

## Environmental Education and Sustainable Development

### ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Sustainable B2B Branding Through Social Media: An Exploratory Analysis of Iranian Ports

Sima Alipour<sup>1</sup>, Morteza Maleki Minbashrazgah<sup>2\*</sup>, Davood Feiz<sup>3</sup>, Azim Zarei<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Candidate in Marketing Management, Faculty of Economic, Management, and Administrative Sciences, University of Semnan, Semnan, Iran

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Faculty of Economic, Management, and Administrative Sciences, University of Semnan, Semnan, Iran

<sup>3</sup>Professor, Faculty of Economic, Management, and Administrative Sciences, University of Semnan, Semnan, Iran

<sup>4</sup>Professor, Faculty of Economic, Management, and Administrative Sciences, University of Semnan, Semnan, Iran

#### Correspondence

Morteza Maleki Minbashrazgah  
Email: [mmaleki80@semnan.ac.ir](mailto:mmaleki80@semnan.ac.ir)

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#### ABSTRACT

Business-to-Business markets use the positive effect of sustainable measures to strengthen their brand. Because sustainable branding supports competitive advantage with a positive impact on customer perceptions and satisfaction, in this regard, the tools and platforms available in the online environment can be effective in sustainable B2B branding by facilitating interaction and dialogue in an informal way between the company and its audience. Therefore, the current research was conducted to provide a conceptual framework of sustainable B2B branding through social media using the qualitative method of theme analysis on Iranian ports. This is an exploratory research with an aim to be applicable. The statistical population is Iranian port managers, and to collect information, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 14 key informants (saturation limit) who were selected by a targeted method. To analyze the data, the text of the interviews was transcribed. Then, using Atlas software and the inductive thematic analysis method, data were coded, analyzed, and interpreted. In this research, the framework of sustainable branding from company to company was explained through social media with 117 basic codes, 10 sub-themes, and 3 main themes of social media management, brand mantra, and sustainability action.

#### KEYWORDS

Iranian Ports, Social Media, Sustainable B2B Branding.

نشریه علمی

## آموزش محیط زیست و توسعه پایدار

«مقاله پژوهشی»

# برندسازی پایدار بنگاه‌بنگاه از طریق رسانه‌های اجتماعی: یک تحلیل اکتشافی از بنادر ایران

سیما علی‌پور<sup>۱</sup>، مرتضی ملکی مین‌باش رزگاه<sup>۲\*</sup>، داوود فیض<sup>۳</sup>، عظیم زارعی<sup>۴</sup>

### چکیده

بازارهای بنگاه‌بنگاه بیش‌ازپیش، جهت تقویت برند خود از تأثیر مثبت اقدامات پایدار استفاده می‌کنند. چرا که برندسازی پایدار با تأثیر مثبت بر ادراکات و رضایت مشتری از مزیت رقابتی حمایت می‌کند. در این راستا ابزارها و پلتفرم‌های موجود در محیط آنلاین می‌توانند با تسهیل تعامل و گفت‌وگو به شیوه‌ای غیررسمی بین شرکت و مخاطبان در برندسازی پایدار بنگاه‌بنگاه موثر باشند. از این رو پژوهش حاضر با هدف ارائه چارچوب مفهومی برندسازی پایدار بنگاه‌بنگاه، از طریق رسانه‌های اجتماعی با استفاده از روش کیفی تحلیل تم بر روی بنادر ایران انجام شد. پژوهش حاضر از لحاظ هدف کاربردی و ماهیت آن اکتشافی است. جامعه آماری مدیران بنادر ایران می‌باشند و جهت گردآوری اطلاعات با ۱۴ نفر از مطلعین کلیدی (حد اشباع) که با روش هدفمند انتخاب شده‌اند، مصاحبه نیمه ساختار یافته صورت گرفته است. به منظور تجزیه و تحلیل داده‌ها، متن مصاحبه‌ها ترانویسی شدند. سپس با استفاده از نرم افزار اطلس و روش تحلیل تماتیک استقرایی کدگذاری، تحلیل و تفسیر داده‌ها انجام شد. در این پژوهش چارچوب برندسازی پایدار بنگاه‌بنگاه، از طریق رسانه‌های اجتماعی با ۱۱۷ کد پایه، ۱۰ مضمون فرعی و ۳ مضمون اصلی مدیریت رسانه‌های اجتماعی، ماترای برند و اقدام پایداری تبیین شد.

