

Examining social media branding profiles of logistics service providers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the social media profiles of logistics service providers, and understand how they use social media for elevating their services and differentiating their brands across industrial partners.

Design/methodology/approach – A content analysis was conducted on 3,215 social media posts, which were gathered from the official Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn pages of seven logistics service providers operating in Turkey.

Findings – The results demonstrated that logistics service providers engage with multiple social media channels with different branding motives, and that each company has a unique social media profile. The benchmarking analysis also revealed the branding strategies commonly pursued by the companies, and also indicated the alternative themes that differentiate their brands across their competitors.

Research limitations/implications – The findings contribute to the literature on the utilization of social media by business-to-business companies, particularly for logistics service providers, and recommend a frame of benchmarks for practitioners in the development of more effective social media branding strategies in services context.

Originality/value – Studies explaining the social media engagement of business-to-business companies in service sector are lacking, and also, the services branding literature in the context of social media is rather scarce. This study investigates the social media profiles of logistics service providers and explores how they use social media for branding their services.

Keywords Social media, Business-to-business marketing, Logistics service providers, Services branding

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Internet is fast becoming a key instrument in the business world. With the collaborative Web 2.0 technologies, particularly social media, new forms of communication, collaboration and sharing have emerged, while providing a more flexible domain, and allowing users to communicate with billions worldwide (Enders *et al.*, 2008; Hutchins and Rodriguez, 2018). According to Digital in 2018 report, there are now over 4 billion internet users, about 80% of who are active in social media (Hootsuite, 2018).

The emergence of social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, has transformed the business-to-business (B2B) communication environment and digital marketing objectives (Shih, 2009), including relationships with customers and trading partners. Social media presence increasingly provides new opportunities for organizations, leading an increasing number of firms to adopt social media tools for business purposes (Dahan and Hauser, 2002; Nielsen AC, 2010; Rapp *et al.*, 2013). According to Reiss-Davis (2013), 100% of business decision-makers engage

with social media for professional purposes. Content Marketing Institute (CMI) and MarketingProfs' recent survey show that more than 90% of B2B firms use a wide range of Web 2.0 social media platforms in marketing strategy, and more than 85% of this usage is on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn[1]. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that, "it's no longer a question of whether you should use social media, but how" (Reiss-Davis, 2013).

B2B e-commerce is widespread and valued more than business-to-consumer (B2C) e-commerce, but its growth is noticeably slower (Kalapesi *et al.*, 2010). Despite researchers' and practitioners' struggle to keep pace with the ever-changing digital era of B2B environment, the majority of academic research has focused on social media in B2C context (Andersson and Wikström, 2017). To the best of the author's knowledge, there is limited research regarding the use of social media in B2B environment (Barac *et al.*, 2017), despite the awareness that social media is used differently for B2B and B2C (Lehtimäki *et al.*, 2009). The extant literature on B2B community has focused on the importance of social media, and examined the benefits and challenges of its use (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011), for sustaining brand loyalty (Guesalaga, 2016; Ji *et al.*, 2017; Swani *et al.*, 2014), enhancing brand image (Leefflang *et al.*, 2014; Swani *et al.*, 2017), improving two-way

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communication with customers (Enders *et al.*, 2008; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Swani *et al.*, 2013) and creating new business partnerships and improving sales (Siamagka *et al.*, 2015). Although McKinsey Global Institute reported in 2012 that 90% of the surveyed companies benefited from social media presence, there is currently little work on its adoption in B2B environment (Habibi *et al.*, 2015; Karjaluo *et al.*, 2015a). Therefore, the research addressing the utilization of social media in B2B context remains at an “embryonic stage” (Siamagka *et al.*, 2015).

The content of social media is created by various users including corporates, employees, professionals and citizens (Karjaluo *et al.*, 2015b), and the value created by social media channels differs across various industries (TrackMaven, 2016). The service sector, which plays an important role in GDP worldwide, is also evolving, with new technologies and growing markets[2]. Economic growth is bringing an increasing trend toward outsourcing logistics services, highlighting the importance of logistics service providers (LSPs) (Meidutė-Kavaliauskienė *et al.*, 2014). In an increasingly competitive world, LSPs also are progressively adopting social media applications to improve their visibility (Hertz and Alfredsson, 2003) and differentiate their brands (Keller and Lehmann, 2006).

B2B businesses, particularly the companies providing customer solutions where the *locus* of the brand is the service, increasingly seek competitive advantage by branding their solution offerings (Maarit Jalkala and Keränen, 2014). This is especially critical for commodity-like industries such as logistics, in which businesses need to distinguish themselves by offering distinctive value propositions, such as customer experience, in the absence of the attributes of a physical product (Davis *et al.*, 2009). In this context, branding is known to be one of the most successful marketing strategies (Anees-ur-Rehman *et al.*, 2018). The extant literature suggest that brands may provide industrial firms with substantial benefits, such as building strong relationships within marketing channels (Glynn *et al.*, 2007), through providing value among suppliers and customers (Davis *et al.*, 2009) and increasing market share (Homburg *et al.*, 2010).

Despite the increased importance of B2B branding, Maarit Jalkala and Keränen (2014) demonstrated a lack of research investigating the effective strategies for building brands in service-oriented B2B contexts, especially regarding the extent to which service sector adopted Web 2.0 technologies for branding purposes. This indicates a need to understand the various forms of social media utilization in B2B service environment, particularly for logistics sector, to support LSPs’ exploitation of social media by, for example, increasing customer engagement (Lee, 2014) and information transparency (Rusch, 2014). To fill the knowledge gap on logistics sector’s social media strategies, the aim of this study is to examine LSPs’ social media profiles, and explore their adoption of social media as a communication channel for branding purposes.

Drawing on the tenets of Media Richness Theory (MRT) and Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G), a content analysis was conducted to explore the social media branding strategies of LSPs, particularly those operating in Turkey. Turkey has the geographical advantage of bridging continental Europe and Middle East, making it a key logistics base globally.

Additionally, in terms of world rankings of social media penetration, Turkey is 2nd on Instagram, 5th on Twitter, 9th on Facebook and 15th on LinkedIn (Hootsuite, 2018). Therefore, Turkey was deemed suitable for the analysis with a specific focus on social media use in logistics sector. This study pursues the following research questions:

RQ1. How do LSPs use social media for services branding?

RQ2. What are alternative services branding strategies that can be implemented by LSPs on social media platforms?

