sup>+</sup> , [119] <sup>+</sup>		
		• Late	[112] <sup>+</sup>		
		Update	[10] <sup>+</sup>		
		Attractiveness	[53] <sup>ms</sup> ; [3] <sup>-</sup> ; [73] <sup>+</sup>		
		General	[3] <sup>+</sup> , [53] <sup>+</sup>		
		Behavioral-based	[24] <sup>+</sup>		
		Outcome-based	[53] <sup>+</sup> , [73] <sup>+</sup>		
Skilled					
Training					
Role clarity	[122] <sup>+</sup>				
Timing	[88] <sup>+</sup>				
Market orientation	[56] <sup>d</sup> , [54] <sup>ms</sup> , [58] <sup>ms</sup> ; [53] <sup>+</sup>				
Relationship orientation					
Hotline to facilitate usage					
Participants	Control systems/ Incentives for staff			[79] <sup>+</sup>	
Participants	Salesforce/Staff				[23] <sup>+</sup>
					[6] <sup>+</sup> , [23] <sup>+</sup> , [25] <sup>+</sup> , [29] <sup>+</sup> , [79] <sup>+</sup> , [115] <sup>+</sup>
					[13] <sup>+</sup>
Participants	Internal marketing of innovation Customer support Improvement based on customer feedback				[79] <sup>+</sup>
					[6] <sup>+</sup> , [25] <sup>+</sup> , [115] <sup>+</sup>
					[79] <sup>+</sup>

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Table 2 (continued)

Marketing mix component	Go-to-market strategy element	Specific design	Relevance for launch	Service innovation articles
Physical evidence	Quality of equipment/tangible products		Product, service and product, and unspecified innovation articles	[23] <sup>+</sup> , [29] <sup>+</sup> , [115] <sup>+</sup>
Process	Configuration	Complexity		[29] <sup>ns</sup> ; [29] <sup>-</sup> , [40] <sup>-</sup>

Note: <sup>d</sup> = descriptive, <sup>ns</sup> = not-significant/not relevant; + = positive; - = negative; <sup>o</sup> = inverted U-shaped.

conclusion (Golder, 2000).

Step 1 involved searching for service innovations launched between 2006 and 2012 from three databases: the Google search engine and LexisNexis, both using various search terms, such as *web start-ups*, *launch service innovations*, and *newly launched services*, and CrunchBase, a free database of technology companies, using the advanced search option for the *consumer web* category with the keyword *service*. For this study, three academic innovation experts followed strict guidelines to narrow down the identified innovations to the specific context of EIs by start-ups. The conceptualization of EIs presented in Section 2.2 forms the explicit basis for these instructions. A standardized guideline instructed the experts to identify EIs by conceptualization and to exclude service innovations that do not fit within the EI conceptualization. Further, the experts identified EIs launched by start-ups and principally suited to the B2C market. An additional requirement was that start-ups had to have been unknown to the public at the time of market launch.

Next, since the aim of this study is to extend the extant theory on go-to-market strategies and build new theory for EI go-to-market strategies by start-ups, theoretical sampling served to identify EIs for further investigation. Theoretical sampling is a non-random sampling approach that enables researchers to select the cases best suited for in-depth insights related to the research objectives based on theoretical reasons, such as the replication or extension of theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Ultimately, further investigation was not necessary after the in-depth analysis of 25 EIs (see Table 3), as further analysis did not reveal any additional insights, that is, after the analysis reached theoretical saturation (Eisenhardt, 1989). For each selected EI, the authors gathered secondary information from company websites, blogs, and press commentaries, amounting to 496 transcript pages.

Step 2 involved critically evaluating the sources of the secondary data, documenting and organizing the sources based on origin (i.e., company-specific data and data from other sources) and data type (e.g., blog entries or online articles). This verification process validated that the data was diverse and relevant (Eisenhardt, 1989). Step 3 involved critically evaluating the information provided on the EIs with a focus on evaluating the sources' intentions and the veracity of statements. In Step 4, two researchers independently performed a comprehensive content analysis of the evidence using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software for the systematic analysis of unstructured textual data, deductively identifying the EI go-to-market strategy elements and their specific designs employed by start-ups. Subsequently, the components of the 7P framework (Booms & Bitner, 1981) enabled a classification of these elements. To build new theory, the evidence should allow for the evolution of additional categories not covered by the 7P framework. Based on this inductive revision of deductive categories following a diagnostic application approach (Perreault & Leigh, 1989), this study improves the code structure throughout the coding process. The intercoder reliability based on the codes of the two independent coders ( $I_r = 0.78$ ) is satisfactory (Perreault & Leigh, 1989). Step 5 presents and discusses the findings (see Sections 4 Results and 5 Discussion).

### 3.3. Expert interviews

Expert interviews with managers from start-ups involved in the introduction of EIs provide an understanding of why start-ups employ specific go-to-market strategies for EIs (RQ3). Contacting all 25 start-ups in the original sample by telephone and/or email over several rounds allowed the identification of experts for each EI. In total, six marketing managers, founders, CEOs, and vice presidents involved in launching the EIs participated in an interview, yielding a response rate of 24% (see Table 3).