### واژه‌های کلیدی

برندسازی پایدار بنگاه‌بنگاه، رسانه‌های اجتماعی، بنادر ایران.

<sup>۱</sup>دانشجوی دکتری مدیریت بازرگانی، دانشکده اقتصاد، مدیریت و علوم اداری، دانشگاه سمنان، سمنان، ایران  
<sup>۲</sup>دانشیار، گروه مدیریت، دانشکده اقتصاد، مدیریت و علوم اداری، دانشگاه سمنان، سمنان، ایران  
<sup>۳</sup>استاد، گروه مدیریت، دانشکده اقتصاد، مدیریت و علوم اداری، دانشگاه سمنان، سمنان، ایران  
<sup>۴</sup>استاد، گروه مدیریت، دانشکده اقتصاد، مدیریت و علوم اداری، دانشگاه سمنان، سمنان، ایران

نویسنده مسئول:

مرتضی ملکی مین‌باش رزگاه

رایانامه: [mmaleki80@semnan.ac.ir](mailto:mmaleki80@semnan.ac.ir)

استناد به این مقاله:

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## Introduction

In recent years, the topics of sustainability and branding have expanded and become increasingly intertwined (Czinkota et al., 2014 ; Grubor & Milovanov, 2017 ;Gupta et al., 2013). A brand is a vital element of companies' marketing strategies (Gatignon et al., 1990). In the B2B market, branding is challenging due to the presence of fewer but larger customer profiles, the need for long-term relationships, and a high level of knowledge and expertise (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016; Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). However, despite its complexity, B2B companies can differentiate themselves by creating unique identity characteristics (Cretu & Brodie, 2007), negotiation power (Low & Blois, 2002), and increase their financial performance (Mudambi, 2002) and strengthen customers' confidence in their choice (Low & Blois, 2002). Considering that the business brand image shows the important features of the product and the relationship that business customers expect to have with a supplier (Bendixen et al., 2004; Vesal et al., 2021), Sustainability can differentiate competing brands in B2B markets. Also, by integrating sustainability into their practices, communicating these practices to customers, and including them in their brand image, companies can create and maintain relationships with sustainable customers (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). Therefore, sustainable branding is an important component of positioning and communication strategy in B2B markets (Kapitan et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018).

Sustainable B2B branding research deals with the actions and processes of business actors who seek a positive financial, social, and of course, environmental impact from their business operations (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). A sustainable brand is a brand that has successfully integrated environmental, economic, and social issues into its business operations (Frbes<sup>1</sup>, 2020). Sustainable branding can support competitive advantage by positively influencing product evaluation perceptions and customer satisfaction (Sheth & Sinha, 2015). Associating the B2B brand with desirable values such as responsibility, social and environmental stewardship, and ethics supports the

attractiveness of the workplace (Sheth & Sinha, 2015). Therefore, investing in sustainable development increases the company's brand value and improves the image and reputation of the company (Dangelico, 2017; Lai et al., 2017; Abuzeinab et al., 2018; Loh & Tan, 2020).

Sustainable brands show respect for the environment and society and lead to the creation of goodwill, enhancing the company's reputation, creating dividends for shareholders through increasing demand and guaranteeing future income through loyalty and support from shareholders, and increasing the value of the brand. (Loh & Tan, 2020). However, many companies that consider themselves sustainable meet only one-third of this definition (Forbes, 2020), which causes damage to their brand reputation. Because if a company creates an ideal brand promise but fails to deliver on it, people will talk about it. Word-of-mouth marketing can be incredibly effective, but people are more likely to talk about a brand when they're unhappy with it. However, the formula for developing word-of-mouth is to meet expectations and fulfill the brand promise. Social media has significant importance and influence in spreading word of mouth (Kotler et al., 2006). The maturation of the Internet as an arena for communication arms equips B2B marketers and brand managers with new tools to target their customers. Online media offers opportunities to strengthen two-way communication with its audience, which subsequently strengthens trust (Webster & Keller, 2004). When companies enter the online environment in search of dialogue, the need for convenience with two-way relationships becomes prominent (Trondheim, 2010).