From this perspective, this study extends knowledge on the use of social media for LSPs, and explores the effective use of social media for reaching the target audience in the supply chain, including end-users, decision-makers, business partners, stakeholders, etc. Findings provide potentially valuable insights for managers in the service sector seeking to improve their brands’ visibility in social media, and their communication with stakeholders. The remainder of this paper is as follows. The next section provides a review of previous research on social media, B2B firms, logistics sector and the theories relating to this context. This is followed by the methodology and presentation of main findings of the content analysis conducted on a sample of LSPs’ social media posts. The findings are then discussed in the light of the extant literature. Finally, conclusions are drawn, and the limitations are presented, with future research recommendations.

2. Literature review and theoretical background

To advance knowledge on LSPs’ use of social media, first, relevant research streams are reviewed, with particular attention to social media, the B2B community and the logistics sector. After exploring the role of branding in service sector, U&G and MRT theories are used to further conceptualize the social media engagement of LSPs.

2.1 Social media in business-to-business context

Social media is often used synonymously with Web 2.0, and both affect communication, socialization, sharing and interaction; however, there are conceptual differences. According to Constantinides and Fountain (2008, p. 232), “Web 2.0 is a collection of open-source, interactive and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes.” In contrast, social media is associated with the internet-based social features of these Web 2.0 applications, such as wikis, blogs, microblogs (e.g. Twitter) and SNSs (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

While the adoption of digital marketing started earlier in B2C, social media is now recognized as an appropriate B2B communication tool for developing relationships beyond standard business transactions. Organizations can communicate with customers, shareholders and employees, and can also identify and engage with their business partners, by gathering feedback and enabling two-way conversations (Shih, 2009). However, according to Swani *et al.* (2014), B2B companies are more hesitant, having a less complete understanding of social media tools than their B2C counterparts. Compared to B2C, the knowledge and customer

information contexts are more complex in B2B environment, in terms of markets, products and new product developments, because of its multilayered structure. Customers are fewer but relatively larger, and business relationships are longer lasting, requiring greater directness in communication between organization and customer/business partner. It is difficult to transfer the knowledge gained and the practices created from the B2C context to B2B, because of differences in the customer base, the branding approach, communication and relationship building. Nevertheless, as stated earlier, this is particularly an important area, because previous research on social media concentrated heavily on B2C at the expense of the B2B context (Habibi *et al.*, 2015; Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2015a; Siamagka *et al.*, 2015).

Existing studies highlight several ways that B2B environment benefits from social media tools in terms of competitive advantage (Bernard, 2016), such as strengthening customer and business partner relationship (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011; Zhang and Li, 2019), enabling future business opportunities (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014) particularly, by increasing customer satisfaction (Ji *et al.*, 2017), and improving a company's online reputation (De Moya and Jain, 2013), and thus, increasing sales and profitability (Rapp *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, social media can play an important role for new business opportunities in terms of attracting investors (Du and Jiang, 2014) while providing new market opportunities. Despite the social media tools' considerable advantages, barriers tend to cause hesitation over using social media tools for marketing purposes (Järvinen *et al.*, 2012; Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011), and some organizations continue to struggle with social media strategies (Buehrer *et al.*, 2005; Järvinen *et al.*, 2012).

2.2 Social media in logistics sector

The studies on social media focus on various industries, but with significantly fewer studies in service industries (Buratti *et al.*, 2018), such as logistics sector, which tend to fall into the B2B community. A report from Armstrong & Associates revealed that, in 2016, 90% of Domestic Fortune 500 companies outsourced logistics and supply chain activities to LSPs. Reflecting the global market competition, rapidly growing demand of logistics services changed LSPs' role in terms of their relationship with customers and supply chain partners (Hertz and Alfredsson, 2003). LSPs currently require interaction with various actors in the supply chain, and are viewed as "networking firms" (Hertz and Macquet, 2006). Thus, LSPs' management of these relationships directly affects the whole supply chain network. In this regard, social media can provide novel ways of interacting with customers and trading partners (Jussila *et al.*, 2012, 2014), allowing new opportunities for enhancing customer engagement by providing, e.g. market intelligence, business intelligence (Lee, 2014) and information transparency (Rusch, 2014).

LSPs have a dual role as intermediaries in trade activities between the shipper and the customer at both national and international level. Customers seek not only affordable prices through these services, but also features such as on-time delivery, delivery flexibility and responsiveness (Green *et al.*, 2008; Wallenburg, 2009; Wang *et al.*, 2010). It is therefore essential for LSPs in a competitive market to provide robust customer relationship management (CRM) solutions for

improved customer satisfaction by exploiting social media channels (Heller Baird and Parasnis, 2011; Trainor *et al.*, 2014), because most customer interactions occur over the internet (Bultema, 2000).

Despite the potential benefits, the logistics sector's social media adoption has been regarded as slow (Botha, 2017); an online survey shows that about 60% of the logistics companies have insufficient knowledge of how to use social media for businesses, despite a slight growth reported in the number of active user companies since 2013 [3]. In this regard, although a relatively new concept in the logistics sector, social media can be leveraged to forge business opportunities for LSPs through improving communication with the stakeholders, and driving a dynamic relationship among different actors (Denktaş-Şakar and Sürücü, 2018). Hence, it is important to understand the motives behind social media utilization in the sector to comprehend its impacts on supply chain dynamics, and develop marketing strategies accordingly.

2.3 Theoretical framework

The component of marketing strategies that is crucial to differentiating service offerings among B2B firms is branding (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). To investigate social media profiles of B2B companies in services context, first, the theoretical framework of U&G theory is used to explain the underlying motivations and gratifications of social media branding strategies of LSPs. The tenets of MRT are further used to demonstrate the degree of richness of LSPs' social media strategies based on their media choices, and benchmark the more effective strategies for branding the services in social media.

2.3.1 Services branding

Branding is an essential tool for B2B and B2C markets (Mudambi, 2002; Mudambi *et al.*, 1997). After Vargo and Lusch (2004) introduced service-dominant logic (SDL), a body of literature has emerged on services and branding in various B2B markets (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007; Baumgarth, 2010; Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Roberts and Merrilees, 2007). For instance, in their study, Roberts and Merrilees (2007, p. 414) puts emphasis on the importance of branding for services rather than products in B2B markets, and highlights the role of brand as a "trust builder" among businesses.

