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Research Paper

Enhancing Social Media Engagement for Logistics Services Branding

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates logistics service providers' social media engagement to understand better its effect on supply chain functions, mainly their branding purposes, since managers and academics consider branding strategies increasingly crucial in the current competitive business environment. Eleven semi-structured in-depth interviews with thirteen social media experts from the selected logistics service providers operating in Turkey were conducted to understand their social media use better and identify their decision-making mechanisms. The theoretical analysis is based on the technology acceptance model and media synchronicity theory. The findings suggest that business-to-business and business-to-customer settings are distinct, while logistics sector companies differentiate themselves through social media branding strategies. The most significant drivers of social media engagement are creating brand recognition and brand awareness, while the main perceived barriers are regulations and stakeholder permission.

Palavras-chave: Social Media, Business-to-Business Marketing, Logistics Service Providers, Services Branding

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1. INTRODUCTION

Technological developments have revolutionized how organizations communicate with their customers and business partners. Alongside Web 2.0 technologies, social media use has also rapidly increased. In 2021, there were over 4.20 billion social media users from over 4.6 billion internet users (Hootsuite, 2021). Thus, almost 60 percent of the world's population is now connected to the internet, while almost half uses social media. As knowledge, technology, and worldwide competition are the top influencers in the current operating environment, the evolution of the digital environment is a significant part of our lives.

Consumers engage with social media for several reasons, including interacting with friends and family, viewing photos and videos, and communicating with retailers and brands (Rapp et al., 2013). As consumers spend much time online, social media usage has extended beyond business-to-customer (B2C) contexts since retailers want to communicate with their target audience. Hence, the focus has shifted from organizations to customers, eroding traditional marketing perceptions of passive audiences (Weber, 2009). Given the increasing importance of customer interaction in marketing communications, companies have increased their presence on social media platforms to attract potential customers while retaining existing ones, understand customer needs and expectations, and conduct market research. Web 2.0 applications enable customers, retailers, and trading partners to collaborate while integrating customers across all business activities (Bartl et al., 2012; Tiwary et al., 2021).

While businesses use social media widely for their regular operations (Bell & Loane, 2010; Chae et al., 2020), internet-based applications allowing the exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Khan et al., 2021) have transformed business-to-business (B2B) marketing specifically. Realizing the popularity of social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, companies increasingly use social media for marketing (Michaelidou et al., 2011; Sarkum et al., 2017; Shih, 2009; Yücenur et al., 2022) and enhancing B2B relationships (Krings et al., 2021), with many companies including social media tools in their

strategies (Venkatesh & Jayasingh, 2017) – 80% of B2B companies, according to a recent survey¹. This has transformed B2B communication, and relationships with customers and trading partners, effectively bridging the gap between businesses and customers.

According to Michaelidou et al. (2011), social media holds great promise for service industry B2B firms for enhancing customer and business partner relationships as social networks mediate all interactions between those parties. This growing popularity of social media integration in businesses as a marketing tool has yet to be matched sufficiently by theoretical and empirical research (Iankova et al., 2019; Siamagka et al., 2015). Because B2B markets are often considered sales driven, there needs to be more focus on branding tenets (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). However, branding strategies, such as brand awareness, brand image, and positioning, enable B2B firms to differentiate their services from competitors (Iyer et al., 2019; Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). Yet, to the best of our knowledge, social media usage for marketing and branding in the B2B environment remains unexplored (Jalkala & Keränen, 2014). Anecdotal evidence suggests that research on B2Bs' adoption of social media mainly focuses on drivers like improving customer relationships (Swani et al., 2014) and building new business opportunities (Siamagka et al., 2015; Swani et al., 2017) or barriers like insufficient expertise or resources, and moral or legal issues (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2005).

While several theories attempt to explain B2B social media adoption, there are surprisingly few studies on the use of social media in service industries, particularly by logistics service providers (LSPs) (Denktaş-Şakar & Sürücü, 2017), despite their significant economic contribution in most countries.² With globalization, rapidly rising demand for logistics services has altered LSPs' role among the supply chain (Hertz & Alfredsson, 2003). Given today's competitive environment and rapidly evolving Web 2.0 technologies, LSPs have been forced to transform their communications with supply chain partners to differentiate their brands (Hertz & Alfredsson, 2003). Moreover, the whole supply chain network is directly impacted by how LSPs manage these connections considering their dual role as intermediaries. Since LSPs interact with a wide range of actors along the supply chain, social media has great potential for them to brand themselves digitally. Yet research on the logistics sector's social media adoption remains scarce

¹ https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2020_B2B_Research_Final.pdf

² <http://www.ehs.org.uk/dotAsset/3f718ae6-9981-42da-82d8-fc21f89e58f4.pdf>

(Botha, 2017), especially in emerging markets (Bellaaj, 2021; Medjani et al., 2019) and from a strategic perspective (Witek-Hajduk & Grudecka, 2018).

To contribute to this under-researched area, this study investigates LSPs' social media engagement in an emerging market context to understand its effect on supply chain dynamics better, mainly their branding purposes, since both managers and academics consider branding strategies increasingly crucial in the current competitive business environment. This study uses a theory elaboration approach to explore how LSPs can best leverage social media to brand their services (Ketokivi & Choi, 2014). Drawing on media synchronicity theory (MST) and the technology acceptance model (TAM), semi-structured interviews were conducted with LSPs operating in Turkey to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do LSPs decide on their social media engagement for service branding?

RQ2: What drivers and barriers influence LSPs in adopting social media for leveraging services branding?