Webster Jr. and Keller (2004), argue that brand communication should be used in multiple channels to reinforce brand strategy. The tools and platforms available in the online environment reduce barriers by informally facilitating interaction and dialogue between the company and its audience, both professional colleagues and customers, with a low level of commitment (Webster & Keller, 2004). Social media is a valuable source of market intelligence, characterized by the ease and efficiency of interactions between network partners and by facilitating individual self-expression and brand engagement. Therefore,

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1. [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com)

social media can enable interaction, collaboration, and networking and thus strengthen relationships between actors within networks (Cartwright<sub>a</sub> et al., 2021; Cartwright<sub>b</sub> et al., 2021). The process of using social media in parallel, in terms of community, conversation and networking is similar to that of an offline process companies use to secure business. McKee argues that social media should be used to enhance traditional business activities instead of replacing them (McKee, 2010).

Researching on brands, brand management, and corporate branding is increasing, but the context of the online environment for these topics has been neglected by business and marketing academics, especially in the industrial environment (Cartwright<sub>a</sub> et al., 2021; Cartwright<sub>b</sub> et al., 2021;). Today, B2B companies, whose market segments are more stringent than the consumer market in terms of products, transactions, negotiation performance, and organizational structure, are moving toward adopting social media for their various business purposes. The growing importance of social media for B2B organizations makes this field more challenging and exciting for researchers and professionals (Liu, 2019; Bernard, 2016; Manzanaro et al., 2018). Some researchers have highlighted the great potential of creating business relationships through social networks and platforms (Ahi et al., 2017; Neeley & Leonardi, 2018). Therefore, the role of social media in the B2B sector and the expectations and goals of industrial companies should be clarified. B2B companies have to adapt to the changes that happen in the digital world. These companies need to learn how to engage in the digital marketing side of their company because this is what not only increases sales but also strengthens their customer relationships and improves brand awareness. (Wang et al., 2017). B2B companies, although investing in new channels and related marketing tools such as email marketing, digital newsletters, and sales support materials (Barwise & Farley, 2005), are still hesitant to invest in social media tools. On the other hand, past research focusing on B2C markets shows that adopting environmental sustainability practices, such as pollution prevention and reducing energy and natural resource consumption, forces companies to strengthen their brand equity (Chen, 2010; Chen, 2015; Olsen et al., 2014). But compared

to B2C markets, the dominant marketing activities and most economic value of marketing activities occur in B2B markets, and the operation of B2B companies also requires the consumption of significant resources and imposes a greater burden on the environment. (Kapitan et al., 2019; Mariadoss et al., 2011). However, despite its importance, sustainable branding has been neglected, especially in B2B marketing research (Vesal et al., 2021). Especially in developing countries, where the role of branding is vital to use market opportunities and gain competitive advantages, but the dominant reference framework for research on B2B branding still emphasizes developed countries (Nyadzayo et al., 2018). Therefore, it is surprising that there is little research on B2B markets focusing on the relationship between sustainability and brand in developing countries. Because of insufficient infrastructure and socio-economic conditions in developing countries more responsibility is allocated to companies for market and regional development (Sheth & Sinha, 2015), therefore, it is necessary to understand how B2B companies operating in developing countries (such as Iran) can use social media to build strong brands and increase market presence through sustainable investment.

Among the B2B companies in developing countries, which need to focus on this issue, are ports. Because ports are among the organizations in which the concept of sustainable development is well exemplified, and ports and maritime organizations create many environmental and social concerns, port activities can have a significant impact on environmental resources (Paipai, 1999). Therefore, in light of changes in port competition and the need for differentiation in port services, branding has become a vital issue for port organizations (Vural et al., 2021). Ports position their brand by referring to advantages such as loving nature, saving the world and expressing empathy or paying attention to people or the environment, and attracting the attention of the emotions and senses of their customers. They aim to convince customers that their sustainability initiatives, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, helping to save the world, and doing good for the environment and society, go beyond functional benefits. Such a strategy creates a brand image with strong sustainability associations. Due to

the importance of the issue, the conventions of the International Maritime Organization, including the Convention on the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (Marpol) and its annexes, the Water Balance Management Convention, and the global project under the title of World Ports Sustainability Program, which was established in early 2017 by the International Union of Ports and Anchorages<sup>1</sup> (IAPH) is defined, also seek to strengthen and coordinate sustainability measures in ports around the world (UNCTAD<sup>2</sup>, 2012).