Despite a vast amount of academic research on B2C context, the role of brands, specifically in business markets, still requires much attention (Lipiäinen and Karjaluoto, 2015). Existing studies on B2B branding argues that building a strong brand may provide several strategic benefits, such as higher competitive advantage (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2007), and better communication over the distribution network (Ohnemus, 2009) and the supply chain relationships (Anees-ur-Rehman *et al.*, 2018), which eventually improve financial performance. It is also revealed that branding strategies have positive effects on perceived quality of products or services (Cretu and Brodie, 2007), which play an important role in the B2B purchasing decision-making process (Gomes *et al.*, 2016). More recently, Cassia *et al.* (2017) focus on the transition toward service-orientation, and reveal the positive impact of branding on loyalty. Furthermore, extant research on the business context

shows that credibility in B2B markets depends on the reputation of the overall organization, rather than the products alone, and this credibility reduces perceived risk, which consequently allows greater opportunities for investment in the corresponding brands (Leek and Christodoulides, 2011).

However, despite increasing industry attention in branding literature, coverage of service brands, particularly in logistics services, remains scarce (Davis *et al.*, 2009). Considering the absence of branding studies on B2B social media usage (Keränen *et al.*, 2012), this study aims to fill this gap by investigating the social media branding strategies of solution-oriented logistics firms.

2.3.2 Uses and gratifications theory

U&G theory is a socio-psychological approach to understanding how individuals use specific media content to fulfill needs (Katz *et al.*, 1973). Its main purpose is to identify underlying motivations behind the use of a particular medium, and content choices (Lee and Ma, 2012). Ruggiero (2000) considers it as one of the most effective and appropriate theories for understanding the motives behind media channel choice, and points out its major strength, i.e. adaptability over time to new technologies, such as the internet. In this regard, Rubin (2009) emphasized that U&G needs to adapt to explosive growth of new media in terms of the gratifications engendered. The theory, developed from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, has five main assumptions:

- 1 The audience members are assumed as active and goal-oriented.
- 2 Media choice depends on the audience and is used for gratifications.
- 3 In terms of human needs, media competes with other resources.
- 4 The audience is self-aware of its interests and motivations in media choices.
- 5 The audience can make judgments on media content value.

Users search for precise gratifications on their choice of media (Katz *et al.*, 1973). With advent of the digital age and the popularity of social media, it is critical to understand the motivations and needs behind individuals' internet use; therefore, it is essential to construct a theory to explain why and how a particular medium gratifies their needs.

From early 2000s, the internet usage extended the theory's scope beyond the traditional media of television and radio. More recent approaches investigated the attention of individuals in relation to new media, specifically the internet (Huang, 2008; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000). U&G theory has been essential in understanding which gratifications modern digital media can stipulate, and has been widely applied to investigate medium and content gratification, including SNSs (Chen, 2011; Liu *et al.*, 2010; Phua *et al.*, 2017; Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). The extant literature on U&G applications on social media illustrated that a brand's main goal is to attract the audience via gratifying content shared on social media; thus, the content shared should be carefully designed to strengthen the level of engagement with the audience (Malthouse *et al.*, 2013).

With the advent technological developments and market dynamics, it is not only consumers who are active agents of social media; now, businesses also started to get involved in

social media, particularly for branding purposes (Meske and Stieglitz, 2013; Xu *et al.*, 2012). In businesses, it is the team of individuals who are direct interpreters and active decision-makers of corporate strategies. Hence, individuals, who work for LSP companies and responsible for developing corporate strategies, are also active agents of social media while playing the dual role of both consumer and employee (Xu *et al.*, 2012). On the other hand, it is also the individuals who work for the LSP's stakeholders, and who are exposed to any treatment on social media or influenced by the branding strategies and make decisions for their own corporate actions/strategies in relation to those LSPs. In that respect, individuals who are directly managing the social media content of those companies become the research unit of analysis in B2B context. Therefore, U&G theory can be considered as an appropriate theoretical basis for exploring companies' social media branding motives (Meske and Stieglitz, 2013). Within this perspective, U&G theory is used in this study to explain the motivations, uses and gratifications reflecting the needs of LSP companies. Therefore, the contribution is made to the existing U&G literature by extending its theoretical framework to B2B context from a services branding perspective.

2.3.3 Media richness theory

U&G theory advances theoretical understanding of motivations behind the companies' selection of social media tools and content; however, to capture the capabilities and characteristics held by these various social media channels, the concept of media richness is applied. MRT, a widely referred media theory (Daft and Lengel, 1986, p. 560), is an extension of information processing theory, defined as "the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval." The theory was initially used to measure traditional media tools within organizations, and later adapted to Web 2.0 technologies (Daft *et al.*, 1987; Dennis and Kinney, 1998). With the evolution of media channels, such as social media, several studies have used MRT to explain social networking adoption (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Liu *et al.*, 2017; Ye *et al.*, 2018).

Regarding the degree of richness, the theory suggests that the aim of any type of communications is "resolution of ambiguity and the reduction of uncertainty" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). MRT theorizes that certain media channels are more effective, and premises four richness factors across different media tools: number of channels used, variety of language, immediacy of the feedback and establishment of personal focus. Moreover, it suggests that different media channels and content have different capabilities; for instance, multimedia formats such as video, audio and images enhance richness on online mediums (Simon and Peppas, 2004). The theory proposes that richer media leads to faster communication and better understanding, which might positively influence an organization's brand image, and eventually provides competitive advantage. The internet provides numerous opportunities for interactivity, and allows a larger audience to be reached (McFarland and Ployhart, 2015); therefore, richer interaction is expected not only between individuals, but across all the actors in a supply chain. Hence, applying MRT can bring a more comprehensive understanding on the richness perceived via social media engagement of LSPs, in terms of their branding strategies.

3. Methodology

To elaborate on the social media utilization of logistics companies for services branding purposes, an empirical study was conducted. Because the study is exploratory in nature, content analysis was used (Yin, 1994) on the social media messages of LSPs to gain insight into their social media branding strategies.