This article first reviews the literature on B2B social media use for logistics services branding. Drawing on TAM and MST, it investigates social media adoption by LSPs. The methodology is explained next, followed by the main findings from interviews with social media experts from selected LSPs after discussing the findings about the literature, managerial and theoretical implications are suggested, along with the study's limitations and avenues for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Web 2.0 technologies in social media have made the Internet more participatory (Darwish & Lakhtaria, 2011). While Web 2.0 and social media are two terms that are often used interchangeably, according to Kaplan and Heinlein (2010, p.61), social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content”. Recently, academics have become interested in attitudes toward social media usage and social media adoption in both consumer and business contexts. However, scholarly attention on B2B branding has been rising relatively slowly (Davis et al., 2009; Iyer et al., 2019; Jalkala & Keränen, 2014; Kalafatis et al., 2000; Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). The following subsection explores the current literature on social media and services branding in B2B.

2.1. Social media and B2B branding

According to Drummond et al. (2018), social media is perceived as a channel that provides new business opportunities while maintaining successful relationships with prospective partners and further facilitates trust among business partners. Since the traditional offline marketing landscape fails to satisfy today's competitive environment, B2B firms should maintain an online presence to manage their relationships with customers and business partners. Considering its multilayered structure, B2B organizations require highly complex interactions, while such tools also allow accessible communication among internal and external stakeholders worldwide (Cartwright et al., 2021). These online tools offer immense benefits to companies since stakeholders use the Internet daily. While this alone is enough for firms to use such tools, increased transaction of information and communication and the opportunity to cut costs are several different goals that can be achieved in the digital online environment (Walters, 2008). Hence, effective engagement of such tools in a firm's marketing strategy has become essential to provide a competitive advantage (Varadarajan & Yadav, 2009).

According to Felix et al. (2017, p.123), social media marketing is “an interdisciplinary and cross-functional concept that uses social media to achieve organizational goals by creating value for stakeholders.” B2B organizations market their services to other businesses, while B2C organizations directly sell their products to customers. Social media use differs fundamentally in each context (Brennan & Croft, 2012; Guesalaga, 2016; Iankova et al., 2019; Pandey et al., 2020). While recent studies mainly focus on B2C social media use, the extant literature revealed that social media is also an effective tool for B2B marketing activities, such as facilitating customer relationship management (Moore et al., 2013), enhancing business relationships (Jussila et al., 2012), attracting potential business partners (Michaelidou et al., 2011; Tiwary et al., 2021), and building brand value (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Lipiäinen & Karjaluo, 2015). However, despite the acknowledged potential of social media, B2B organizations still lag in implementing social media marketing and branding strategies (Cartwright et al., 2021; Iankova et al., 2019; Karampela et al., 2020; Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015; Tiwary et al., 2021). The extant literature reveals that this hesitancy to engage social media for marketing is common because B2B organizations still perceive digital marketing as useful only for B2C firms (Lacka & Chong, 2016; Tiwary et al., 2021). Moreover, the lack of unfamiliarity with the

platform and the overwhelming number of available channels are other barriers to social media implementation in B2B (Järvinen et al., 2012; Tiwary et al., 2021).

According to Cartwright et al. (2021), social media strategies are needed to maintain long-term customer relationships. For example, Surucu-Balci et al.'s (2020) study in the container shipping industry demonstrates that social media post characteristics enhance stakeholder engagement. A successful digital branding strategy generally aims increased brand loyalty, brand awareness, and brand reputation. Such online branding approaches eventually yield improved customer experience and relationships, increasing sales and profitability (Michaelidou et al., 2011; Rapp et al., 2013). As the importance of B2B branding increases, research has focused on brand positioning as one of the most critical branding strategies in the marketing literature (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Successful brand positioning enables a B2B firm to differentiate its focal brand from its competitors, which improves service quality and customer relationships (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Ohnemus, 2009). While extant literature on social media mainly focused on various industries, there are fewer studies in service industries (Buratti et al., 2018), particularly in the logistics sector (Davis et al., 2009).

2.2. Theoretical framework

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). TAM was initially proposed in 1986 by Fred Davis as an extension of Ajzen and Fishbein's Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). Technology acceptance depends on perceived usefulness and ease of use (Davis et al., 1989). Perceived usefulness is "the degree to which a person believes using a particular system would enhance his/her job performance." In contrast, perceived ease of use is "the degree to which a person believes using a particular system would be free of effort" (Davis et al., 1989, p. 985). Several studies have extended Davis's original study (Davis, 1989) to understand how the two variables influence technology adoption (Adams et al., 1992). Recent studies have supported these findings while extending the original model as TAM 2 (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000; Venkatesh et al., 2003) and TAM 3 (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008).

Due to its explanatory nature in predicting users' decision on the adoption of new technologies for specific tasks (Naqvi et al., 2019; Rauniar et al., 2014), TAM is a widely used theory that successfully explains the drivers of technology adoption, mainly Web 2.0 functions like e-commerce, video posts, blogs, and online shopping (Lee & Lehto, 2013; Moon & Kim, 2001). Moreover, in their study, where they reviewed research that utilized TAM, Wirtz and Göttel

(2016) also emphasized the applicability of its primary constructs, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and subjective norm on the adoption of social media. According to Al-Qaysi et al. (2020)'s systematic review of TAM in the social media context, Facebook was revealed to be the most widely used social media channel, and in their study, where they focused on technological innovativeness, grounding on TAM, Lam et al., (2008) demonstrated that higher levels of innovativeness drive people to embrace and apply new technologies.