According to the aforementioned materials and the examination of the Asia-Europe shipping route as an east-west route, it can be seen that Iran's ports have a worthy place in this global route, and crossing Iran's soil is compared to the Suez Canal route, which is a major route. Trade between Asia and Europe is considered to be about 5 thousand kilometers shorter. The performance patterns of the country's ports also indicate the existence of vast potential capacities that have been lost or greatly reduced due to the lack of necessary conditions in the past and the opportunism of the competing ports. The favorable development movements of recent years in ports have reduced the performance gap between the country's ports and international favorable indicators (Ports and Maritime Organization); However, we are still far from the desired global indicators in the sustainable development of ports, and ports must invest in how to build a sustainable brand through social media to approach these indicators in the field of sustainable development. Therefore, this research was done to design a model of sustainable B2B branding through social media, which, while understanding the process, can focus on sustainable branding in ports by identifying the effective components.

Therefore, to achieve this goal, the research question is raised as follows:

What is the conceptual model of sustainable B2B branding of ports through social media?

Studies have shown that B2B branding mainly focuses on identifying the implications of B2B brands for organizational purchasing decisions (e.g., Bendixen et al., 2004; Wuyts et al., 2009) or Firm performance (e.g., Homburg et al., 2010; Worm & Srivastava, 2014) is

focused. However, a review of B2B branding literature reveals that despite the acknowledged role of branding in business markets (Zablah et al., 2010), the literature provides little clarity on the critical drivers of brand performance in B2B markets. (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012; Sheth & Sinha, 2015).

Some marketing research on sustainability focuses on corporate social responsibility or green marketing. This area of research shows that companies are integrating sustainability into their business strategies to influence customer-related outcomes and branding. The focus of these works includes customer satisfaction (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006), customer loyalty (Homburg et al., 2010), corporate customer identification (Siu et al., 2014), and brand equity in the B2C context. (Hsu, 2012; Olsen et al., 2014). The few studies that have addressed the relationship between sustainability and brand have focused on the B2C context (e.g., Pai et al., 2015; Torres et al., 2012). Recent research shows that emotional factors and individual opinions in a B2B environment cannot be ignored (Gomes et al., 2016). Providing ethical products and services, as well as companies that show environmental and social concerns, are factors that can change customer behavior. This supports the need for B2B companies to provide transparent information to their customers about environmental efforts and sustainable products (Martin & Schouten, 2011).

Zhang et al. (2011) highlighted green marketing as a strategy to improve the brand image (Zhang et al., 2011). Gupta and Kumar (2013) also pointed out the role of marketing in improving a company's competitive position and as an enabler in achieving a better reputation by creating awareness about the benefits of sustainable products and services (Gupta & Kumar, 2013). Brands often provide the main points of differentiation between competitive offers in marketing, and sustainability as a starting point can be critical to the success of companies (Wood, 2000).

Zameer et al. (2020) presented the relevant role of differentiation strategy through resources and creative work to create value for customers and create a strong brand image (Zameer et al., 2020). Marketing researchers

1. <https://www.pmo.ir/>

2. UNCTAD. Sustainable Development of Port. <https://unctad.org/>

recommend that businesses include sustainability in their communications to promote brand differentiation (Loh & Tan, 2020). Kapitan et al. (2019) also created a sustainable brand positioning scale for B2B companies (Kapitan et al., 2019). While Vesal et al. (2020) reported that sustainability strengthens the brand image of B2B companies (Vesal et al., 2021), Sheth and Sinha (2015) argue that sustainability is critical to building brand reputation B2B in emerging markets. Kumar and Christodolupoulou (2013) also report a positive relationship between sustainable branding and company performance (Sheth & Sinha, 2015).