The interviewees shared details about their current position and (1) the EI's launch date; (2) the EI's success in terms of customer adoption based on website traffic, user numbers three and six months after the launch, and subjective success evaluation; (3) decisions regarding the



**Table 3**  
Final sample of e-innovations for historical method analysis and expert interviews.

No.	E-innovation	Description	Launch date	Expert interview
1	2Big2Send	Online service to store, organize, and transfer (large) files	04/2007	
2	9flats	Online marketplace to list, discover, and book accommodations	02/2011	
3	Airbnb	Online marketplace to list, discover, and book accommodations	08/2008	
4	Birchbox	Online subscription service for beauty product samples	09/2010	
5	Box	Online file-hosting and file-sharing service	03/2006	
6	Diskmiss	Online file-hosting and file-sharing service	05/2012	
7	Dropbox	Online file-hosting and file-sharing service	09/2008	
8	Dwolla	Online service to transfer money through social networks	12/2009	X
9	EmergencyLink	Online service for medical information and personal contacts to emergency responders	06/2012	
10	Getaround	Online peer-to-peer car sharing service	05/2011	
11	iZettle	Electronic service for credit card payments via smartphone or tablet	11/2011	
12	Jott	Voice-to-text transcription online service	12/2006	X
13	Lenddo	Online service using users' social connections for creditworthiness and local financing	03/2011	X
14	Lust Have It!	Online subscription service for beauty product samples	07/2011	
15	MediaFire	Online file-hosting and file-sharing service	10/2006	X
16	Mendeley	Online service for managing scientific references	01/2009	
17	Mint	Online service to manage (personal) cash flows, budgets, and bills	09/2007	
18	Prezi	Online presentation service with zoom function	04/2009	X
19	Rdio	Online music streaming service	08/2010	
20	Spotify	Online music streaming service	10/2008	
21	Square	Electronic service for credit card payments via smartphone or tablet	05/2010	
22	TransferWise	Online currency exchange service	01/2011	X
23	Twitter	Micro-blogging online service for news, content, and information	07/2006	
24	WhatsApp	Real time cross-platform mobile messaging service	07/2009	
25	Wonga	Financial online service providing small short-term credits fast	10/2007	

N = 6

go-to-market strategy elements, their specific designs, and their composition into a go-to-market strategy, as well as the reasoning for applying these specific go-to-market strategy elements; and (4) turning points and adjustments within the first six months after launch. The phone interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min each and yielded 82 transcript pages. Two researchers again analyzed the transcripts using content analysis in MAXQDA. The intercoder reliability ( $I_r = 0.82$ ) is satisfactory (Perreault & Leigh, 1989).

#### 4. Results

The historical method and expert interview analysis reveals that the 7P framework (Booms & Bitner, 1981) is valid for designing go-to-market strategy elements for EIs launched by start-ups. Interestingly, the analysis shows that start-ups apply additional go-to-market strategy elements for these seven components, that the literature does not account for (see Table 2).

For *product*, start-ups by definition launch EIs under new brands, as confirmed by the analysis (e.g., 9flats and Wonga). The majority of start-ups intendedly chose simple and lean brand names, an aspect not investigated in literature. Key aspects in innovation literature focused on *price* elements such as price level (e.g., Easingwood, Moxey, & Capleton, 2006), trials (e.g., Frambach, Barkema, Nooteboom, & Wedel, 1998) and generic pricing strategies (e.g., Park, MacLachlan, & Love, 2011). These aspects are also relevant for start-up EI pricing. For instance, in line with previous research (Frambach et al., 1998; Jain, Mahajan, & Muller, 1995), trials also play a role in EI launch (e.g., Prezi and Rdio).

The analysis identifies additional pricing elements that need to be considered in the EI context. Free service options are frequently used as part of a broader service assortment offered under a freemium revenue model with several variants, ranging from free basic services to fee-based premium services. For example, Mediafire offers three service variants of its online storage service: a free ad-based version, an ad-free paid subscription, and a premium subscription with extra storage. In addition to the freemium model, start-ups employ other revenue models including subscription- (e.g., Birchbox) and commission-based revenue models (e.g., Airbnb and Mint). Concerning *place*, by definition, all

start-ups distribute their EIs online. Rangan, Menezes, and Maier (1992) examine the importance of direct versus indirect distribution for product innovations. Start-ups apply direct online selling, but they also benefit from strategic partnerships (e.g., iZettle and Square), since start-ups consider the accessibility of the EI to be important. For example, WhatsApp's CEO stresses, "[I]t is our job to be available on every platform."

Contrary to the findings of prior studies on the *promotion* of service innovations (Cooper, Easingwood, Edgett, Kleinschmidt, and Storey, 1994; Frattini, Dell'Era, & Rangone, 2013), start-ups do not typically launch EIs using a costly, formal external promotional program. Instead, small scale advertising campaigns (e.g., iZettle) are the norm. For example, the Financial Times reports that WhatsApp "has become a top-selling iPhone, Android, and BlackBerry app in dozens of markets without a penny spent on promotion or advertising." Although some start-ups aim for promotions via partner websites (e.g., iZettle, Jott, and Rdio), the information sources related to the launch of EIs are mainly non-commercial. For example, start-ups used promotional tools to introduce EIs that necessitate relatively low investments, such as press commentaries on their websites (EmergencyLink, Prezi, and TransferWise), customer testimonials (e.g., Getaround and Square), merchandizing (Airbnb and Rdio), videos (e.g., Dropbox and Mendeley), company blogs (e.g. Dwolla and Mendeley), and social media (e.g., Airbnb and Dropbox). Especially on social media, start-ups often call for users to provide customer referrals by engaging in positive word-of-mouth (e.g., Lenddo and Mint). Although prior research shows some of these tools to be relevant for product and/or service innovations, other tools are specifically relevant for start-ups launching EIs. Due to the digital nature of EIs as well as financial restrictions, start-ups apply a rather social, customer-centric promotion approach.