Regarding the use of TAM in a social media context, there also have been several studies linking theory with social media adoption in a B2B environment (Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015; Lacka & Chong, 2016; Naqvi et al., 2019; Rauniar et al., 2014; Siamagka et al., 2015). In TAM, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are both significant drivers of B2B social media use (Lacka & Chong, 2016), which means that a social media user who evaluates the medium as having a high degree of usefulness and ease of use, are likely to adopt and benefit from that technology more. Grounding on TAM, B2B social media adoption research focuses on various industries, such as aerospace, healthcare, and information technology services, from many regions, from Scandinavia to China, including social media adoption in emerging markets. Accordingly, by leveraging the TAM model, this study aims to provide insights into the social media acceptance of LSPs by analyzing perceived drivers and barriers to their social media engagement.

Media Synchronicity Theory (MST). Dennis and Valacich initially proposed MST in a conference proceeding in 1999 as an extension of media richness theory. They defined media synchronicity as “the extent to which the capabilities of a communication medium enable individuals to achieve synchronicity” (Dennis et al., 2008, p.581). MST explains communication performance achieved via media. The theory proposes that communication can be divided into conveyance and convergence. While higher synchronicity implies more convergence regarding the processing of information, conversely, lower synchronicity in the transmission of information will comprise more conveyance. While some media can transmit more significant amounts of information, conveyance, other mediums exchange smaller amounts more rapidly, convergence. The type of medium used plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of communication processes, whereas successful communication can only be achieved with both conveyance and convergence (George et al., 2013).

Regarding communication performance, MST divides media capabilities into five metrics: transmission velocity, parallelism, symbol sets, repeatability, and processability (Dennis et al., 2008). Transmission velocity is the speed that a message can be transmitted; parallelism denotes simultaneous information-sharing ability; symbol sets are different ways of conveying a message between sender to receiver; repeatability refers to the adjustments senders make before conveying the message; processability is the receiver's reexamination of the message. Each of these capabilities affects the synchronicity of the communication regarding the fitness of corresponding media (Dennis et al., 2008). Each of the media capabilities has advantages and disadvantages over various communication processes. For instance, higher transmission velocity and a more excellent symbol set lead to more synchronicity, whereas higher parallelism, repeatability, and processability lead to less synchronicity. MST is particularly applicable to social media studies since it "is not a single media, but a combination of media" (Cao et al. 2012, p.3939), and it has been widely used to test media performance based on media choice. Yet, despite its growing importance, the use of MST has not been sufficiently addressed in the B2B context (Wang et al., 2016). Therefore, this study attempts to extend the application of MST by exploring the selected LSPs' rationales for social media content and platform preferences.

3. METHODOLOGY

Considering the study's exploratory nature, a qualitative approach was more suitable to understand LSPs' social media use better and identify their decision-making mechanisms.

3.1. Sample and data collection

A semi-structured interview allowed flexibility to explore the LSP's decision-making mechanisms regarding social media usage (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The research was conducted in Turkey, where 70% of the population are active social media users (Hootsuite, 2021), which is well above the global average. Considering Turkey is a critical global logistics center (Barla et al., 2017), purposive sampling was used to identify suitable leading forwarders in Turkey for this study (Miles et al., 2014). Eleven semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting 20-70 minutes were conducted face-to-face with thirteen social media experts from the selected LSPs (Table 1). While all LSPs' scope of operations is global, three are local brands with global headquarters in Europe. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis, yielding 147 pages of double-spaced text.

Table 1. Interviewee Profiles

Participant	Gender	Designation	Years of Experience	LSP code	Duration (minutes)
P1	Female	Communications and Social Media Senior Specialist	7	LSP1	46
P2	Female	Communications and Social Media Senior Specialist	5	LSP1	46
P3	Male	Marketing & Communications Executive	11	LSP2	68
P4	Male	Digital Communications	4	LSP3	28
P5	Female	Digital Marketing and Communication Manager	5	LSP4	26
P6	Female	Human Resources Director	7	LSP5	29
P7	Female	Human Resources Specialist	5	LSP5	29
P8	Female	Corporate Communication Manager	14	LSP6	27
P9	Male	Continuous Improvement Manager	7	LSP7	22
P10	Male	International Supply Chain Manager	9	LSP8	29
P11	Female	Global Marketing Executive	3	LSP9	29
P12	Male	Social Media Senior Specialist	10	LSP10	20
P13	Female	Human Resources Manager	15	LSP11	22

The sample size was not pre-determined since the aim was to achieve saturation of emerging patterns. Following Glaser and Strauss (1967), the interviews continued until data saturation was achieved regarding the LSP social media engagement mechanisms. Sampling, data collection, and data analysis continued until the emerging themes became repetitive (Carson et al., 2001), and no interview indicated any additional theme.

3.2. Data analysis

Following Spiggle (1994), we conducted the data analysis and reviewed independently through iterative readings, using initial coding approaches (open and coaxial) that continued throughout the process. After independent coding, the underlying themes were identified and compared with the coded text for similarities and differences in interpretations. The themes that emerged from the interviews are evaluated for their fit to the responses based on Strauss and Corbin (1998). Throughout the process, triangulation across interpretations enhanced the credibility and integrity of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by reducing potential bias and error

(Mariampolski, 2001). The finalized main themes identified are discussed in the following section.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

For a better understanding of LSP decision-making regarding social media engagement, the interviews were examined regarding decision-making, drivers, and barriers to social media engagement. There are two sections covering each research question. The first identifies the underlying factors affecting the LSPs' decision-making about social media engagement for services branding. The second section explores the drivers and barriers to social media engagement.

