B2B Organization's LinkedIn Branding and Marketing Communications: An Exploratory Study of IT Service Companies

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Given the social media penetration, LinkedIn communications of B2B companies play an important role in shaping organization's online presence. In this exploratory study, text mining techniques (key word frequency, co-occurrence network and word associations) are utilized to identify content categories communicated by IT services companies via LinkedIn. The findings indicate that IT service organizations use LinkedIn to mainly share informative contents about their success stories, thought leadership commentary highlighting functional benefits only. They tend to focus on their current and potential customers, paying less attention to other stakeholders like current and potential employees, investors amongst others. This research adds to the scant literature available for B2B organization's social media marketing activities.

Keywords: B2B Social Media, LinkedIn, firm-generated content, text mining, co-occurrence network

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, social media penetration is expected to exceed 50% share of the total world population for the first time (Statista, 2019). Out of the total world population of 7.79 billion, active social media users stood at 3.96 billion. Businesses and marketers have started utilizing Social Media as a new channel for communicating and interacting with customers (Holt, 2016). The enormous penetration rate implies that social media is no longer just another medium of casual communications, entertainment and amusement (Ahern, 2017; Svend Hollensen et al., 2017). Social media affects everyone consumers, organizations, students and all other strata of societies across the world (Kaplan, 2015).

Businesses and marketers have started utilizing social media as a new channel for communicating and interacting with customers (Holt, 2016). The multi-dimensionality of the social media provides marketers unique ways to interlace latest technological features in social media marketing within their selling organizations to gain unique positioning in their competitive market (Schultz et al., 2012). Businesses have started using different types of Social Media (like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and others) for various branding activities. (Holt, 2016). Previous researches have shown that Organizations tend to utilize different social mediums for specific types of contents. Organizations have shared more professional contents on LinkedIn, personal interest related contents (like hobbies, music) on Facebook and event, news on Twitter (Utz, 2016).

Amongst the plethora of social media network sites, LinkedIn is used by professionals across the world to get latest professional content, seek professional consultation, advice, connect with current and former colleagues and to look for prospective job openings (Papacharissi, 2009; Utz, 2016). Students utilize LinkedIn to share their capabilities, past achievements, acquired skills, future work interests to create their own unique brand in the competitive job market (Hood et al., 2014). Professionals maintain and enhance their personal brands via LinkedIn profiles, by adding their past work experience, recommendations from former colleagues, professional certifications and so on. (Chang et al., 2017; Johnson, 2017). Employees utilize LinkedIn to share information about their employers, their experiences at work, and their achievements. (Pitt et al., 2018)

Past researches have shown that organizations have used social media and LinkedIn for their branding, marketing communication activities. However, limited research is available on the types of content shared by B2B organizations via social media platforms like LinkedIn. This exploratory study examines the case of IT service companies to identify the content themes shared by companies via LinkedIn.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Branding

Social media can be described as a collection of applications which can be aggregated as collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The rampant proliferation of social media means that marketers have started utilizing social media as an important channel to propagate their marketing efforts (Lund et al., 2018). Social media enables Marketers to forge a unique brand-consumer, brand-employee relationships (Gao & Feng, 2016). The emergence of social media has resulted in empowered consumers, employees and others who have become more active in their interactions with organizations (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Since the audiences have become more active, organizations need to be extra cautious about maintaining and auditing their Social Media Branding activities (Gao & Feng, 2016). If social media branding efforts are not received by the audience, it results in immediate backlash, resulting in eroding brand value, corporate reputation, and brand image of organizations (Scholz & Smith, 2019). While organizations fully understand the potential and benefits of Social Media Marketing efforts, they are still unsure about its usage, measuring its effectiveness, resulting in lack of clear management and execution of social media strategies (Hanna et al., 2011).