Start-ups make use of feature-based, benefit-based, and financial messages. Prior studies assess these three message content types for product and service innovations (e.g., Lee et al., 2011; Talke & O'Connor, 2011; Talke & Snelders, 2013). Feature-based message content highlights aspects such as service attributes and customization, whereas benefit-based message content focuses on data safety, the origin story of the EI, customer education, and process simplicity. Financial messages mainly include information about prices, payment



**Table 4**  
Qualitative empirical evidence on go-to-market strategy elements that signal trustworthiness and usability.

	Marketing mix comp.	Go-to-market strategy elem.	Specific design	Selected empirical evidence	Signal
Product	Price	Brand name Freemium revenue model	Lean	Q1 [HM]: Mint: "Offhand, who do you trust more: <a href="http://Mint.com">Mint.com</a> or <a href="http://MoneyAnalyzer.com">MoneyAnalyzer.com</a> ? <a href="http://Mint.com">Mint.com</a> is quality, it is short and spelled unambiguously."	T
				Q2 [HM]: "The challenge is getting people to use it—because once they use it, they are hooked."	U
Place	Promotion	Strategic partnerships Message content	Customer education	Q3 [Explan]: "We do not want to have a price that prohibits someone from using our EI."	U
				Q4 [Explan]: "Some big affiliate sites included our EI. When we partnered with them, our user base grew rapidly."	U
				Q5 [HM] Dropbox: "When we posted a three-minute video demo, we first sensed that it might take off. We went from 5000 users on our beta waiting list to over 75,000 in 24 h."	U
				Q6 [Explan]: "We spent a lot of time focused on the initial few days after a customer registers to provide them with information, education to help them learn, and product tutorials."	
				Q7 [Explan]: "We did feature the 'creation myth', why we like the EI, how we came up with it, why we think it is useful, and more information about us. Those are the kind of things that give users confidence in an EI. We did this to build and to increase users' trust."	T
				Q8 [Explan]: "You have to trust an EI in terms of 'is my data safe?', 'is the EI reliable?'. Those are the things that make you feel confident about recommending the EI to others, so we spent a lot of time and effort on it."	T
				Q9 [Explan]: "We have to really assure users that they can trust us and that comes with our commitment to security."	T
				Q10 [Explan]: "We try to combat a lack of trust with good PR by partnering with credible established companies."	T
				Q11 [Explan]: "We gave testimonials from people who had used the product, like 'these are the customers who liked the product and these are real, genuine customers and this is their testimonials'. We did this to increase users' trust."	T
				Q12 [Explan]: "We found bloggers and we got them on board. Some of them featured us several times. Having those people try the EI and talk about it was hugely helpful in building trust."	T
				Q13 [Explan]: "The best recommendation is from other consumers. It always is when it comes to EIs. So, we make our EI really social and always more social so that it's easier for users to be able to share."	T
				Participants	Customer support
Q15 [Explan]: "Everyone takes the calls here, from the CEO to the CTO, everyone has to answer the phone from time to time. We want to be close to the customer."	T				
Physical evidence	Website/app design	High-quality		Q16 [HM]: Mint: "One big factor in building trust quickly is site design quality. People do make judgments of trust on appearance—in the real world and online. Mint's website design is "clean, well-designed, and easy-to-navigate."	T
				Q17 [HM]: Jott: "We wanted it to be inherently simple and super easy to adopt, given any usability hurdles."	U
Process	Configuration	Simple		Q18 [Explan]: "An EI has to be very simple, then more people use it. The moment you start adding complexity to the EI you really get less people using it."	U

Note: Q = Quote; HM = Historical Method; Explan = Expert Interviews; T = Trustworthiness; U = Usability.