3.1 Sample

With its geographical advantages, Turkey is a key global shipping and logistics center (Barla *et al.*, 2017). According to the Logistics Performance Index, among 155 countries, Turkey is ranked 34th in 2007, 39th in 2010 and 27th in 2012. Additionally, 1,500 Turkish logistics companies operate a total of 4,600 vehicles across Europe, which make the Turkish logistics sector the biggest regional fleet (Turhan and Turan, 2017). Hence, this highly appealing emerging market in terms of logistics operations was chosen as the subject of study.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify the LSPs that fit the aim of this study (Miles *et al.*, 2014). The sample was selected from the leading LSPs listed in the Supply Chain Services in Turkey Report by the Association of International Forwarding and Logistics Service Providers[4]. First, from the top 20 LSPs listed, all companies' social media accounts were examined. While 10 out of these 20 have social media accounts, only seven of them were found to be active on at least one social media platform, and thus, the passive accounts were eliminated from the list. Subsequently, the authors gained access to seven LSPs' public Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn pages; five were Turkish companies, and two were European. The number of local employees in each company ranged from 1,000 to 8,000, and all had a wide range of operations globally (Table 1).

These companies were selected as the sampling frame for three main reasons. First, logistics sector in Turkey is expanding rapidly in line with economic growth (Turhan and Turan, 2017). Second, the selected companies are the leading forwarders in Turkey, with worldwide operations, offering different ranges of services, enabling a comparison of social media use across a variety of LSPs. Third, as a country, Turkey is one of the most active users of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn (Hootsuite, 2018).

3.2 Data collection and analysis

In this context, content analysis was conducted on messages on corporate social media channels to understand the gratification themes shared by LSPs, and their services branding motives in multiple social media platforms (Katz *et al.*, 1973). Content analysis is considered to be a fundamental method of research in communication (Lombard *et al.*, 2002) and marketing (Neuendorf and Kumar, 2002), and has been used in B2B context in various media forms, including Facebook wall posts (Swani *et al.*, 2013) and tweets (Swani *et al.*, 2014).

The research design comprises secondary data gathered from the LSPs' publicly available social media platforms, in particular, the corporate pages of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. Multiple social media platforms were chosen for the analysis, as suggested by MRT theory (Simon and Peppas, 2004), to gain a comprehensive understanding on the content provided for services branding. These platforms are presented as the big four, and ranked in the top five among B2B SNSs (Hootsuite, 2018). Data was collected from the social media analytics, analysis and measurement platform BoomSocial for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts, while LinkedIn posts were gathered manually by the authors[5].

Table 1 Sample LSP companies

LSP	Origin	Services provided	Scope of operation		No. of employees (as of 2019)
			Region	No. of countries	
LSP1	Turkey	Road, Sea and Air, Railway, Ro-Ro, Intermodal, Domestic Distribution, Fair and Event, Project, Cargo Insurance, Warehouse Service, Project Management, Facilities, Technology, Customs Clearance and System Infrastructure	Europe	15	7,989
LSP2	Turkey	Road, Sea and Air, Railway, Terminal Management, Project Cargo/ Intermodal	Asia	18	1,300
			Africa	4	
			Europe	5	
LSP3	Turkey	Road, Warehousing, Supply Chain Development, Project Logistics, Sea and Air, Railway, Customs Clearance	Asia	8	3,638
			Europe	17	
			Worldwide		
LSP4	Turkey	Road, Sea and Air, Railway, Fair and Event Logistics, Insurance, Intermodal, Project Transportation, Warehousing, Customs Clearance	Asia	8	1,400
			Africa	3	
			Europe	29	
LSP5	Germany	Road, Sea and Air, Railway, Supply Chain Development, Package/Parcel/ Small Package delivery	Worldwide		1,000
LSP6	Turkey	Road, Sea and Air, Warehousing and Distribution Services, Railway, Project Transportation, My Car's On Vacation	USA	1	3,000
			Asia	7	
			Europe	12	
LSP7	Austria	Road, Sea and Air, Contract Logistics, Supply Chain Development, Fairs and Exhibitions, Sport and Event Logistics	Asia	1	400
			Europe	29	

The data features Turkish-language social media posts for the seven LSPs: five Turkish and two global. It is noted that LSP 7 had no Twitter page, and LSP 6 no Instagram account, and no posts were found on LSP 2's Twitter and LSP 7's LinkedIn pages. In total, 3,215 social media messages from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, posted between October 2017 and October 2018, were examined. Table 2 shows the distribution of posts across different social media platforms for each company. Some posts were repeated across platforms; therefore, the number of distinct posts derived from total number of posts is 1,404, as shown in the last column.

Because coding is critical in content analysis (Lombard *et al.*, 2002; Neuendorf and Kumar, 2002), particularly in mass communication messages, the categories were developed through a continual iterative process, until more general classes were formed. Following guidelines provided by Lombard *et al.* (2002) and Creswell (2007), messages were analyzed; emerging themes were compared; and similarities and differences were explored. Messages were kept in a spreadsheet summarizing the integrated data. The iterative process enabled us to verify the findings (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). To enhance the reliability and integrity of the interpretations, "discursive alignment of interpretation" (Seuring and Gold, 2012) was used. Once social media posts were coded by each author individually, two independent coders then discussed the categories to assure consistency. After rounds of rereading and re-examining the data, and continual refining of the categories and comparing the findings with existing theories, the authors reached a consensus on each theme. Following this procedure, the intersubjectivity of the content analysis was ensured, leading to the finalization of the themes of strategies shared by LSPs through social media channels for elevating their services and thus brands.

4. Findings and discussion

After analyzing the data thoroughly, 1,404 distinct posts were grouped under 137 subcodes, and categorized under 10 branding themes (Table 3).

In results, two main findings are reported, each addressing the research questions. First, LSPs have different branding motives for sharing their services and activities in distinct social media platforms. Categorization of data revealed that LSPs elevate their services and differentiate their brands through various social media platforms by:

- advertising and promoting their services;
- informing about awards and certifications;
- announcing company events and activities;

- sharing company news and announcements;
- introducing company values;
- focusing on CRM,
- showing their employee orientation;
- engaging with social media users at large;
- announcing their recruitment standards; and
- announcing their social responsibility activities.

In addition, some social media platforms are used for particular branding motives, such as LinkedIn, for attracting potential employees meeting required standards. Findings are further discussed in terms of the similarities and differences of service-versus product-oriented B2Bs (Section 4.1).

Second, benchmarking among the social media branding themes of LSPs on different social media platforms shows that some branding strategies are common to LSPs (such as engaging with users at large, and advertising and promotion), whereas others are distinct, and thus more effective in differentiating the brands across their business partners (such as social responsibility and employee orientation). These ten themes further reveal that, LSPs pursue social media branding motives to enhance their brand image, create brand awareness and cultivate customer engagement (Cawsey and Rowley, 2016; Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011). This approach supports previous findings that social media usage in the logistics sector mainly focuses on attracting new leads (Diba *et al.*, 2019).