B2B AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media marketing and branding activities have been proven to be beneficial for B2B Organizations as well (Michaelidou et al., 2011). Over the period of time, B2B Organizations have been maintaining their presence on most of the famous social media networks (Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015; Pulizzi & Handley, 2016). Researchers have found that emerging technological advances tools in social media and other channels can make the exchange process between consumers and producers more efficient and effective (Agnihotri et al., 2016). This leads to strengthening effective marketing activities and processes even in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), overcoming resource limitations (Vescovi, 2000; Brink, 2017)

Businesses are using social media with expectations to enhance B2B collaboration between sellers, buyers and partners,leading to probable innovation and co-creation opportunities

(Jussila et al., 2014; Brink, 2017). Considering its imminent importance, several B2B companies have started evaluating the introduction of social media channels in their marketing efforts (Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015). However, in spite of its importance and value of social media tools, its application in B2B context is still in its nascent stages (Siamagka et al., 2015).

Some past researches have undermined challenges faced by B2B organizations with respect to its social media usage like: (a) managing and maintaining health of the brand on social media, (b) its ability to elicit useful insights from the social media activities, (c) measuring the effectiveness of social media marketing

activities (de Vries et al., 2012). B2B organization's Social media adoption is based on organization's innovativeness, its ability to embrace emerging technology trends and its perceived usefulness within the organizations. (Michaelidou et al., 2011)

In this conundrum with B2B organization's usage of Social media, some researchers have investigated on the actual contents shared by organizations on social Media. Researches have proven that unlike B2C contents, B2B social media contents tend to include more corporate brand names, direct functional appeals about the products and services and some emotional appeal with respect to bolstering existing customer relationships (Swani et al., 2014). Very few past researches have shown that B2B organizations have the ability to influence content by creating new contents, participating on discussions to co-create contents and also curate contents through their official social media networks, resulting in increasing moderation, monitoring of all content related to organizations (Huotari et al., 2015).

A thorough research of past literatures suggest that there exists a confusion and lack of clear answer to usage of social media by B2B organizations, its relevance, the messaging contents. Furthermore, considering the existing confusion and uncertainty, very few researches have focused on the actual contents used by B2B Organizations on Social Media, the reasoning behind selection of those contents. This exploratory research tries to fill in this gap in existing literature about the messaging contents used by B2B Organizations on Social Media with particular focus on LinkedIn. The research questions in this study are as follows:

RQ1: How is LinkedIn used by B2B organizations, specifically IT services companies?

RQ2: What type of contents are shared by B2B organizations, specifically IT services companies on LinkedIn?

STUDY DESIGN

LinkedIn posts of six IT/IT outsourcing companies with majority headcount/presence in India were considered for this exploratory study. Three companies of Indian Origin and three foreign MNCs were selected. Table 1 represents information about these companies and LinkedIn Posts data. LinkedIn Posts data for one year (June-2019 to June-2020) was collected. In total, 1472 LinkedIn Posts in English from 6 companies were collected.
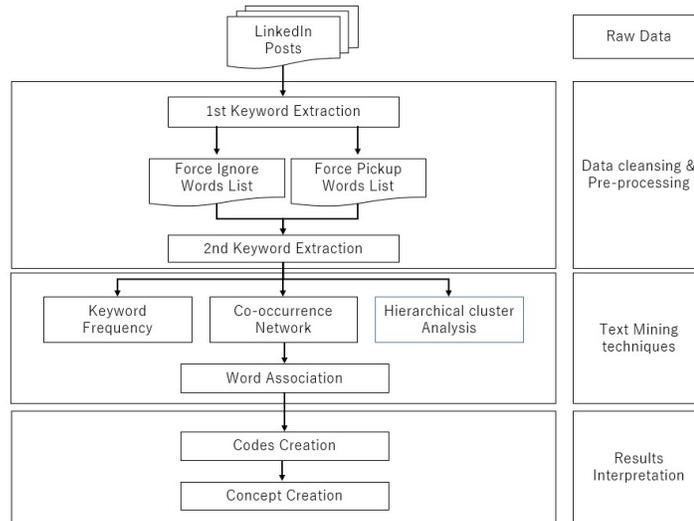
TABLE 1
TARGET COMPANIES AND LINKEDIN URLS OF COMPANIES