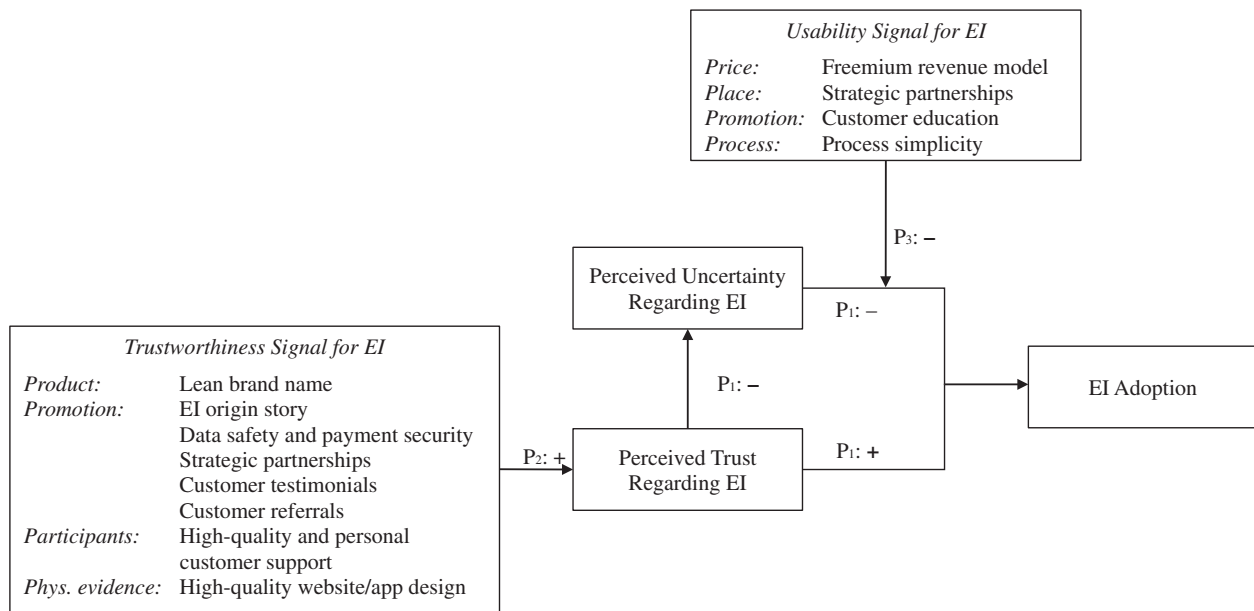


Fig. 1. Tentative Conceptual Model of the Relationship between E-Innovation Go-to-Market Strategy Elements and E-Innovation Adoption.

conditions, and payment security. Particularly, information regarding data safety and payment security in the form of safe, certified, and/or encrypted payment and data storage methods (e.g., EmergencyLink) are frequently part of the message content.

New to the literature is the insight that customer education and describing the EIs' origin are central for the go-to-market strategy of EIs launched by start-ups. Various means are used to educate customers, such as step-by-step guides (e.g., EmergencyLink and Jott), videos (e.g., Airbnb), tutorials (Prezi), and webinars (e.g., Prezi). For example, Dropbox's customer education initiative using a video partly explains their success. As the co-founder of Dropbox highlights in an interview with the Wall Street Journal, "When we posted a three-minute video demo, we [...] went from 5,000 users on our beta waiting list to over 75,000 in 24 hours." Furthermore, several EI websites recount the birth of the initial idea for the EI. Airbnb's website, for instance, said: "Our story begins in the living room of Joe and Brian's San Francisco loft in 2007."

Another interesting insight is with regard to *participants*. Many of the start-ups encourage and integrate customer feedback (e.g., Dwolla and Mint) with the goal of improving the EI, a tool for service innovations (Avlonitis et al., 2001). Other start-ups allow the participation of potential users in corporate decisions (e.g., Dwolla) or invite them to firm events (e.g., Prezi). Most start-ups emphasize their customer support quality and use this support to engage in personal interactions with their customers (e.g., Airbnb and WhatsApp). Furthermore, for *physical evidence*, a lean design structure and a high-quality appearance of the EI on the website seem to be relevant (e.g., Square). Although prior studies highlight the relevance of the quality of tangible products for services (e.g., Storey & Easingwood, 1998), none addresses these specific aspects with regard to design. Finally, regarding the service *process* (e.g., Frambach et al., 1998), the simplicity of the process delivery is crucial for EIs (e.g., Diskmiss and Dropbox). For example, Jott's website states, "overwhelmingly, it's about simplicity."

## 5. Discussion

This study uses a multi-method approach to establish an understanding of the go-to-market strategies for EIs by start-ups. First, a systematic literature review aggregates the various go-to-market strategy elements and their specific design discussed in the extant literature, which has mostly been devoted to product innovations.

Subsequently, an analysis of 25 EIs applying the historical method (Golder, 2000) identifies the go-to-market strategy elements for EIs and their specific design actually employed in practice. The 7P framework (Booms & Bitner, 1981) is valid for grouping go-to-market strategy elements for EIs, but the design of the framework needs to adapt to the specific context of EIs launched by start-ups. Specifically, the go-to-market strategy elements investigated in the literature do not cover all of the design aspects of go-to-market strategies for EIs. Additional EI-idiosyncratic aspects, such as displaying the origin story of the EI, need consideration.

Finally, expert interviews with managers involved in the launch of EIs offer valuable insights into the reasons for employing specific go-to-market strategy elements. The historical method analysis and the expert interviews uncover that the designs of go-to-market strategies for EIs serve specific signaling purposes. In line with prior signaling literature (Besharat, 2010; Schuhmacher et al., 2017; Su & Rao, 2010), start-ups appear to use signals to provide relevant information for potential customers' adoption decisions. In the context of start-ups launching EIs, such signals mainly target two key constructs for consumer adoption: trust and uncertainty.

### 5.1. Roles of trust and uncertainty in e-innovation adoption

The expert interviews reveal that start-ups expect that the increase in potential customers' trust in a start-up's EI encourages EI adoption. In fact, prior research finds evidence for a general positive influence of trust on the use of electronic services (Beldad, de Jong, & Steehouder, 2010) and e-commerce (Ha & Stoel, 2009). Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé (1992, p. 315) define trust as the "willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence." Even in initial exchange relationships, first trust perceptions form (McKnight et al., 2002), as in situations when potential customers are learning about a start-up and that start-up's EI for the first time.

The adoption of EIs by start-ups implies high levels of uncertainty for potential customers because of several EI-inherent characteristics, such as their digital nature (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003), impersonality (Dimoka, 2010), and the fact that they are launched by an unknown company (McKnight et al., 2002). Prior research suggests that trust may help to overcome perceptions of uncertainty (Ha & Stoel, 2009; Morrison & Firmstone, 2000; Nienaber & Schewe, 2014; Pavlou, 2003). Specifically, Ha and Stoel (2009, p. 566) emphasize that "trust is one of

the most effective tools for reducing uncertainty and risks [...] and generating a sense of safety.” Morrison and Firmstone (2000, p. 601) even state that “the main function of trust is to reduce uncertainty.”