Branding is especially important in logistics service market. This forces LSPs to differentiate their service offerings (Davis *et al.*, 2009), and integrate relevant branding themes to social media platforms for visibility in the service sector. Because of the nature of the sector, it is difficult to assess the value of the service before purchase; therefore, advertising and promoting services on such channels is highly important for LSPs. The impressions made by their social media activity reinforces brand image, and this eventually plays a significant role in obtaining customer loyalty in logistics service market (Juga *et al.*, 2010). In that respect, publicizing the company's received awards and certifications, particularly regarding service quality, can strengthen service provider's brand image. Moreover, because quality of services and customer loyalty have significant impact on brand equity for third-party service providers (Westberg *et al.*, 2011), promoting company's service quality on such channels eventually enhances brand reputation (Bendixen *et al.*, 2004). Considering that social media is seen as a source of information about the brand and its product/service offerings in B2B context (Rapp *et al.*, 2013), content including information and updates about the company and events that company attended creates brand awareness on social media

Table 2 Sample social media channels

LSP company	Twitter	Facebook	Instagram	LinkedIn	No. of posts	No. of distinct posts
LSP1	228	235	234	253	950	453
LSP2	0	168	179	119	466	183
LSP3	182	147	139	83	551	191
LSP4	175	179	99	67	520	231
LSP5	130	156	34	37	357	166
LSP6	75	71	NA	48	194	78
LSP7	NA	102	75	0	177	102
Total	790	1,058	760	607	3,215	1,404

Table 3 Branding themes of LSPs in social media channels

Themes	Description	Subcodes
Advertisement and promotion	Promoting company services and products	Business unit, company resources, customs operations, delivery steps, global network, integrated transportation models, international service rate, environmental friendly ports, local network, logistics 4.0, multimodal transportation, new product announcement, online services, packaging, company inventions, R&D, service accessibility, service capabilities, service extension, service flexibility, service quality, service variety, special expertise area, tailored services across industries, technological developments, technology integration, transportation mode variety, value-added services
Awards and certification	Awards and certifications the company received	Driving technique certification certificate of appreciation, company resource award, customer experience awards, customs clearance services, employee awards, employment awards, intermodal network award, global operator award, supplier award, human resource award, integrated logistics provider award, international transportation awards, marketing awards, professional competence certificate, project awards, quality standards, R&D awards, special expertise area certification, reputation awards, safety standards, service quality certification, transportation mode variety certification, workplace qualification, tailored services across industries, value-added service certification, social responsibility awards
Company events and activities	Events and activities the company attended	Intercompany activities, social activities, business meetings, trainings, company communication platform content, collaboration activities, facility visit, company resources, sports events, summit participation, intercompany activities, cultural activities, workshops, university events, presentations, education programs, sector specific events, business related operations, panel participation, forum participation, fair participation, logistics partner events, meetings, mentorship programs, supply chain management events, celebrations
Company news and announcements	Information and updates about the company in general	Brand value, business partners, company resources, global network, sustainability, relocation, business unit, press release, logistics center, special expertise area, transportation mode variety, investments
Company values	Company identity and principles	Team-work, quality standards, customer-orientation, social responsibility, innovation, solution-oriented thinking
Customer relationship management	Interaction with customers and potential customers	Customer feedback, customer service, call center, customer-orientation
Employee orientation	Posts about the employees and workplace environment	Employee hobbies, employee experiences, employee feedback, employee skills, employee life story, employee training program, health and safety consciousness, journey of drivers, orientation program, special days, success stories
Engaging with social media users (customers)	Miscellaneous posts that aim to engage social media users (customers/followers)	Social media polls, company resources, company television program, contemporary news, canvass, employee photos, popular culture, journey of drivers, famous quotes, frequently asked questions, geographical information sharing, global network, greetings as a reminder, company magazine, logistics dictionary, practical tips, service variety, social media contest, special days, useful information sharing
Recruitment	Announcements of open positions inside the company	Global job listing, local job listing, internship
Social responsibility	Social responsibility-themed posts	Societal welfare, animals, children, disabled people, autism, water sources, drivers, energy saving, human rights, gender equality, green logistics, peaceful wishes, education, recycling, volunteering projects, sustainability, refugees, tailored services across industries, transportation mode variety

while leading higher engagement (Mudambi *et al.*, 1997). To enhance awareness of their brand, LSPs also cultivate customer relationships on social media through meaningful interactions (Järvinen *et al.*, 2012).

Similar to B2B context (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011), service providers aim to improve customer satisfaction and build customer trust through fostering interactions which eventually yields brand equity (Westberg *et al.*, 2011). Like customers, employees are considered as significant stakeholders in brand building (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007), and sharing employee-oriented content through social media is revealed as an alternative branding strategy among LSPs. Additionally, in line with previous

findings revealing that corporate social responsibility (CSR) enhances brand equity in B2B context (Sheth and Sinha, 2015), particularly in emerging markets (Lai *et al.*, 2010), explored themes illustrate that LSPs also engage with social responsibility content for social media branding purposes.

4.1 The use of different social media channels for branding logistics service provider services

Analysis revealed that LSPs pursue different branding motives in distinct social media platforms. Figure 1 shows the distribution of each theme on overall social media posts, indicating that LSPs use social media channels most commonly

for engaging with social media users, promoting services and sharing firm activity feeds. This supports findings of [Karjaluoto et al. \(2015a\)](#), that social media utilization in B2B context focuses on enhancing customer relationships; and provides further evidence that B2Bs' social media engagement is more directed toward service and product presentation compared to B2Cs. In other words, their main focus on social media marketing is to enhance strong brand image and increase brand awareness. In contrast to earlier findings ([Andersson and Wikström, 2017](#); [Jussila et al., 2014](#)), recruitment is less important for LSPs in social media branding strategies than other emerged themes. This reflects an important difference from the B2B context. Although jobseekers consider social media channels as an important source of information about the company culture, findings reveal that among leading LSPs, social media is much less used as a resource for recruitment compared to other B2B counterparts. A possible explanation is that, rather than using social media, particularly LinkedIn, for job listings, companies prefer popular job posting websites. Another difference with the B2B environment is the very low frequency of LSP feeds about company vision or brand position ([Bolat et al., 2016](#)), i.e. social media messages about their business identities or principles. For LSPs, brand image is anticipated to highlight favorable company attributes; however, surprisingly, such brand value proposition contents are in fact the least used.