ID	Company Name	LinkedIn URL	LinkedIn Posts Count
A	Tata Consultancy Services	https://www.linkedin.com/company/tata-consultancy-services/	233
B	Infosys	https://www.linkedin.com/company/infosys/	257
C	HCL Technologies	https://www.linkedin.com/company/hcl-technologies/	258
D	Cognizant	https://www.linkedin.com/company/cognizant/	274
E	Cap Gemini	https://www.linkedin.com/company/capgemini/	297
F	Accenture	https://www.linkedin.com/company/accenture/	153

Text mining or quantitative content analysis techniques can be used to create conceptual modelling, which helps us to understand particular phenomena in society. (Kino, 2018). In this exploratory study, LinkedIn Posts data is analyzed using keyword frequency, co-occurrence Network and word association techniques to identify key codes and concepts. (Hu & Trivedi, 2020). KH Coder, a free software (Higuchi,

2017) for quantitative content analysis is used for this analysis. The complete analysis flow is depicted in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
COMPLETE ANALYSIS FLOW OF QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS USING TEXT MINING

RESULTS

Keyword Frequency

After the data cleansing and pre-processing, word frequency of top 30 most frequent words was generated. Table 2 represents the results in tabular form.

TABLE 2
KEYWORD FREQUENCY (TOP 30 WORDS)

Noun	Count	Proper Noun	Count	Adjective	Noun
business	219	COVID	260	new	168
customer	139	AI	97	digital	135
technology	126	Register	91	global	66
world	114	Business	78	latest	57
experience	103	Watch	70	virtual	55
organization	92	Services	55	next	38
industry	90	Know	54	key	34
innovation	87	SAP	52	better	33
time	85	Head	50	remote	33
solution	84	OneHCL	45	many	31
company	82	Cloud	44	best	29
enterprise	77	IoT	44	full	29
today	74	NavigateYourNext	44	top	26
report	70	CEO	40	proud	25
future	66	Digital	36	big	23
service	65	REPORT	35	current	22
webinar	65	Davos	33	few	22

share	63	Technologies	33	real-time	22
way	62	IntoTheNew	31	financial	21
leader	59	Institute	29	great	21
insight	57	4HANA	28	innovative	21
blog	55	President	28	normal	21
partnership	51	India	27	live	20
team	51	World	27	right	20
workplace	51	Discover	26	first	19
digitaltransformation	49	Group	24	other	19
employee	49	HCLPavilion	24	strategic	19
year	47	June	24	such	19
crisis	46	Europe	23	automotive	18

Considering the time frame of the study (June-2019 to June-2020), it is seems quite obvious that "COVID" finds a top spot in the most frequent proper noun list. Since the data is from B2B IT companies, the focus is more on words like "business", "technology", "digital". Further, the latest technologies like IoT, AI, Cloud, SAP, and HANA are also shared frequently by IT Services companies. Some specific words like "IntoTheNew", "NavigateYourNext", "digitaltransformation" appear frequently in the study data. "Word association" techniques are used to get some more information about words associated with these specific words.
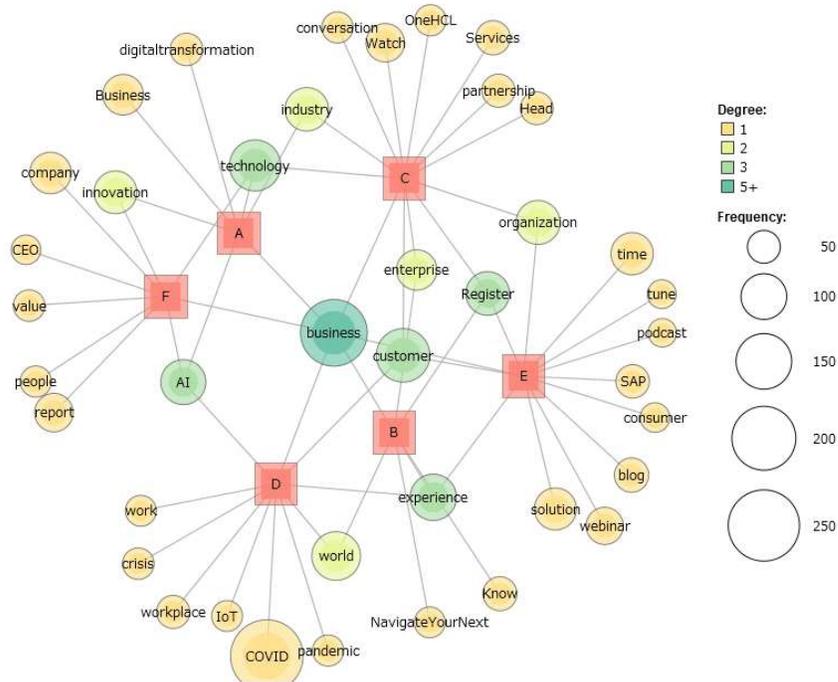
Co-Occurrence Network