Research on B2B social media strategy is limited. Cartwright (2021) states in his research; B2B organizations tend to use four distinct engagement strategies when implementing social media marketing strategies (Cartwright, et al., 2021). Brennan and Croft (2012), in an exploratory study of the use of social media in B2B marketing and branding, found that, although large companies were heavy users of all major social media channels, the use of these tools by none was not universal. Enterprise-by-enterprise social media pioneers are trying to use these tools and position themselves as "thought leaders", act as market drivers, and build relationships with a range of stakeholder groups (Brennan & Croft, 2012). However, there is an urgent need to better understand the potential of social media in B2B contexts to support businesses in

overcoming their hesitation to adopt social media (Cartwright, et al., 2021).

By studying the literature and the background of the research, it was found that there has not been a comprehensive investigation in the field of sustainable branding, especially in ports. Therefore, considering the special conditions of Iranian ports, the current research was conducted to investigate the reasons for such a gap.

### Research Methodology

According to the purpose of the research, which is to present the conceptual framework of sustainable B2B branding in ports, the approach of the research is qualitative, it is practical in terms of the type of use, and it has an exploratory and descriptive nature. In this research, the theme analysis method was used, which is a qualitative method for organizing and describing existing data by identifying basic themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Because theme analysis provides an entirely qualitative, detailed, and nuanced report of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Brown and Clark (2006) have suggested the steps of conducting a theme analysis in six steps (Figure 1). It should be noted that, like many qualitative research techniques, theme analysis has a recursive nature and introduces flexibility and adaptability. Therefore, it provides the possibility of possible changes in codes and themes during the process.

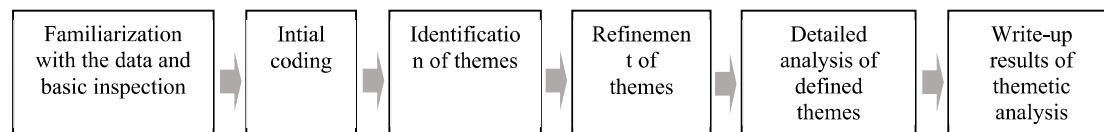


Figure 1. The Steps of theme Analysis (Walters, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006)

The statistical population in the current research are managers who are familiar with the topic of research in Iranian ports. Sampling in this research was purposeful; Because the current research is trying to collect information from key informants in Iranian ports. In the purposeful sampling method, the participants are selected based on the judgment of the researcher, and this judgment is based on the relevance of the sample group to the research objectives. The selection of samples has been continued until the adequacy and theoretical saturation of the data have taken place, and the

researcher finds that the next samples will not provide him with distinctive information (Prendergast & Maggie, 2013). That is when the new data collected does not differ from those collected before (Kvale, 1996).

Data sources for theme analysis can be of any type, including academic literature, interviews, focus groups, social media sources, etc. (Walters, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Among the different methods of data collection in this research, the semi-structured interview method was used online using a webcam. After conducting 14 interviews with port managers

(Chabahar Port, Anzali Port, Shahid Rajaei Port, and Imam Khomeini Port), the data collection ended when the saturation point was reached.

The characteristics of the participants in the research are listed in Table No. 2.

The average time of each interview was estimated to be 54 minutes due to the busyness of the interviewed group. At the beginning of each interview, while stating the purpose of the research, it was emphasized that the interviews would be used only for research purposes and that the identity of the individuals would not be revealed in the research reports. After obtaining permission from the interviewees and their agreement, the interviews were recorded and transcribed, and coded on the same day. The theme analysis approach was used to analyze the interviews. Then the researcher codes the analyzed data (themes) and chooses a label for them (labeling or coding is the first step towards summarizing the huge data obtained from the interviews) (Abedi Jafari et al., 2011); Each theme contains important things about the data related to the research question and represents a

level of response or patterned meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Like all other types of research data analysis, the accuracy of the content analysis results of an interview depends on the reliability and validity of the analyzed type. A high level of reliability is at least something necessary for the coherence and accuracy of error analysis. In the present study, retest reliability (Bowen & Bowen, 2008) was used to calculate the reliability of the interviews.

In the present study, to calculate the retest reliability, three interviews were randomly selected from among the conducted interviews, and each of them was coded twice by the researcher in a 15-day interval. Then, the specified codes were compared with each other in two-time intervals for each of the interviews, and through the number of agreements and non-agreements, in two stages of coding, the reliability coefficient of the test was calculated for the research through the following method (Khastar, 2009) and was reported in Table No. 1.