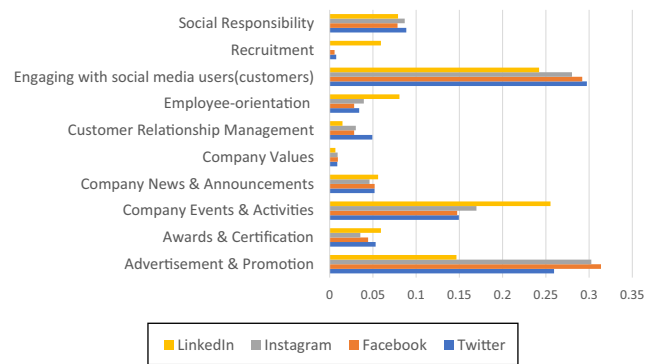
The evidence from the content analysis in the social media branding strategies of LSPs reveals that, among the four channels, Facebook (33%) is the most used, and LinkedIn (9%), the least. Findings further show that LSPs use different channels for different purposes: LinkedIn for posts targeting potential employees, prospective suppliers and/or customers, and Twitter, Facebook and Instagram generally for networking and communication with a wider audience, including business partners and end-users. This further reveals a shared profile among Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, leading to cross-posting, in contrast to LinkedIn content.

Branding themes shared among social media channels ([Figure 2](#)) show that LSPs use LinkedIn mainly as a hiring channel, reinforcing the view that this is the most successful social media channel for recruitment ([Chiang and Suen, 2015](#)). It provides candidates competitive advantage in terms of time and cost-efficiency, whereas for the company, it procures an effective talent pool to fulfill the job requirements ([Singh and Sharma, 2014](#)). Hence, for recruiters, the strategy of keeping candidates' interest via building a successful brand image on such

Figure 1 Branding strategy trends of LSPs in social media



Figure 2 Social media branding themes among social media platforms



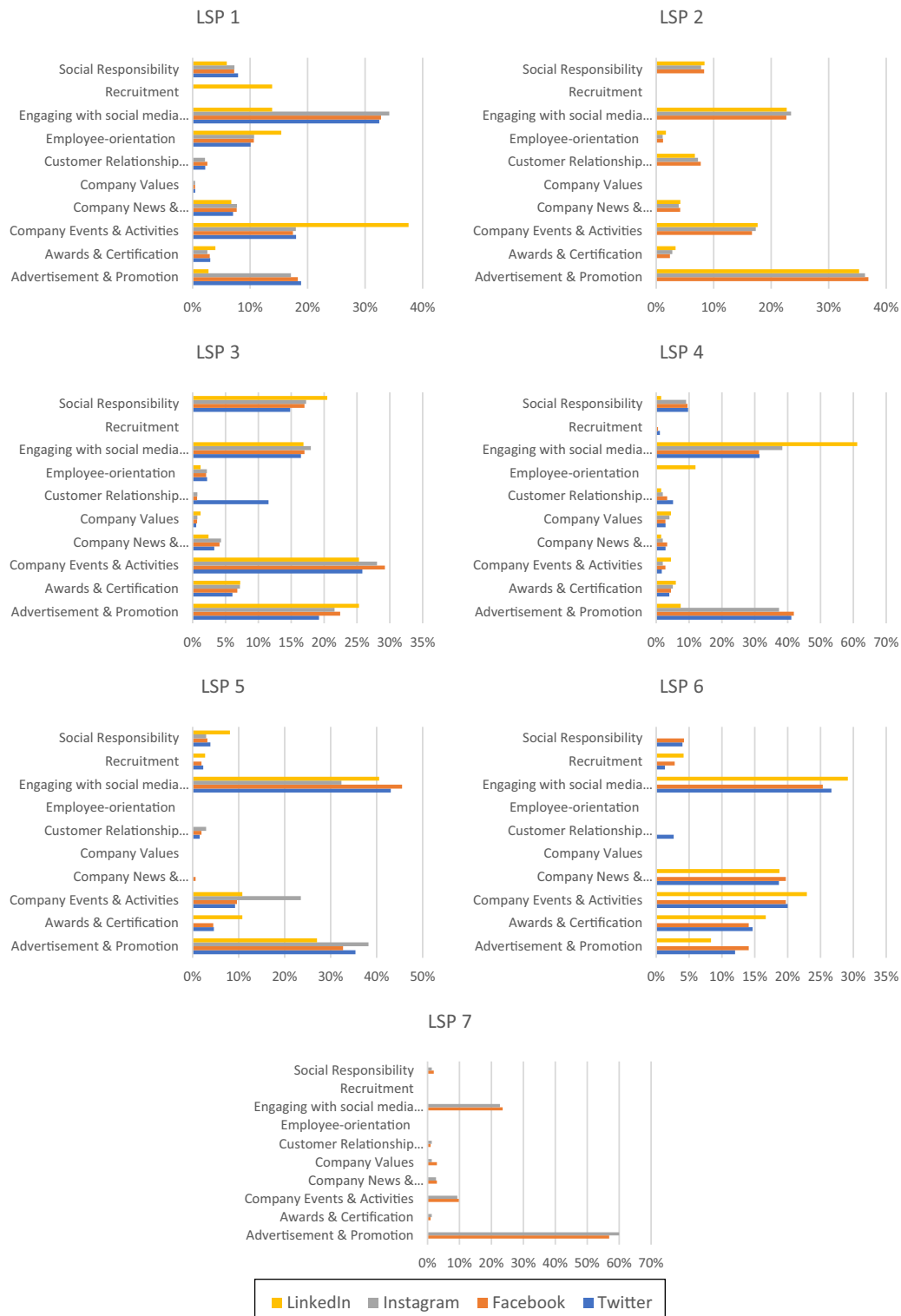
social networking tools plays a crucial role in a successful hiring strategy ([Cawsey and Rowley, 2016](#)). However, apart from LinkedIn, the other platforms are underused for recruitment.