Co-occurrence network analysis indicates the relationships between words in data corpus. Co-occurrence network of words is used to identify clustering of words. The clustering of words is used to identify key themes in the collected data (Murakami, 2018). A co-occurrence network was created using words with minimum frequency of 36 words. In total, 70 words were selected to create co-occurrence network. Co-occurrence network was created with edges as words-words and edges as words-variables/headings (Higuchi, 2017; Kino, 2018). The results of co-occurrence networks show some typical clustering of words. The clusters are denoted with unique numbering from ① to ⑩.

FIGURE 2
CO-OCCURRENCE NETWORK OF WORDS, EDGES = WORDS
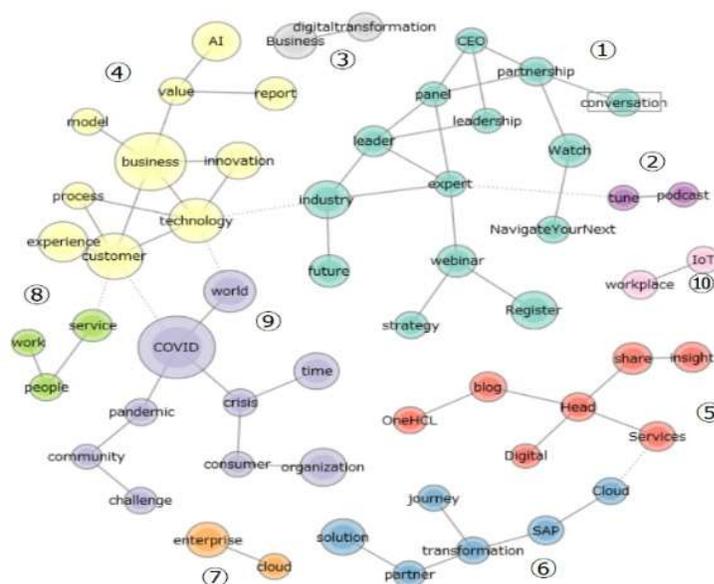
FIGURE 3
**CO-OCCURRENCE NETWORK OF WORDS, EDGES = WORDS-VARIABLES**

For Co-occurrence network with edges as words-variables, some words are seen with higher degree of co-occurrence in all six companies. "Business" has the highest degree as 5+. "AI", "experience", "customer", "register", "technology" have Degree as 3.

"Innovation", "industry", "organization", "world", "enterprise" have Degree as 2. All other words occur in a particular company only. "digitaltransformation" has closer association with Company A than any other company. Similarly, "COVID" has closer association with Company D than any other company. "AI" has closer association to companies D and F than other companies.