4.1. LSP decision-making regarding social media engagement

The factors influencing decision-making regarding LSPs' social media engagement were organized by choice of social media content and platform.

Factors Affecting Decision-making Regarding Social Media Content. Content refers to the various types of data published on social media, such as photos, videos, and texts (Juntunen et al., 2020). Although content creation on social media is crucial in social media branding activities, more needs to be known about creating compelling content to increase audience engagement, particularly in B2B branding (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016; McShane et al., 2019). The interviews revealed three main factors affecting decision-making: organizational structure, the orientation of the content engagement, and providing a fit between content and social media platform.

Regarding the *organizational structure*, eight of the sampled LSPs are global companies. The interviews revealed that their social media content identification depends on global management. Interestingly, only one (LSP 5) has a local private social media account and global pages. Moreover, their social media content creation, and the need to use language carefully in social media posts, can depend on the language, culture, and regulations of the countries they operate in. Some use dual languages (Turkish and English) in Turkey, whereas others use only Turkish to engage with their Turkish audience. Some interviewees saw this as an advantage since it is believed to be challenging to create content in the B2B logistics sector; they can increase the number of posts by using dual language. As another interviewee put it, *“We merge local and global calendars and share both local and global traditional days to provide the content variety*

in global social media” (LSP 9). Interestingly, one interviewee also commented about “local content being inadequate and not engaging enough compared to the global ones” (LSP 7).

Of the three local companies in the sample, the interviews revealed that their social media strategies were also affected by being part of a holding:

“We are required to communicate with sister companies regarding their social media content selection, which eventually provides a mutual benefit while increasing the variety of content” (LSP 11).

Additionally, the interviews revealed that some companies work with social media agencies to identify social media content and determine the frequency of social media posts—nine interviewees mentioned working with a social media agency in this way, whereas two LSPs create content in-house. LSPs working with agencies generally follow yearly or monthly schedules of events, such as company events, innovations, campaigns, and traditional days, and preplan sharing frequencies accordingly.

While some LSPs follow social media engagement trends, such as posting an average of 2-3 posts per week, content quality is more important for some firms.

“You need to be engaging. The better content you create, the more the audience consumes it because people tend to consume it more nowadays. Previously, 3-4 items a week would be enough, but social media is now at a different level with the new algorithms. It is more important to create quality content” (LSP 1).

Related to this, recent changes on Facebook have forced companies to reevaluate their social media content strategies (Swani et al., 2017) to produce more engaging content rather than mere promotion. Given the challenge of regularly producing entertaining and engaging content in logistics, another interviewee described how their company balances the frequency of social media topics:

“We don’t want to bore our audience with mentioning our services so much. That’s why we share three times a week, and only one of these posts is about our services. The rest are more engaging posts such as lifestyle etc.” (LSP 6).

This reveals another factor affecting LSPs’ decision-making: *orientation of the content engagement*. In a B2B environment, bilateral engagement with the target audience moves beyond customers to include other decision-makers like stakeholders. Compared to B2C contexts, sharing bilateral content with business partners deepens everyone’s engagement (Harrigan et al.,

2015). Similarly, engaging the audience is closely related to interaction rates, which can be increased in several ways. For instance, LSPs emphasize how they differ from courier companies to increase audience awareness and encourage engagement. Interviewees mentioned that this is a common misunderstanding among customers. Some LSPs demonstrate their know-how by promoting their niche projects through social media posts to prevent this.

Similarly, some LSPs highlight their social responsibility events to differentiate themselves. Emphasizing the company's know-how and ability to handle complex projects promotes its services and increases brand recognition. Another way to differentiate the brand is visual: *"We spend a lot of time and effort on creating our visual content to represent our brand identity fully"* (LSP 3).

Regarding the *orientation of content engagement*, LSPs choose social media content in terms of stakeholder engagement and customer feedback. Some LSPs share the same content on each other's web pages to strengthen relationships with business partners that mutually benefit their stakeholders. More than half of the sampled LSPs use such cross-posting to increase interaction. However, sharing a stakeholder's name online without permission is an issue in the industry, so most LSPs are only allowed to share non-confidential services. Nonetheless, engaging with stakeholders and highlighting such collaborations is thus another important factor affecting the decision-making on the content shared on social media. As mentioned by Cartwright et al. (2021, p.19), "All employees are vital stakeholders in the organization, and each stakeholder can contribute towards social media marketing," which is mentioned by one of the companies interviewed, as follows;

"We identify the content strategy to strengthen relationships with stakeholders while benefitting them, including our employees, because we see them as our stakeholders too." (LSP 1).

Moreover, regarding their employee engagement, one LSP mentioned how they promote services on social media through their employees. For example, one company has a unique social media strategy in which their truck drivers share their photos: *"Thanks to our drivers, they take photos when they are on the road and send it to us, and when we get the photos, we can share it on different platforms."* (LSP 3). Here, this company utilizes its employees as brand ambassadors on social media platforms, allowing them to create brand awareness and increase trust in the brand and potential customers through its employees (Cartwright et al., 2021).

According to marketing research, it is critical to engage customers with the content (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Therefore, gathering customer feedback and responding to improve social media message strategies is just as important as promoting the services themselves. Moreover, social media channels provide suitable channels for collecting information and feedback from customers while improving customer relationships (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010): “*We create customer satisfaction surveys on social media to receive feedback on their social media strategies and take necessary action if necessary*” (LSP 3).