Pavlou (2003) defines perceived uncertainty as “the consumer’s subjective belief of suffering a loss in pursuit of a desired outcome” (p. 109), whereas he describes trust as “the belief that the other party will behave in a socially responsible manner, and, by so doing, will fulfill the trusting party’s expectations without taking advantage of its vulnerabilities” (p. 106). Building upon the theory of reasoned action and the technology acceptance model, Pavlou (2003) empirically corroborated the negative effect of trust on perceived uncertainty. Thus, the expectation is that trust is also negatively related to uncertainty in this context, so that trust helps overcome customers’ uncertainty associated with a start-up’s EI.

**P<sub>1</sub>.** Perceived trust in a start-up’s EI (1) positively influences EI adoption and (2) decreases perceived uncertainty associated with a start-up’s EI, which in turn negatively influences EI adoption.

### 5.2. Trustworthiness signal

The analysis reveals that start-ups intentionally design the marketing mix components of *product*, *promotion*, *participants*, and *physical evidence* to signal the trustworthiness of an EI. Specifically, trustworthiness can be signaled by using a lean brand name that conveys integrity while sounding innovative (see quote Q1 in Table 4). Furthermore, start-ups signal trustworthiness via the communication of the start-up’s and EIs’ origin stories or the visions behind the EIs (Q7 in Table 4). Additionally, information regarding data safety and payment security in the form of safe, certified, and/or encrypted payment and data storage methods are frequently part of promotional messages, reportedly to foster trust (Q8 and Q9 in Table 4). For the same purpose, start-ups enter strategic partnerships (Q10 in Table 4) and engage customers in testimonials (Q11 in Table 4).

Generally, start-ups often use social media as a mouthpiece to invite users to recommend or ask bloggers to feature the EI. Start-ups see these referrals as effective means to increase the EI’s trustworthiness (Q12 and Q13 in Table 4). To further render the EI more trustworthy, start-ups emphasize and try to personalize their high-quality customer support (Q14 and Q15 in Table 4). Finally, start-ups focus on a high-quality design and appearance of their websites and apps to facilitate positive judgments of trust by potential users (Q16 in Table 4).

**P<sub>2</sub>.** Start-ups use a lean brand name, employ customer-centric social promotional programs, and implement personal customer support, as well as a high-quality website/app design as trustworthiness signal to increase potential customers’ perceived trust in their EI.

### 5.3. Usability signal

The data shows that to mitigate the negative effect of uncertainty on EI adoption, the design of a usability signal in the form of the marketing mix components of *price*, *place*, *promotion*, and *process* seems to be effective. For the price component, start-ups actively use a freemium model to signal EI usability. By facilitating the testing of the EIs’ functionality and showing that the EI is usable without financial risks, start-ups can encourage potential customers to engage with an EI (Q2 and Q3 in Table 4). Thus, start-ups can actively reduce the negative effects of potential customers’ uncertainty on EI adoption. For *place*, strategic partnerships that increase the accessibility of the EI accelerate adoption (Q4 in Table 4). Further, start-ups focus on customer education in promotional messages to provide customers with information about the EI’s functionalities. In doing so, start-ups facilitate EI adoption indirectly (Q5 and Q6 in Table 4).

Finally, start-ups employ a simple process that allows for quick and easy use of EIs as another usability signal. Start-ups highlight the

simplicity of the EI service process to signal that the EI is easy to use. The interviewed experts emphasize that they focus on the simplicity of the EI service process and provide customers with an easy usage experience to facilitate using the EIs (Q17 and Q18 in Table 4). By signaling that the EI is accessible, easy to use, and testable without any financial liabilities, start-ups may buffer the negative effect of potential customers’ uncertainty on EI adoption.

**P<sub>3</sub>.** Start-ups employ freemium revenue models, engage in customer education, and implement strategic partnerships and process simplicity as usability signal to mitigate the negative effect of potential customers’ perceived uncertainty on EI adoption.

### 5.4. Tentative conceptual model

The results illustrate that start-ups focus more on increasing potential customers’ trust in the start-ups’ EIs instead of directly trying to reduce customer uncertainty. One of the interviewed experts stresses that “trust is the dealbreaker or dealmaker.” In line with this statement, the design of start-up go-to-market strategies mainly aims to signal trustworthiness, as the primary aim of using a signal is to dissolve the state of information asymmetry between two parties (Kirmani & Rao, 2000). Start-ups seem to deem a signal of trustworthiness to be suitable to dissolve EI information asymmetry between themselves and potential customers.

In addition to the trustworthiness signal, start-ups intentionally use go-to-market strategy elements for EIs that signal usability. One expert points out that “people do not use anything that is even remotely complicated.” Hence, by signaling that the EI is accessible and easy-to-use, a start-up seeks to reduce the negative effect of uncertainty around the EI on adoption. Fig. 1 shows a tentative conceptual model that integrates the derived propositions.

## 6. Managerial implications

The findings of this study can be incorporated into a framework for start-ups involved in the launch of EIs, namely, the CARE framework. The CARE framework relies on four pillars: customers, authenticity, representation, and education. Since start-ups generally have to design their EI go-to-market strategies with limited resources, all recommendations consider the financial start-up reality. The CARE framework has the potential to serve as a helpful and intuitively appealing guideline for start-ups to efficiently and effectively allocate their resources within their EI go-to-market strategies for launch success.