The Co-occurrence network highlighted the presence of some specific nouns (and proper nouns). Some specific words like "digitaltransformation", "Navigateyournext" "AI" and "COVID" were identified from the co-occurrence network analysis. To dig further into the roots of specific words and phrases, words association was checked as per Figure 4 through Figure 7 (Higuchi, 2017). Some Key words clusters were also identified from word association.
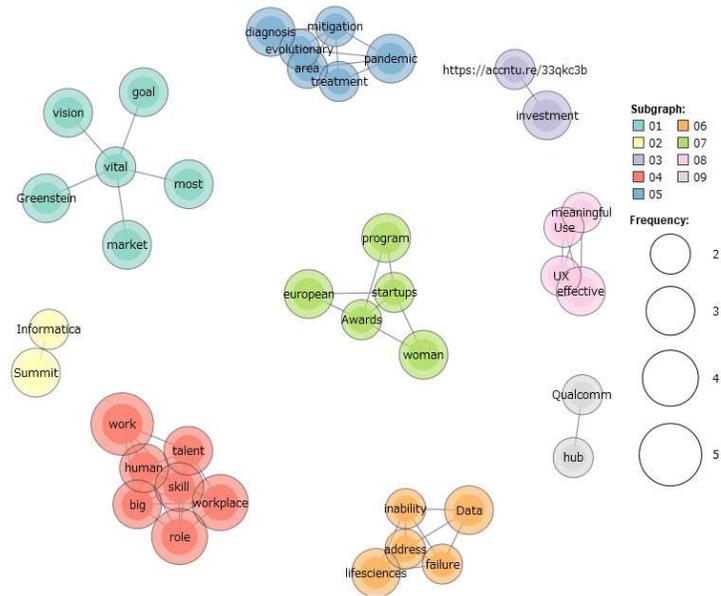
FIGURE 4
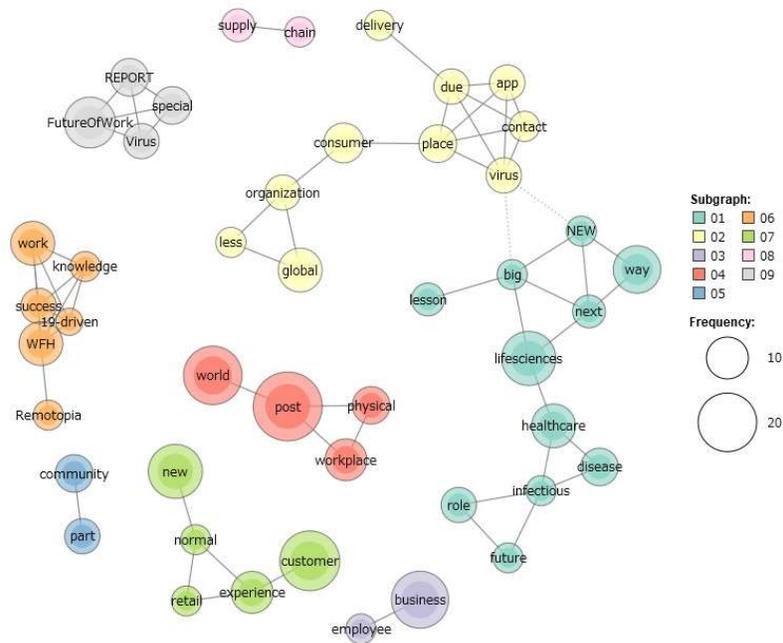**WORDS ASSOCIATION: "digitaltransformation"**
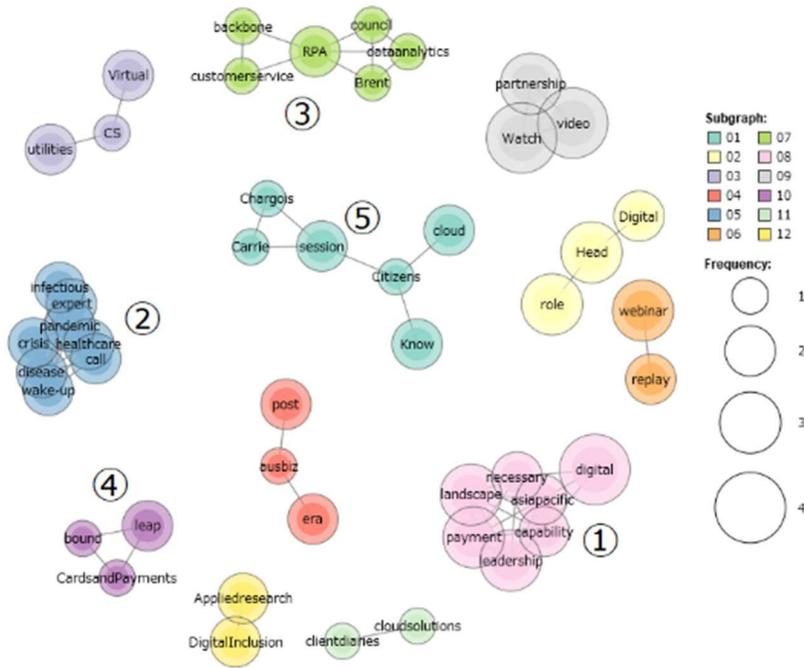
FIGURE 5
WORDS ASSOCIATION: "NavigateyourNext"
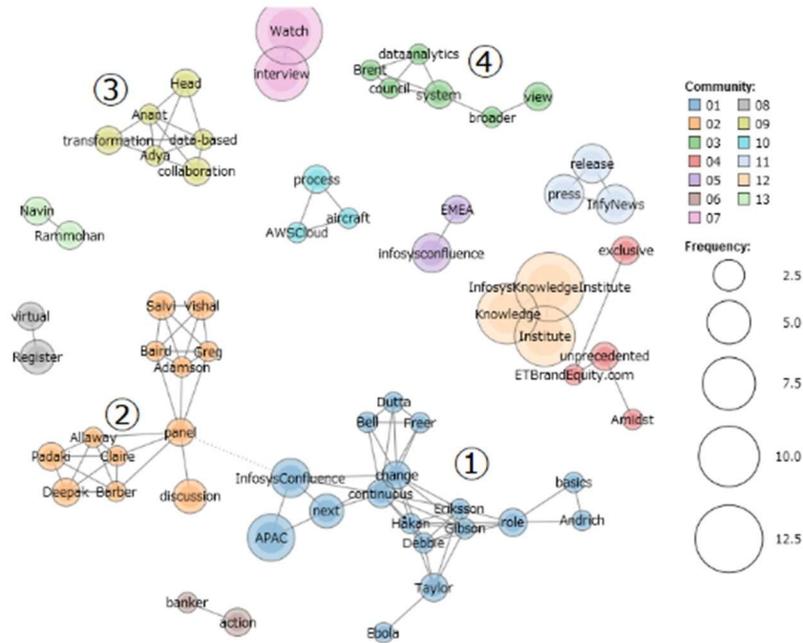
FIGURE 6
WORDS ASSOCIATION: "AI"