Another critical factor in choosing social media content that the interviews revealed is *providing a fit between content and social media platform*. The decision-making on social media content among LSPs varies across social media channels: “*Social media platforms have their unique audiences*” (LSP 10). In line with previous studies on B2B marketing, most of the sampled companies share business-related content on LinkedIn since it is known as a professional social network (Bodnar & Cohen, 2011; Sundström & Alm, 2021). Moreover, since social media is increasingly used for branding (Sivertzen et al., 2013), and given that LinkedIn is widely used for recruitment, one interviewee mentioned how their company focuses on employer branding when deciding on what content to share to attract potential employees on LinkedIn, particularly generation Y.

In contrast, LSPs prefer other social networking sites to share entertaining content to engage with customers, with Instagram currently the preferred B2B engagement tool. Interestingly, according to Shahbaznezhad et al. (2021), Instagram users tend to be more passively engaged than Facebook users, who appear more active by commenting on social media posts. Moreover, when communicating with consumers, Facebook and Twitter are better social media channels (Smith et al., 2012). Even though Instagram is more prevalent among LSPs as a branding tool, due to its passive user engagement, it may still be less preferable when gathering rich interaction or providing customer solutions.

One interviewee illustrated the difference in tone between social networking sites that specifically aim to create a warm atmosphere in their message content. For instance, since Instagram is known for sharing image-based content (Muñoz & Towner, 2017), some LSPs prefer this platform for sharing the company’s social events. Another company prefers LinkedIn, while a third shares on its Facebook page. Moreover, since Instagram has a visual character

compared to the other text-centered platforms, it makes the content more accessible, which attracts the audience more (Lenartowicz & Strzelecki, 2021).

Another microblogging social networking site, Twitter, encourages communication with the audience and approaching customers or business partners via real-time tweets. However, although Twitter users can share embedded media like videos, images, and URLs, YouTube is the preferred platform for webpage video integration. Thus, the sampled LSPs use Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter for social interaction, LinkedIn for business networking and developing professional relationships, and YouTube for videos. This indicates that social media channels have particular strengths and weaknesses as branding tools. Accordingly, the following subsection investigates the factors affecting LSPs' decision-making on social media platforms.

Factors Affecting Decision-making Regarding Social Media Platforms. Another important decision in designing a social media branding strategy is selecting a platform (Yücenur et al., 2022). The interviews revealed that several factors affect this decision: popularity of the social media platform, presence of the target audience on a particular social media platform, communication atmosphere of the social media platform, interaction rates and follower numbers, and features of social media platforms. The first factor, the *popularity of the social media platform*, is a significant factor that affects the social media platform choice of LSPs. According to Hootsuite's Digital 2021 Report, Turkey's four most-used social media platforms are YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. One interviewee remarked on this:

"If you want to be noticed, then you should be present on the top social media platforms in Turkey, such as Facebook and Instagram" (LSP 1).

Most LSPs try to maintain their social media presence on all popular platforms to reach their target audience and maximize interaction. However, although this makes it easier to share content, *"the more social media channels you use, the harder it gets to manage" (LSP 1).*

The second factor influencing decision-making on social media channels is the *presence of the target audience on a particular social media platform*. By communicating with the right audience, LSPs can increase interaction, which is crucial for social media engagement:

"LinkedIn's audience particularly has more corporate profiles, so posting on LinkedIn is healthier. When you advertise a video and 50 people like it on Facebook, it means nothing to me, but 10,000-plus views on LinkedIn means a lot" (LSP 9).

Thus, being a business and employment-oriented social networking service, LinkedIn allows LSPs to reach the right audience for their business-related posts. One company, which had just started using social media platforms, chose LinkedIn to increase its followers by increasing brand recognition:

“On LinkedIn, we aim to create brand recognition, increase followers, and create awareness in our followers, but our first target is to gain followers since our company has no previous experience on social media” (LSP 9).

Moreover, reaching the right audience on such professional social networks increases brand recognition with target businesses and may yield new business opportunities. Additionally, since LinkedIn is a powerful recruitment resource, many LSPs use it for job listings and personnel selection. It is a valuable channel for employer branding as companies can advertise their corporate image, which increases potential employees’ awareness of the brand and employer's attractiveness.

While LinkedIn is considered a professional networking tool, other social media platforms like Instagram are perceived as entertainment channels, which makes it harder to attract an audience with logistics-related content on such sites. In line with previous findings, profile-based social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are discussed as more suitable platforms for entertainment than content-based platforms such as LinkedIn and YouTube (Buzeta et al., 2020).

Furthermore, some interviewees revealed that their LSPs do not post on Instagram because there is no target audience, although another interviewee said their company prefers Instagram for its young users. While some companies prefer LinkedIn, another interviewee said that Instagram enables their company to express its brand image and improve brand recognition since Instagram has an easy and enjoyable way to communicate with the audience.

This yields us to the third factor affecting decision-making on social media platforms: the *communication atmosphere of the social media platform*.

Although Twitter is known for usage for customer service purposes in the B2B context (Iankova et al., 2019), the sampled companies do not prefer Twitter for several reasons. First, it is perceived as a political platform for audiences to share political views or protest, so its content can be overly aggressive, which carries risks for the company. Second, some companies consider Twitter’s atmosphere too controversial, given the Turkish audience’s tendency to share hate

speech. Third, some interviewees claimed that Twitter is unpreferable across the logistics sector. On the other hand, some interviewees consider Facebook outdated and unpopular, hence ineffective for communicating with a target business audience. Undeniably, reaching the right audience is crucial for engaging with business partners. This means companies' social media branding strategies must identify the right social media platform to interact with their target audience.

This leads to the next important factor: *interaction rates and follower numbers*. While a popular social media platform should create many interaction opportunities, one interviewee noted that the number of followers is critical for interaction rates.