Moreover, the business network LinkedIn is used for sharing professional networking activities, such as announcements of intercorporate activities, event participations and awards. The other channels are preferred for advertising existing services, promoting new services and improving relationship with customers, such as customer services purposes. As expected, for advertising purposes, LSPs primarily engage with Facebook, which enables audience-targeting based on user behavior gathered through their unique code called Facebook Pixel. For advertising their products and/or services, LSPs are, unexpectedly, highly dependent on the image-based social media platform Instagram. Overall, the selected LSPs prefer Twitter, Facebook and Instagram for customers and trading partners, and LinkedIn for reaching prospective employees and motivating existing ones via posting feeds such as company events.

4.2 Benchmarking the branding strategies of logistics service providers among different social media platforms

The study revealed significant differences on social media profiles of LSPs. Specific branding strategies are pursued by each; for instance, LSP 3 focuses on CSR, LSP 1 is more employee-oriented and LSP 6 is highly focused on promoting its services, implementing a service-specific content-sharing strategy for lead generation purposes. This further indicates important differences in LSPs' targeted audience in the B2B environment. For instance, while some companies aim to reach the whole supply chain, others implement a strategy focused on particular members, such as prospective employees or trading partners.

[Figure 3](#) illustrates the social media content shared by each LSP. The first company, LSP 1, has presence on all four social media channels, which indicates a richness in communication. The company's gratification of social media utilization is mainly for employee motivation, and attracting potential recruits, and to a lesser extent, lead generation purposes. A significant strategy adopted by LSP 1 is the special content aimed at employees, particularly truck drivers, with a highly visible social media profile focused on this group. Because social interaction is a highly

Figure 3 Social media branding profiles engaged by each LSP company

valued facet for blue collar employees (Marandi and Moghaddas, 2013), this strong employee orientation, specifically on drivers, improves the motivation and increases company performance. In this regard, employee social media interaction provides brand engagement, which

is considered as a valuable tool for company's brand positioning and brand equity (Duncan *et al.*, 2019), especially owing to the intangible nature of the services provided in this sector. Furthermore, the company strategy targets not only existing, but also potential employees.

LSP 2 has a social media presence on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, but has not yet shared any Twitter posts. The company operates an emphatic cross-posting strategy across social media channels, which could be considered as a deliberate ploy to strengthen its message, but the neglect of Twitter may benefit the company's competitors. Their social media gratification consists mainly of advertising services and engaging with both customers and stakeholders, generally targeting lead generation and increasing brand awareness. LSP 2's main social media presence is on Instagram, which, as an image-based platform (Muñoz and Towner, 2017), is considered as an effective channel for advertisement and user engagement (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). This could also provide successful interactions with customers and/or trading partners as a social media marketing strategy, because every interaction through the supply chain network is considered as an input to the brand performance (Marquardt *et al.*, 2011).

In contrast, LSP 3 makes use of every channel, mainly for increasing brand awareness, specifically by promoting their business activities and attendance at events such as summits, fairs and conferences. Despite the multiple gratifications of their social media utilization, rather surprisingly, there is great emphasis on social responsibility posts, particularly regarding education. CSR aims to fulfill stakeholders' moral gratifications, such as value creation concepts, along with SDL, which supports sustainable businesses (Biggemann *et al.*, 2014), and therefore can be considered as a successful branding strategy for a solution provider. Another significant characteristic is the company's customer-oriented communication strategy on its Twitter page, which is a suitable platform with its capacity for rapid response (Culnan *et al.*, 2010), and valuable publicity features, such as hashtags (Swani *et al.*, 2014). Hence, LSP 3's CRM adoption in social media strategies potentially increases customer satisfaction, and thus, improves organizational performance (Ata and Toker, 2012; Trainor *et al.*, 2014).

LSP 4 integrates all four social media channels, but distribution of the themes across these channels is not yet homogenous. Its social media content centers around two purposes: social networking with customers, and promoting the company's services. This dual-focus has the effect of limiting social media strategy for communicating the brands, that is, creating brand awareness. The company's social media use provides information about its culture via promotion of the company magazine.

A multinational company, LSP 5, has social media presence on all platforms. Interestingly, the company is the most frequent user of social media polls and contests, potentially an effective strategy for engaging with customers and end-users. Another important finding is that LSP 5 engages with each different social media channel for a different purpose; for instance, Instagram for messages related to products and/or services and company activities, exploiting the image-based format (Muñoz and Towner, 2017). In contrast, Facebook posts focus on partnering, new collaborations and co-operations with stakeholders, suggesting the targeting of business partners and potential trading partners rather than end-users. LSP 5 also relies heavily on hashtag usage, which can be considered as a successful social media strategy, through increasing richness of content (Baym, 2015). Furthermore,

their hashtag usage contains the brand name, potentially increasing global brand loyalty for such multinational companies (Swani *et al.*, 2014), because service sector firms are associated with brands not products (Davis *et al.*, 2009).

Another local firm, LSP 6, actively uses all platforms except Instagram. The most frequently shared messages concern special days, with great emphasis on awards won, which illustrate a strong emphasis on brand image and awareness. The company uses Twitter exclusively for customer service responses, exploiting this text-oriented platform for informative messages (Lovejoy *et al.*, 2012). Twitter has an "asymmetrical follower model," i.e. there is no necessity for businesses to approve follow requests (Swani *et al.*, 2014), allowing an easier interaction with the customer, and because Twitter users are highly responsive, this constitutes an effective social media strategy (Kusumasondjaja, 2018).

LSP 7 is a multinational firm, using only Facebook and Instagram in their Turkish accounts. In terms of the richness of medium, LSP 7 lags behind its competitors because of its emergent engagement with social media. Although engaged with only two channels, these have a shared profile, suggesting a balance of posts across both, and providing a strong information flow through social media users.

In summary, the data reveals that all LSPs have Facebook accounts with active content, although use of the other three channels varies. Therefore, this study underlines that Facebook is an ideal platform for any social media branding strategy, including in logistics setting, because it has the optimal advertising targeting options (Diba *et al.*, 2019). However, as MRT posits, richer media promotes faster and clearer understanding of the messages shared, and more effective communication with the customers and/or trading partners (Dennis and Kinney, 1998). Thus, social media presence on a single channel could be inadequate in terms of media richness. Similarly, there are risks of relying on LinkedIn as the main recruitment tool, because SNSs such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram provide dual communication and are more attractive to newly graduated potential recruits (Bernard, 2016). Therefore, cross-posting on various channels could accelerate the recruitment process by increasing the visibility of job listings.