### 6.1. Customers

Start-ups can establish a culture of customer orientation from the beginning, even with limited financial resources. In particular, start-ups should be aware that they do not just need technical skills to make their EIs successful. At the time of launch, start-ups should acquire marketing skills via learning or recruiting personnel. In the launch phase, they should then ask early users for feedback to improve their EIs. Company blogs and social media enable start-ups to dialogue with their customers in a cost-efficient manner. Personal interaction should be an integral part of start-ups’ business models. Start-ups can then offer personal customer support actively carried out by their employees, as long as the employees can handle the requests. Thus, employees are very close to their customers and can use this channel for additional customer feedback to improve the EI.

### 6.2. Authenticity

Authenticity is particularly important for new, unknown start-ups. To encourage potential customers to build favorable initial trust perceptions, start-ups should convey their EIs’ origins and visions. They can

disclose their histories and missions without spending much money by displaying the information on their websites or by using company blogs. Personal customer support can further contribute to building an authentic image. This way, the EI loses an impersonal image and gains trustworthiness for potential customers.

### 6.3. Representation

Start-ups with limited financial resources can leverage their early customer base and make them representatives for the EI. Without a costly, formal external promotional program, start-ups can build a solid customer base by creating social media buzz and incentivizing word-of-mouth advertising. Strategic partnerships with established firms facilitate gaining a foothold in the market. The implementation of a customer referral system, especially in combination with a freemium business model, can help reach a critical mass of customers in the launch phase. Additionally, customer testimonials convey trustworthiness and make the intangible EI more tangible to potential customers. Again, using channels such as the company website or blog, and social media can lower expenditures.

### 6.4. Education

To enhance trust and signal that the EI is easy to understand and use, start-ups should not fail to educate their customers. Companies can implement customer education in several cost-efficient ways. A video on the company website may explain the features and functionality of the EI. Additionally, step-by-step guides can illustrate the simple usage process on the company website or social media. Additionally, a lean brand name can stress the simplicity of the EI. Generally, communication about the EI should highlight process simplicity, and emphasize data protection and payment security.

## 7. Limitations and future research directions

This study does not come without some limitations. First, the systematic literature review focuses on a particular set of top journals. The dataset of 131 articles provides an adequate perspective on the design of go-to-market strategies. Future studies can extend this dataset to lower ranking journals as well to seek additional insights on go-to-market strategies relevant for EIs. Second, the historical method analysis uses a theoretical sampling approach. Despite theoretical saturation in the data set, setting different sampling foci might lead to further insights. Third, despite a multi-method approach, including triangulation to investigate the go-to-market strategies for EIs by start-ups and to develop a conceptual model, further econometric analyses could validate the findings.

As a next step, future research should empirically analyze the tentative conceptual model and implications outlined in this present study. Specifically, future research should assess the illustrated causal relation between trust and uncertainty, using empirical methods such as

experiments that allow ruling out reverse causality. Fourth, although the empirical analyses are idiosyncratic to EIs launched by start-ups, the findings might also bear potential implications for established companies and small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as for the launch of other innovations. A fruitful avenue for future research would be to investigate which of the go-to-market strategy elements outlined in the conceptual model also pertain to established companies, small and medium-sized enterprises, or other innovations.

## 8. Conclusion

This exploratory study uses deductive and inductive knowledge generation approaches to identify go-to-market strategies and their elements for EIs launched by start-ups. Furthermore, this study analyzes start-ups' underlying intentions for employing specific go-to-market strategy elements and discloses the elements' signaling functions.

Data triangulation using multiple collection methods ensures the greatest generalizability possible for the results garnered with the applied empirical approach. In doing so, the resulting insights contribute to the innovation literature and to the understanding of the launch of EIs by start-ups.

First, this study extends the 7P framework (Booms & Bitner, 1981) to the specific context of start-up EIs. The results illustrate that the design of the 7Ps has to adapt to the financial reality of start-ups and the digital nature of EIs. Second, this study theoretically contributes to signaling theory by deriving an understanding of the signaling functions of EI go-to-market strategy elements, extending signaling theory to the context of start-ups and their EIs, and discovering two particular types of signals: trustworthiness and usability signals. Third, this study contributes to the understanding of the adoption process of EIs by revealing factors that drive EI adoption. Based on a historical method analysis and expert interviews, this study proposes a mediating mechanism between go-to-market strategies for EIs and EI adoption, that is, increasing trust in EIs through trustworthiness signals sent by start-ups. Furthermore, this study proposes a moderating mechanism on the negative influence of the uncertainty associated with start-ups and their EIs on EI adoption, that is, reducing the negative impact of this uncertainty on EI adoption via usability signals. Hence, the findings allow us to derive several propositions regarding the influence of EI go-to-market strategies and their signaling functions on potential customers' trust and uncertainty and, ultimately, on EI adoption. These propositions identify several aspects that can spur further research on go-to-market strategies for EIs. Finally, this study contributes to the innovation launch practice by presenting managerial implications for start-ups launching EIs.