“Yes, Instagram has a story-sharing feature; it is nice if you have many followers. If you have 300-400 employees, but you don't even have 10,000 followers, then however many stories you share, the number of people you can reach is limited” (LSP 9).

Additionally, having many followers does not necessarily mean high interaction rates. As one interviewee explained, it is more important to reach the right audience to engage with them than have many followers:

“At this point, your follower's quality is important too. Of course, everyone can follow a logistics company's social media profile. Still, how we benefit from social media regarding services is important. Which one is important: reaching more people or reaching the right people? So, we aim to reach the right audience. Yes, we want to reach larger groups, but connecting with the right audience is the most important issue” (LSP 2).

This leads to the last factor, the *features of social media platforms*. As discussed earlier, every social media site has its unique features. While some LSPs do not prefer Twitter, others find its features useful for their social media branding strategies. Some companies reject Twitter because of its structure, mainly listing the most trending topics that users are tweeting about. This can make it challenging to reach their audience since logistics-related topics are unlikely to be trending, and making a specific topic popular is hard. Some interviewees also mentioned Twitter's character limitation, although the number allowed in each post has increased: *“It still restricts communication with the audience” (LSP 8)*. For one LSP, the character limitation hinders bilingual social media use:

“On YouTube, we first upload animation videos in English with Turkish subtitles. Then, we upload the Turkish version, which is very easy on YouTube. We can also post in different

languages on Instagram. However, as you know, Twitter has a 280-character limit, so it's impossible to share both English and Turkish versions of the same post. So, we share all posts in English on Twitter. It's a disadvantage for us" (LSP 3).

According to Leek et al. (2016), Twitter has three main marketing functions: information sharing, problem-solving, and personal relations activities. For example, one interviewee mentioned how hashtags (#) help disseminate information about their company's fair participation.

"When we attend fairs, Twitter helps us a lot because when you use the fair's hashtag, it helps in reaching and communicating with the audience that is interested in such events while creating brand recognition" (LSP 4).

In line with previous findings, tweets with hashtags increase engagement, so brands rely heavily on them to communicate with their target audience (Shin et al., 2018). While Twitter allows comment sharing as a text-oriented platform, Instagram is a more visual, photo-based platform and offers more than textual information sharing through its visual storytelling feature. Since users build on brand or other consumers' stories, this may motivate them to participate in the brand narrative (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Therefore, with more than 900 million users and unique characteristics like story sharing and live broadcasting, it has become a viral B2B marketing tool (Muñoz & Towner, 2017; Neher, 2013).

4.2. Drivers and barriers to social media engagement across LSPs

According to Hootsuite and We Are Social's Digital 2021 April Global Statshot Report, there were over 4.7 billion social media users at the start of April 2021, making social media a crucial part of our lives in recent years. One interviewee said, *"It is a necessity nowadays" (LSP 2)*. This interviewee further explained the importance of social media in Turkey for sharing company-related news firsthand via such channels to counter yellow journalism. The rapid growth of social media and the volume and speed of message diffusion has made it people's primary source of information. Another interviewee said that social media is a more popular medium for information sharing than before. Thus, a significant driver is *social media being a part of our lives*. (See Table 2)

Table 2. Drivers and Barriers to Social Media Engagement Across LSPs

Drivers to social media engagement	Barriers to social media engagement
Social media being a part of our lives	Difficulty of social media engagement in the B2B realm
Social media platforms being less costly	Difficulty of B2B content creation
Services branding	Logistics sector lagging in social media
Business networking	Regulations and permissions
Customer relationship management	Potential risks encountered on social media channels

Another driver is *social media platforms being less costly*. As Siamagka et al. (2015) reported, social media allows LSPs to decrease advertising costs and reach a wider audience by using social media and its targeting features. LSPs interact with various actors in the supply chain, so their social media strategies reflect this. For instance, some target managers, CEOs, and SME owners, whereas others target potential employees and customers and seek potential collaborations. Our study reveals that LSPs target different audiences to increase awareness of their services. Table 3 shows the differing target audiences of the LSPs.

Although their target audiences may vary, LSPs' social media engagement has a common purpose, namely *services branding*:

“To reach customers, employees also for branding, branding in every way” (LSP 11).

Table 3. LSP Target Audiences

LSP Company	Target Audience
LSP 1	<i>“Our target audience involves all our stakeholders. Truck companies, human resource platforms, our employees, media, other logistics companies. Because you lead the logistics sector with the projects you accomplished.”</i>
LSP 2	<i>“Our target audience, firstly of course those firms that import/export, SMEs, leading holdings in Turkey and global companies.”</i>
LSP 3	<i>“Our target audience is large-scale companies, those who request storage and transportation services.”</i>
LSP 4	<i>“Our partners are not in the target audience actually, the target audience is mostly firms’ logistics managers, procurement managers when it comes to SMEs. But for large-scaled companies, CEOs, managers, purchasing directors or logistics directors”</i>
LSP 5	<i>“Our target audience is our employees, employees’ families or potential employees”</i>
LSP 6	<i>“Our target audience is the customers, potential customers, potential employees and stakeholders”</i>
LSP 9	<i>“Since we import/export a lot, our target audience comprises of small companies, rather than large-scale ones. It is because our aim is to create brand awareness. If we target large-scale companies, they already work with bigger forwarders. In logistics sector, things work like this, they don’t want to change the company they work with, they want to maintain status quo.”</i>
LSP 10	<i>“Our B2B campaigns target SMEs, exporters, e-tailers, specific occupational groups and job owners.”</i>
LSP 11	<i>“Our target audience is customers, reaching the customers in the logistics sector and all other customers who import/export. Basically, all customers who needs air freight, ground freight or sea freight transporting or shipping”</i>

B2B services are less tangible and more complicated than consumable goods, so LSPs mainly use branding to differentiate their services. Some build their brand by emphasizing the importance of logistics for everyday life. Such branding activities increase social media visibility, raising interaction rates.