**Table 1.** Test-Retest Reliability

Row	Interview code	Total number of codes	Number of agreements	Test-Retest Reliability
1	P <sub>5</sub>	37	16	86%
2	P <sub>7</sub>	23	10	87%
3	P <sub>11</sub>	39	15	76%
Total		99	41	82%

Considering that this reliability rate is more than 60% (Kvale, 1996), the applicability of the coding was confirmed, and it can be claimed that the level of reliability and analysis of the current interview is appropriate. To determine the validity of the current research, Kvale's (1996) seven stages, which are determining the topic, design, interview situation, copying (transcribing), analysis, verification, and reporting, were used (Kvale, 1996). In this research, all Analysis steps were done with the help of Atlas. Ti software.

**Research Findings**

In this section, the process of analyzing the data obtained from the interviews was examined based on the three-stage method of thematic analysis, and the results of each stage were presented in summary form. Also, the

demographic characteristics of the participants in the research are shown in Table No. 2.

**Table 2.** Description of Demographic Variables

Gender	Male	Female		
	(71.42%)	(28.58%)		
Age	51-10 (21.42%)	41-50 (50%)	30-40 (28.58%)	
	Work experience	10 years and above (42.87%)	5-10 Year (35.71%)	Less than 5 years (21.42%)

**First step:** analysis of interviews and identification of primary codes:

At this stage, the conducted interviews were analyzed, and 117 basic codes were identified. An example of quotations and primary codes is presented in Table No. 3.

**Table 3.** Example of Quotes and Initial Codes

Quotation	Initial code
We needed to design a role-based dashboard that would provide an effective and efficient user experience while improving the structure and organization of content, making it easier for users to find and access thousands of port information sources.	Role-based dashboard design; Improved content organization; Access to information sources of ports
Most port websites are mediocre at best in terms of design and content. This creates a distinct opportunity for those ports that want to establish digital leadership.	The site and content design
Focusing on the tagline "We are an environmental leader" helps build a brand image that goes hand-in-hand with sustainability. And it means being vigilant and always looking for sustainable measures.	Creating a sustainability slogan for the brand, creating a brand image in sync with sustainability
In any case, it seems essential that port managers who work in the field of sustainability should be familiar with the problems of greenwashing. The perception of dishonesty can quickly reverse such pursuits.	Awareness of the problems of greenwashing ports
Achieving a social strategy that aligns with key business goals will help build a sustainable brand.	Achieving social strategy
To succeed in building a sustainable B2B brand, the first step is to show the world who you are.	Create brand awareness
B2B companies are not exempt from the rule of brands being human, especially when building a sustainable brand.	The human nature of brands
Focusing on social networks that are more effective in the B2B field, such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram.	Inspiration with a focus on business-to-business friendly platforms, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram.

**Second stage:** categorizing codes and identifying sub-themes:

At this stage, 117 primary codes were classified in the form of sub-themes, and 15

sub-themes were formed. Then, the classification was provided to 4 experts in this field, and finally, 10 sub-themes were determined, which are presented in Table No. 4.

**Table 4.** Classification of Primary Codes in the Form of Sub-themes

Sub-themes	Initial code
<b>Website quality</b>	Accessible website, role-based dashboard design, access to port information resources, role-based entry points, mobile-friendly website design, easy access to information resources, identifying the right combination of design and information, Design according to the specific needs of customers, identifying and activating key user tasks in the port's audience sections, creating an effective port map and customer web portal, and paying attention to the buyer's journey beyond visiting the website.
<b>Stakeholder management through social media</b>	Coordination and communication with a large and diverse group of stakeholders, creating a deep and comprehensive understanding of employees, partners, and stakeholders, facilitating interaction with stakeholders, empowering employees in social media, and involving employees in sustainability measures in social media.
<b>Content organization on social media</b>	Creating appropriate content about ports, improving content organization, content enhancing customer experience, appropriate online experience, increasing operational efficiency, paying attention to content volume, content transfer process, producing rich and attractive content related to sustainability, sharing sustainability stories, Sharing compelling content, following the 80/20 rule in content creation, creating inspiring content, combining sustainable messages with general content, creating honest and logical content, electronic marketing in goods and other business platforms, creativity in marketing. Sustainable B2B online, classification of social media, an adaptation of content produced with social media, production of advertising content, and leads.
<b>Value perception framework</b>	The green brand image of ports, sustainable brand identity, brand reputation, port brand architecture, green brand identity, development of brand value, creation of brand sustainability slogan, creation of brand awareness, development of awareness of