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## Appendix A. Systematic literature review of articles investigating go-to-market strategy elements for innovations

No.	Study	Journal	Object	Marketing mix components investigated						
				Product	Price	Promo-tion	Place	Process	Partici-pants	Physical evidence
[1]	Aaker (2007)	California Management Review	U	X						
[2]	Abbey, Blackburn, & Guide Jr. (2015)	J. of Operations Management	P		X					
[3]	Ahearne et al. (2010)	J. of Marketing Research	P						X	
[4]	Andritsos & Tang (2010)	European J. of Operational Research	P				X			

[5]	Auh & Shih (2009)	J. of Brand Management	P	X					
[6]	Avlonitis, Papastathopoulou, & Gounaris (2001)	J. of Product Innovation Management	S			X		X	
[7]	Barroso & Llobet (2012)	J. of Marketing Research	P			X			
[8]	Beard & Easingwood (1996)	Industrial Marketing Management	P	X	X	X		X	
[9]	Besharat (2010)	Industrial Marketing Management	P	X					
[10]	Beuk et al. (2014)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P						X
[11]	Bouten, Snelders, & Hultink (2011)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X					
[12]	Bruce, Foutz, & Kolarici (2012)	J. of Marketing Research	U			X			
[13]	Cadwallader et al. (2010)	J. of the Academy of Marketing Science	S					X	X
[14]	Calantone & di Benedetto (2007)	J. of Business & Industrial Marketing	P		X				
[15]	Calantone & di Benedetto (2012)	J. of the Academy of Marketing Science	U		X	X		X	X
[16]	Castaño et al. (2008)	J. of Marketing Research	U			X			
[17]	Chakravarti & Jinhong (2006)	J. of Marketing Research	P			X			
[18]	Chang & Tseng (2015)	European J. of Marketing	P	X					
[19]	Chen, Chiang, & Yang (2014)	Marketing Letters	P			X			
[20]	Chen, Shen, & Chiu (2007)	Industrial Marketing Management	P			X			
[21]	Chiesa and Frattini (2011)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X	X	X		X	
[22]	Chung (2011)	J. of Business Research	P			X			
[23]	Cooper & de Brentani (1991)	J. of Product Innovation Management	S	X		X		X	X
[24]	Cooper & Kleinschmidt (1995)	J. of Marketing Management	U	X	X	X			X
[25]	Cooper et al. (1994)	J. of Product Innovation Management	S	X		X			X
[26]	Cui, Lui, & Guo (2012)	International J. of Electronic Commerce	U			X			
[27]	Dahl & Hoeffler (2004)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P			X			
[28]	Danaher & Putsis (2001)	J. of Marketing Research	U		X				
[29]	De Brentani (2001)	J. of Product Innovation Management	S					X	X
[30]	Delre et al. (2007)	J. of Business Research	P		X				
[31]	Dens & de Pelsmacker (2010)	J. of Brand Management	P	X		X			
[32]	Desai (2000)	Marketing Science	P			X			
[33]	Di Benedetto (1999)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P		X	X		X	X
[34]	Dockner & Gaunersdorfer (1996)	European J. of Operational Research	P		X			X	
[35]	Easingwood et al. (2006)	J. of Product Innovation Management	S		X			X	
[36]	Ernst et al. (2015)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X	X				
[37]	Feiereisen, Broderick, & Wong (2008)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P			X			
[38]	Feiereisen, Wong, & Broderick (2013)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P			X			
[39]	Flatten et al. (2015)	Entrepreneurship: Theory & Practice	U			X			
[40]	Frambach et al. (1998)	J. of Business Research	S	X	X	X		X	X
[41]	Frattini et al. (2013)	J. of Product Innovation Management	S			X			
[42]	Fruchter & van den Bulte (2011)	International J. of Research in Marketing	P			X			
[43]	Gielens & Steenkamp (2007)	International J. of Research in Marketing	P	X					



[44]	Goedertier et al. (2015)	J. of Business Research	P	X				
[45]	Gruner, Homburg, & Lukas (2014)	J. of the Academy of Marketing Science	P				X	
[46]	Guiltinan (1999)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X	X	X	X	
[47]	Gupta & di Benedetto (2007)	Industrial Marketing Management	P			X	X	
[48]	Handel & Misra (2015)	Marketing Science	U			X		
[49]	Hariharan, Talukdar, & Kwon (2015)	International J. of Research in Marketing	P				X	
[50]	Heiman & Muller (1996)	J. of Marketing Research	P				X	
[51]	Henard & Szymanski (2001)	J. of Marketing Research	U	X	X			
[52]	Homburg, Bornemann, & Totzek (2009)	J. of the Academy of Marketing Science	P			X	X	
[53]	Hultink and Atuahene-Gima (2000)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P					X
[54]	Hultink and Robben (1999)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X	X	X	X	X
[55]	Hultink et al. (1997)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X	X	X	X	
[56]	Hultink et al. (1998)	International J. of Research in Marketing	P	X	X	X	X	X
[57]	Hultink et al. (1999)	J. of Strategic Marketing	P	X	X	X	X	
[58]	Hultink et al. (2000)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X	X	X	X	X
[59]	Ingenbleek, Frambach, & Verhallen (2013)	J. of Product Innovation Management	U			X		
[60]	Ingenbleek et al. (2003)	Marketing Letters	P			X		
[61]	Jain, Mahajan & Muller (1995)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P			X		
[62]	Jin (1995)	J. of Economic Behavior and Organization	P				X	
[63]	Jung (2011)	J. of Business Research	P				X	
[64]	Kamrad et al. (2005)	European J. of Operational Research	P			X	X	
[65]	Khandeparkar (2014)	J. of Retailing and Consumer Services	P			X		
[66]	Kim, Hahn, & Yoon (2015)	Psychology & Marketing	P	X				
[67]	Klink and Athaide (2010)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X				
[68]	Kohli (1999)	J. of Business Research	P				X	
[69]	Krieger et al. (2003)	J. of Services Marketing	S			X	X	
[70]	Krishnan, Bass, & Jain (1999)	Management Science	P				X	
[71]	Kuester et al. (2015)	International J. of Research in Marketing	P			X		
[72]	Kuester, Hess, & Herrmann (2015)	International J. of Innovation Management	P	X				
[73]	Kuester, Homburg, & Hess (2012)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X	X	X	X	X
[74]	Langerak, Rijdsdijk, & Dittrich (2009)	Marketing Letters	P			X		
[75]	Le Nagard-Assayag & Manceau (2001)	International J. of Research in Marketing	P				X	
[76]	Lee & O'Connor (2003)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P				X	
[77]	Lee & Tan (2013)	J. of Management Information Systems	S			X	X	
[78]	Lee et al. (2011)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P			X	X	
[79]	Lenfle & Midler (2009)	Research Policy	S					X
[80]	Lilly & Walters (1997)	J. of Product Innovation Management	U				X	
[81]	Li, Zhang, & Wang (2015)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X				
[82]	Lin, Wu, & Cheng (2015)	J. of Business Research	S	X				
[83]	López & Sicilia (2013)	European J. of Marketing	P				X	