“Our social media strategy is not primarily addressing lead generation. Brand image is our primary strategy on social media: creating awareness like what our company represents, what kind of services and products it provides” (LSP 2).

This comment exemplifies using social media to build brand image and awareness. This ultimately helps reach new clients or strengthen customer relationships (Michaelidou et al., 2011). One common aim of branding strategies across LSPs is building trust via brand awareness. In line with previous research, the interviewees also claimed that the brand name is

one of the most fundamental elements of brand awareness (Davis et al., 2009). One interviewee argued that small-scale companies like theirs need brand awareness more than their larger competitors since their brand name is already recognized in the sector. Two sampled LSPs belong to the same holding with the same brand name. For many LSPs, the company name refers to the brand itself, so one of those interviewees said they focus on differentiating the brand name to create brand awareness.

Another interviewee noted that *“increased brand awareness and trust means coming into the customer’s mind first.”* (LSP 4). Interestingly, another LSP uses social media to demonstrate company know-how and share company-related announcements to build brand prestige rather than promoting its services or attracting new customers. The sampled LSPs are focused on building brand prestige to increase customer loyalty. In a B2B environment, customers are more significant, while business relationships are longer term, with purchasing decisions made by professionals. Therefore, building trust is essential for enhancing business relationships (Alves et al., 2017; Sundström & Alm, 2021; Tiwary et al., 2021). Since the brand is a signifier of trust (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006; Tiwary et al., 2021), social media use focuses on trust building, mainly brand prestige and reputation management.

The interviews also revealed the various strategies that LSPs employ to enhance their brand image. For instance, a stakeholder-centric brand image can create successful relationships between business partners by reducing perceived risk:

“When you look at our social media strategy in general, we aim to communicate with our stakeholders to create positive valence while increasing our brand recognition and sales channels. Therefore, we aim to show how we add value to our stakeholders and the logistics sector in general” (LSP 1).

Thus, while LSPs focus on social media brand-building activities to differentiate themselves, building solid brands also plays a crucial role in the marketing strategy of B2B firms (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Tiwary et al., 2021). A strong brand also relies on maintaining successful business relationships; therefore, another driver is *business networking*. The interviews revealed that LSPs share their collaborations with customers on social media, which benefits both sides. Such posts about collaborations with customers strengthen stakeholder relationships. Moreover, some companies use social media to promote their technological capabilities while informing customers about all supply chain transactions. Supply chain performance critically depends on

coordination within the supply chain network, so good communication through information sharing is beneficial (Chae et al., 2020). B2C research has demonstrated that supply chain transparency increases the customer's willingness to pay (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Likewise, the interviewees revealed that some B2B LSPs prefer transparency along their supply chain network to prove their capabilities and differentiate themselves from competitors.

According to one interviewee, another everyday use of social media by B2B companies is for pricing strategies. Although some LSPs believe it is inappropriate to use social media for this, other companies have benefitted from collecting leads and gathering quotations via social media. In addition, companies can receive and act on social media feedback. The interviewees claimed that reactions and feedback are mostly positive, although some companies use social media as a communication channel for problem-solving. For instance, one LSP sees social media engagement as a "*firsthand information source*" (LSP 6) to solve stakeholder-related communication problems while reaching a wider audience. This company also gathers customer complaints or their negative experiences. Social media allows companies to reach a larger audience during a crisis. In line with MST's media capabilities, social media can transmit messages rapidly and in parallel through its simultaneous communication ability (Dennis et al., 2008).

For some LSPs, another driver is problem-solving via social media channels to enable *customer relationship management*. Social media enables LSPs to receive customer feedback and solve customer problems. Another interviewee claimed that receiving feedback positively impacts employees, while the company's social media engagement, particularly at the executive level, boosts employee motivation. This relates to a common challenge for LSPs: employee engagement on social media platforms, which can be an internal barrier to implementing social media strategies (Michaelidou et al., 2011).

Despite the advantages and opportunities of successful social media branding, B2B companies may find it hard to use social media (Järvinen et al., 2012; Tiwary et al., 2021). B2B companies are mostly slow adopters because of various perceived barriers, including limited budget, time, and training (Michaelidou et al., 2011; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000).

The first barrier the interviews revealed was the difficulty of social media engagement in B2B. As service industry companies, it is hard for LSPs to advertise their services compared to tangible products. Interaction in the B2B environment is low, making it harder to reach the target

audience. One interviewee noted, “*The service we provide is corporate-oriented, so it’s hard to build relationships*” (LSP 8). This is mainly because individuals engaged in social media are not usually those targeted by B2B content:

“*Social media may not be the channel B2B decision-makers tune in to and make decisions with.*” Another perceived barrier is that *B2B content is more challenging to create than B2C*. Frequent content sharing is problematic in logistics because “*not so much stuff to be shared happens every day*” (LSP 9). Accordingly, most companies mentioned the difficulty of expressing what a logistics service provider does on social media: “*It’s a difficult process to explain logistics; there are so many nuances in this sector*” (LSP 2).