FIGURE 7
WORDS ASSOCIATION: "COVID"

INTERPRETATION

Based on co-occurrence network, word associations and keyword frequencies the grouping of words were classified into following "codes", which are derived from Figure 2 and Figure 7.

TABLE 3
CODES INTERPRETED FROM KEYWORDS

No.	Keywords	Codes
1	CEO, panel, partnership, leadership, conversation, expert, industry leader, future, webinar, strategy, register	Experts/Executive management leadership talk, Subject matter expert talk
2	Tune, Podcast	Communication medium
3	Business, digitaltransformation (Including keywords from Word association results derived from Figure 4 to Figure 7)	Business and digital transformation in 1. Life sciences, 2. Payments, 3. Retail industries 4. Using RPA, data analytics.
4	Business, technology, innovation, model, AI(Including keywords from Word association results), report, customer, experience, process, value	Business and Technology innovation, Reports
5	OneHCL, blog, Head, Digital, Services, share, insight	Subject Matter expert sharing thoughts, opinions
6	Solution, partner, journey, transformation, SAP, cloud	Case studies about successful project implementations
7	Cloud, enterprise	Cloud for customers(enterprises)
8	Work, people, service	Service to working people, employees
9	Community, challenge, COVID, pandemic, world	IT Company's responses to global challenges
10	Workplace, IoT	Spread of (IoT) in workplace.