Despite differences in LSPs' social media presences, all aim to engage audiences through a wide variety of posts, such as sector-related news, and special day celebrations, which illustrates the selected LSPs' common goal of enhancing brand awareness. Customers create value, whereas firms only offer value propositions (Vargo and Lusch, 2004); therefore, such strategy could be beneficial for brand performance because the greater the customer involvement in the value creation process, the greater their engagement with the brand. Another notable point among LSPs' social media presence is the lack of CRM and CSR messages. However, social CRM improves customer satisfaction, and enables successful communication with customers and business partners (Heller Baird and Parasnis, 2011); furthermore, social media channels are considered as suitable for CSR announcements in B2B environment (Schniederjans *et al.*, 2013). Because integration of CSR and SDL concepts provides a broader view regarding business ethics, it would be beneficial for companies to share CSR messages to achieve long-term sustainability.

5. Conclusion

The present study extends the knowledge of social media branding in the service sector by showing that LSPs engage with social media for different branding motivations. It is apparent that each company has a unique social media profile, and that companies vary in the amount of effort put into digital marketing tools, and generating social media presence on multiple platforms. The overall results provide academics and managers with a comprehensive understanding of how LSPs use social media channels in their marketing strategies.

Relevant studies point out the general scarcity of academic research regarding the use of social media in B2B context (Barac *et al.*, 2017; Siamagka *et al.*, 2015), and the lack of emphasis on the service sector, particularly for logistics (Buratti *et al.*, 2018; Maarit Jalkala and Keränen, 2014). Moreover, services branding studies in B2B environment are neglected (Bernard, 2016). The study contributes to this emerging body of literature presenting the importance of developing effective social media branding strategies in service-oriented B2Bs, particularly for logistics. Another contribution to the literature is the approach to social media as a branding platform for service sector, and the examination of the branding motives of LSPs (Lee and Ma, 2012; Ruggiero, 2000) to improve understanding on how social media can be used to elevate their services and differentiate brands across business partners. The findings can act as research benchmarks, and be used in comparison with other industries, and the B2C environment. Moreover, this study contributes the existing research on social media in B2B context, particularly the service sector, by analyzing and comparing four different social media channels engaged by the LSPs. This context of the study emphasizes the importance of presence on multiple social media platforms for strengthening the brand image (McFarland and Ployhart, 2015), with high levels of richness eventually providing better communication (Daft and Lengel, 1986; Katz *et al.*, 1973).

5.1 Managerial implications

This study focuses on social media engagement of LSPs, which is at the embryonic stage, particularly in the services branding context (Bernard, 2016; Siamagka *et al.*, 2015). Among the ten major LSPs in Turkey, only seven are present on social media, and from the ten different themes emerging across four social media platforms, only two companies (LSP 1 and LSP 2) showed significant variety. This finding has important implications for managers, emphasizing the need for LSPs to differentiate their value propositions from numerous competitors using branding strategies. In this regard, social media offers various advantages, in terms of cost and convenience, with immediate access to larger audiences. Moreover, bearing in mind LSPs' essential role in the supply chain, managers should be aware of how the various social media platforms can serve their particular branding strategies (Lashgari *et al.*, 2018).

A strong brand enhances power in the supply chain network, the level of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Low and Blois, 2002; Ohnemus, 2009). Supply chains often include a large number of participants, and embedding social media into LSPs' branding strategy could provide multidirectional, transparent and robust communication for dissemination of

information throughout the network. To generate an effective brand management via social media marketing, managers should seek to enrich the content shared across a variety of channels, and carefully align the medium with the target group (Keinänen and Kuivalainen, 2015). By ensuring variety in both social media channel and content, managers can increase media richness, providing better communication with the target audience (Daft and Lengel, 1986; Katz *et al.*, 1973). The content and channel to be engaged vary depending on the target audience, such as in the case of LSP 5, which uses Twitter for polls and Instagram for advertisement activities. This further reveals that, in addition to the sector, the target audience plays an important role in the selection of the social media channel and content in B2B branding context (Lashgari *et al.*, 2018).

Another potentially useful insight for managers is that a company's employee orientation can be strengthened on social media channels. The logistics sector can be considered as employee-oriented because of the key role played by drivers (Londono-Kent, 2009), and such content could serve LSPs' marketing strategies by appealing to the target audience. One implication is that, for LSPs with self-owned vehicles, driver-focused content will be a benchmark for a successful social media marketing strategy. Hence, such brand differentiation strategies could offer useful insight into B2B service brands, and provide guidance for LSPs. Related to this, LSPs should also incorporate a more general theme of CSR into their social media strategies, corresponding to worldwide trends. For managers, focusing on such content may increase a company's brand image, and consequently, loyalty of customers, leading to their engagement in co-creation of solutions (Cassia *et al.*, 2017). In terms of enhancing company image, none of the companies in this study share content on company values, revealing another alternative social media benchmark for the service sector, the need for content about company culture. Finally, LinkedIn is an undeniably a popular recruitment tool in B2B context (Vick and Walsh, 2010), but was neglected by all except LSP 1. Hence, using LinkedIn for recruitment purposes could be an effective social media benchmark for LSPs.

5.2 Limitations and future research

While this study contributes to the store of knowledge on social media engagement in B2B branding setting, particularly logistics sector, it has four main limitations. First, it is geographically limited, and further research should be conducted in other regions to enhance the knowledge on social media engagement worldwide. Second, content analysis was conducted only on messages posted by the companies; a similar analysis of social media user posts (i.e. comments) could generate a clearer understanding of how LSPs determine their social media strategies. Third, a further study could focus on the social media posts from a triadic perspective, i.e. shipper, customer and buyer. Finally, future academic work is encouraged to extend the scope of this research to other service industries, and use qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews, bringing a greater degree of empirical support.

Notes

- 1 Available at: <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2018-b2b-research-final.pdf> (accessed January 11, 2019).
- 2 Available at: www.ehs.org.uk/dotAsset/3f718ae6-9981-42da-82d8-fc21f89e58f4.pdf (accessed January 24, 2019).
- 3 Available at: <https://www.inform-software.com/news/news-details/news/social-media-in-logistics-recognized-potential-missing-expertise> (accessed February 16, 2019).
- 4 Available at: www.utikad.org.tr/images/HizmetRapor/stefaniskanutikad_transportlogisticsandsupplychainservicesinturkey-0678.pdf (accessed December 22, 2018).
- 5 Available at: <https://www.boomsocial.com> (accessed January 7, 2019).

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