Sub-themes	Initial code
	sustainable brand in social networks, modification of brand voice according to With sustainable strategies, sustainable brand positioning, sustainable brand personality, presenting a human image of the brand, improving the sustainable brand image
<b>Brand legitimacy</b>	Brand ethical concerns, environmental legitimacy, changing stakeholders' expectations from the organization, changing stakeholders' perceptions, social legitimacy, Green port marketing plan.
<b>Using social media evaluation tools</b>	Google Analytics, LinkedIn Analytics, Tweetdeck, Tweetcounter, internal tools, Social Mention, Addictomatic
<b>Brand related links</b>	Brand-related links, emotional association related to the brand, brand communication in the B2B online shopping process, online communication guidelines, access standards in social media, website content usability, and choosing social media as a marketing channel. , creating an emotional connection with the audience through social media, compelling storytelling in social media, using emotions to create engagement, being cautious about how to engage emotions, creating a connection with the audience based on trust, safety, social approval, self-respect, networking, maintaining your core connection with the host location, brand personality communication strategy with special emphasis on communication, thinking creatively and strategically about the online customer experience, inspiration with a focus on B2B friendly platforms, using Twitter and Instagram for better interaction with customers, using LinkedIn platform capabilities, sustainable brand presence through social media integration.
<b>Environmental sustainability</b>	Transparency in showing the methods of environmental sustainability in social media, environmental protection, playing a role in climate change, using environmental management systems, cooperation with the Environmental Quality Commission, measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, etc. Electrification of containers, use of alternative fuels, use of hydrogen fuel cell vehicles, carbon neutrality, joining the coalition of hydrogen ports of international agencies, use of new forms of energy management, the movement towards cleaner fuels, use of low fuel Sulfur, choosing environmentally friendly practices, awareness of greenwashing problems in ports.
<b>social sustainability</b>	Transparency in showing social sustainability practices in social media, identifying important stakeholder sustainability issues, participating in sustainability workshops, social listening, setting goal-oriented messages under the title of corporate citizenship, social participation, building a sustainable corporate culture, showing how Helping the audience in the field of sustainability (educating the audience), investigating the residents' perception of the local identity, concern about the quality of life of the indigenous people of the region.
<b>Economic sustainability</b>	Creating a circular and transparent economy, reducing costs, a sustainable economy, a green economy, paying attention to investment costs in sustainability, and showing the reduction of labor costs.

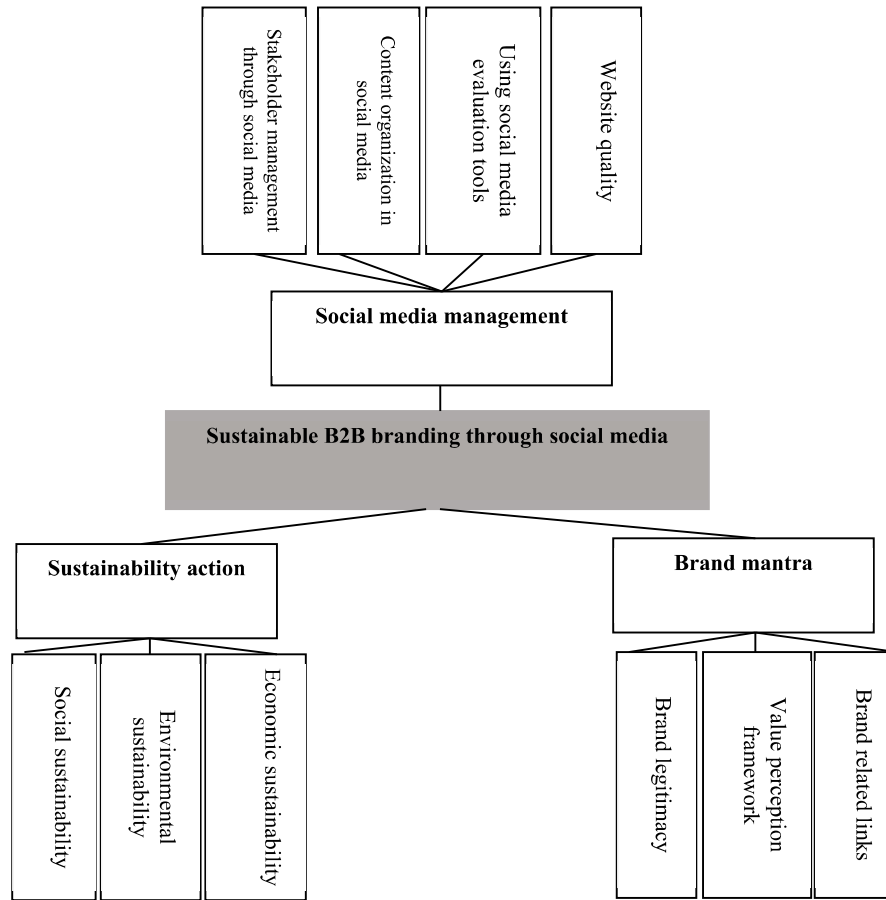
**The third step:** identifying the main themes: meaning were placed in a similar category; The output of this stage is the identification of 3 main themes presented in Table No. 5.