Codes are used to identify words, phrases that uniquely identify salient components from the test data which represent key highlights within the data corpus (Saldaña, 2009). Codes can be considered a basic units of information which can be combined into categories for ease of understanding.

Based on the above codes, specific content categories were identified. In addition, considering some codes about webinar, podcast, the content categories were further summarized to develop a comprehensive view of all activities conducted by IT Companies on LinkedIn.

TABLE 4
SUMMARY OF LINKEDIN ACTIVITIES BY IT SERVICE COMPANIES

Channel	Content Categories	Target
Webinar, Blogs, Podcasts	Top leadership commentary	Existing or Potential Customers
	Success stories, case studies	
	Subject matter experts commentary	
	IT Company's stance, opinion about relevant changes in business surroundings	

DISCUSSION

Current State of LinkedIn as Marketing/Branding Platform

The results of this exploratory study show that all six IT Services companies are using LinkedIn as a branding, marketing and communications medium. As per previous researches, IT Service companies are

seen promoting their corporate brands, capabilities, services via LinkedIn (Swani et al., 2014). The content categories identified in this study tend to be more informative, unidirectional which is as per the previous researches which undermined the fact that B2B Marketing and selling follow a rational tone, focusing functional characteristics of the products and services (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007; Swani et al., 2014). As a result, the target audience of these branding and marketing communications tend to be existing and potential new customers.

Limits of LinkedIn Usage in IT Service Companies

Social Media has offered a completely new platform offering technical capabilities for bi-directional communications, personalized contents and targeting variety of audiences (Buratti et al., 2018). This study highlights the current state of LinkedIn Branding and marketing communications of IT services companies. Researchers have argued about potential benefits of disseminating emotional values via social media communications (Swani et al., 2014; Buratti et al., 2018). However, the current study results show that IT Vendor companies have not exploited the emotional aspect enough but are more focused on propagating the functional aspects of their offerings.

Past researches have shown that Social Media, LinkedIn in particular can be utilized effectively for communications to their current and potential employees (Bernard, 2016). Past researches have argued about usage of Social Media to stimulate and encourage conversations with employees (Buratti et al., 2018). However, the current study of LinkedIn Posts did not show enough contents about recruitment, employer branding. Considering the current penetration and reception of social media, there is ample scope for these companies to proactively promote employer branding contents via LinkedIn Posts.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Conclusion

The results of this exploratory study highlight the current situation and limitations of LinkedIn Branding, communications of B2B Companies with focus on IT Services companies. As seen in past researches, the focus of B2B companies is limited to informative content, focused on functional values and targeting only the existing and potential new customers from the entire gamut of stakeholders. This research paves way for B2B organizations to assess, evaluate and implement new marketing and branding contents which are focused on emotional values, targeting other stakeholders. In addition, B2B organizations can consider implementing bi-directional, conversational and interactive contents for increased collaboration and openness in Organization's external communications.

Limitations and Future Research

In spite of its findings, this exploratory study has its inherent limitations. This study uses data from focused on 6 IT companies for a period of one year. In addition, this study takes data from LinkedIn Posts only. These two points limit the industry representation scope. Furthermore, LinkedIn and other social media platforms keep evolving by addition of new features, tools. Hence, there is a possibility that some contents, target stakeholders might be handled using different LinkedIn features apart from LinkedIn Posts.

The current study focusses on assessment of content categories in LinkedIn Marketing and branding communications. Further studies can investigate on the reasons for the selection of specific contents, their relevance with the target stakeholders, their preferences. Further research can focus on utilization of LinkedIn not just a medium for branding/marketing communications, but also as a collaboration, co-creation platform with involvement of not just customers but also other stakeholders like employees, collaborators amongst others (Guesalaga, 2016; Buratti et al., 2018). Future research can focus on establishing relationship between overall industry trends, business settings, macro level issues faced by organization's stakeholders and its impact on Organization's branding and marketing communications.

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