[84]	Lowe & Alpert (2010)	Psychology & Marketing	P		X				
[85]	Lowe & Barnes (2012)	J. of Marketing Management	P		X				
[86]	Ma, Gill, & Jiang (2015)	J. of Marketing Research	P	X					
[87]	Mathur (1999)	J. of Marketing Management	P			X			
[88]	Matikainen et al. (2015)	Industrial Marketing Management	P						X
[89]	Montaguti, Kuester, & Robertson (2002)	International J. of Research in Marketing	P		X	X	X		
[90]	Moreau, Markman, & Lehmann (2001)	J. of Consumer Research	P			X			
[91]	Narayanan & Manchanda (2009)	Marketing Science	P			X	X		
[92]	Narayanan, Manchanda, & Chintagunta (2005)	J. of Marketing Research	P			X			
[93]	Park, MacLachlan, & Love (2011)	International J. of Research in Marketing	S		X				
[94]	Parry & Kawakami (2015)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P			X			
[95]	Penmetza, Gal–Or, & May (2015)	Production and Operations Management	S		X				
[96]	Popma, Waarts, & Wierenga (2006)	Industrial Marketing Management	P			X			
[97]	<a href="#">Prins and Verhoef (2007)</a>	J. of Marketing	S			X			
[98]	Punyatoya, Sadh, & Mishra (2014)	J. of Brand Management	P	X					
[99]	Rackham (1998)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P			X			
[100]	Radford & Bloch (2011)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X					
[101]	Ramanan & Bharvaga (2014)	Production & Operations Management	P					X	
[102]	Rangan, Menezes, & Maier (1992)	J. of Marketing	P					X	
[103]	Reinders, Frambach, & Schoormans (2010)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X					
[104]	Roberts & Candi (2014)	J. of Product Innovation Management	U			X			
[105]	Samu, Krishnan, & Smith (1999)	J. of Marketing	P			X			
[106]	Schatzel & Calantone (2006)	J. of the Academy of Marketing Science	P			X			
[107]	Sheinin & Schmitt (1994)	J. of Business Research	P	X					
[108]	Shen, Duenyas, & Kapuscinski (2014)	Manufacturing & Service Operations Management	P			X			
[109]	Sheng & Pan (2009)	J. of Retailing & Consumer Services	P	X					
[110]	Simonin & Ruth (1995)	J. of Business Research	P	X					
[111]	Song & Parry (2009)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P				X		
[112]	Sorescu, Shankar, & Kushwaha (2007)	J. of Marketing Research	P			X			
[113]	Spann, Fischer, & Tellis (2015)	Marketing Science	P			X			
[114]	Steenkamp & Gielens (2003)	J. of Consumer Research	P	X		X	X	X	
[115]	<a href="#">Storey and Easingwood (1998)</a>	J. of Product Innovation Management	S				X	X	X X
[116]	Stummer et al. (2015)	European J. of Operational Research	P			X	X	X	
[117]	Su & Vithala (2010)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P				X		
[118]	Su & Vithala (2011)	International J. of Production Economics	P				X		
[119]	Talke & Hultink (2010)	J. of Product Innovation Management	U				X		



[120]	Talke and O'Connor (2011)	J. of Product Innovation Management	U					X		
[121]	Talke and Snelders (2013)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P					X		
[122]	Wang & Miao (2015)	J. of Business Research	P						X	
[123]	Warren, Abercrombie, & Berl (1989)	J. of Services Marketing	S					X		
[124]	Winter & Sundqvist (2009)	Marketing Intelligence & Planning	P					X		
[125]	Woodside (1995)	Industrial Marketing Management	P			X				
[126]	Wooder and Baker (2012)	J. of Product Innovation Management	S	X						
[127]	Yin, Li, & Tang (2015)	Decision Sciences	P					X		
[128]	Zhao (2000)	Marketing Science	P			X		X		
[129]	Zhao, Dahl, & Hoeffler (2014)	J. of Consumer Research	P					X		
[130]	Zhao, Hoeffler, & Dahl (2009)	J. of Marketing Research	P					X		
[131]	Ziamou (2002)	J. of Product Innovation Management	P	X						
Σ			P: 98	38	46	76	23	4	18	3
			S: 18							
			U: 15							
%			P: 29.0	35.1	58.0	17.6	3.1	13.7	74.8	2.3
			S: 13.7							
			U: 11.5							

Note: S: Service, P: Product, U: Unspecified/Product and Service.

## Appendix B. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.09.037>.

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