Regarding the third perceived barrier to social media engagement across LSPs, the respondents heavily stressed that the *logistics sector lags in social media* engagement while defining logistics as a “niche” and “difficult” sector. Interestingly, interviewees reported that cultural differences hinder social media engagement among supply chain partners. Since supply chains are wide networks with various players across many different locations and cultures, not all stakeholders may have the same knowledge or infrastructure: “*Some of them don’t even know what social media is. How can I explain creating awareness on social media to him?*” (LSP 9).

Another perceived barrier for LSPs is *regulations and permissions*. Recent laws in Turkey protecting personal data have created new challenges for social media users. All interviewees were concerned about this issue, emphasizing how carefully they edit content before sharing to avoid violating these laws, copyright, or other regulations. A significant barrier is that content can only be edited and shared with stakeholder permission. Most solution partners do not allow their brand names to be shared, and it takes a long time to get customer approval before sharing any customer-related content. Considering the importance of stakeholder interactions on digital channels, such as tagging business partners, difficulties of getting customer or vendor permission for such industry alliances certainly influence the branding strategy of companies.

The third emerging barrier is the *potential risks encountered on social media channels*. Some LSPs consider that social media’s public availability creates risks, such as a competitor’s copying their content. To prevent such risks, a social media crisis management strategy must be implemented. Social media has a dark side, such as misinformation, negative electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), and fake news (Dwivedi et al., 2023). One interviewee noted that despite the regulations, there is no ethical standardization regarding social media content. Additionally,

social media have become a viral weapon through information leaks and hacks (Agnihotri et al., 2016), so LSPs face security risks using social media. One interviewee pointed out that, as forwarding companies, LSPs face particular security risks like digital espionage:

“We have eight depots in Turkey and tons of our customers’ equipment. Security is an issue, but technology theft and spying concern us the most. So, we have strict rules on social media – special rules, such as there is no entrance with phones in some of the depots” (LSP 2)

In today’s digital landscape, such digital security threats potentially negatively impact company image, affecting brand equity. Therefore, being proactive by utilizing proper security protocols can reduce LSPs' risk of digital security risks.

5. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study contributes to the emerging research stream on branding in logistics services by exploring how logistics service providers in emerging markets decide on their social media branding strategies and identifying the specific drivers and barriers to social media engagement. Our findings suggest that LSP's decision-making on social media branding strategies is categorized in terms of content and platforms.

Three factors affect their decision-making on social media content: organizational structure, content engagement orientation, and the fit between content and social media platform. While the company’s organizational structure, such as being a global company, influences its social media content, the engagement of employees, customers, and stakeholders also affects content choices. Regarding content-channel fit, the LSPs choose specific content based on a particular social media platform’s features. Four factors affect the decision-making on social media platforms: popularity, target audience and interaction rates, communication atmosphere, and platform features. While the drivers of social media engagement include social media being part of our lives and social media platforms being less costly, companies are motivated by service branding, customer relationship management, and business networking purposes. On the other hand, the barriers regarding the social media engagement of LSP companies revealed the difficulty of B2B social media engagement, B2B content creation, logistics sector lagging in social media, regulations and permissions, and social media risks.

5.1. Implications

The study's findings derive several academic and practical implications. Firstly, MST proposes a framework to explain several capabilities of a medium (Dennis et al., 2008). Our findings extend knowledge in this field by investigating the use of social media for logistics branding. In line with previous findings, social media engagement positively impacts the companies' business relationships (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Surucu-Balci et al., 2020). Wang et al. (2016) extended MST to include security capability, which is relevant to the concerns revealed by our interviewees related to information security from using social media that face B2B companies and the logistics sector. Moreover, the media capabilities proposed by MST enhance communication performance, thereby improving business performance in terms of marketing (Wang et al., 2016). Furthermore, based on TAM, this study revealed the drivers and barriers of social media branding by LSPs in terms of perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and perceived barriers, in line with previous research (Michaelidou et al., 2011; Siamagka et al., 2015; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000).

This study provides valuable insights for developers of social media strategies in LSPs regarding how to differentiate their brands successfully. Firstly, our findings reflect previous research highlighting that social media engagement for branding purposes in the logistics sector is still far behind other B2B settings (Buratti et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2009; Jalkala & Keränen, 2014) and compared to developed markets (Bellaaj, 2021; Medjani et al., 2019). Brand development is significant for service-oriented B2B contexts, such as the logistics sector, because of the intangible nature of the services provided (Marquardt et al., 2011). The study shows that the LSPs sampled know that social media is an increasingly important source of competitive advantage through differentiating their brands. LSPs should therefore monitor their competitors' social media engagement. Given the challenges of content creation in the logistics sector, which the interviewees referred to, LSPs could invest in better technology to improve the quality of their social media content, differentiating their brands from their competitors. In addition, co-branding activities might enhance brand reputation while providing mutually benefitting external stakeholders and the company itself. Companies should improve employee motivation to participate. Regarding perceived barriers to social media engagement, such as lack of employee engagement.

5.2.Limitations and Further Research

While this study makes novel contributions, there are several limitations that future research can address. First, we adopted a deductive approach based on TAM and MST. Future studies could adopt more inductive approaches to enrich the knowledge of social media adoption for branding purposes within the logistics sector while generating new theories in services branding. Second, given the dynamic changes in the logistics services market, social media has numerous potential uses for supply chains, such as improving visibility and transparency. Therefore, future studies can provide novel insights into social media engagement within the supply chain network by examining other players. This study only focused on LSPs so that future studies can explore the engagement of stakeholders like employees, customers, and investors. At the same time, interviews can provide broader insights about stakeholders' views of social media branding. Similar studies could also be conducted on firms from different B2B sectors, particularly in services, to provide valuable insights on services branding while examining whether social media branding varies across different sectors.

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