In this stage, the classification of sub-themes based on their similarity in direction and

**Table 5.** Identifying the Main Themes

<b>Social media management</b>	Website quality
	Using social media evaluation tools
	Content organization in social media
	Stakeholder management through social media
<b>Brand mantra</b>	Brand legitimacy
	Value perception framework
	Brand related links
<b>Sustainability action</b>	Environmental sustainability
	Social sustainability
	Economic sustainability

In the following, the company-by-company sustainable branding network in social media is presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** The Theme Network of Sustainable Branding of Ports through Social Media

## Conclusion

Recently, the concepts of sustainability in port branding have been taken into consideration, as Paipai (1999) has emphasized; there are growing concerns about the environmental impacts of port operations and development due to important global issues such as climate change and energy conservation. From a sustainability perspective, a port must manage and balance three endpoints: economic well-being, social well-being, and environmental quality. A major driver for sustainability is attracting and retaining customers who care about sustainability. In this way, compiling a green port marketing plan that meets the economic, social, and environmental goals leads the port toward sustainable growth and development. Therefore, this research was conducted to explain the conceptual model of sustainable branding of ports through social media.

The findings of the research indicate that

sustainable branding from company to company can be explained based on three themes: social media management, brand mantra, and sustainability action.

The main theme of social media management includes four sub-themes: website quality, social media evaluation tools, content organization in social media, and stakeholder management through social media.

To build a sustainable brand, ports are required to create a quality website to provide information about sustainability measures and interact with their stakeholders. Because branding means creating a distinct identity and conveying this distinct identity to the minds of the audience. However, most port websites are mediocre at best in terms of design, user experience, and content. Most ports and their websites are accessed by several types of users: truckers, port or dock workers, cargo owners, shippers, etc., developing role-based entry points (e.g., “click here for trucker resources”);

it can facilitate users' use of the website and receiving information and sustainability reports. It is very important that these pages are mobile-friendly because most port workers access the website from a phone or tablet while they are in or around the port. Also, no one knows what the future holds for the logistics supply chain, but ports can reduce the stress on everyone who interacts with the port by taking the time to think creatively and strategically about their customers' online experience. Ports should think of a website as more than just a website. In fact, it should be seen as a customer web portal. In most port websites, there are hundreds of documents, forms, licenses, and communication and legal instructions. Therefore, it is suggested to design these websites in such a way that it is easy for users to access information resources by organizing and classifying the content of the website.

One of the basic steps in building a sustainable brand through social media is evaluating social media as a communication channel between the brand and the audience. Ports should use social media as their most effective marketing channel considering which networks are the most effective. Do the managers' efforts lead to real traffic or sales? Is it time to start running ads? To evaluate according to the type of social media used, it is suggested that ports use a variety of social media evaluation tools, such as Google Analytics, LinkedIn Analytics, Tweetdeck, Tweetcounter internal tools, social mentions, and Addictomatic. In this way, these tools provide a complete set of reporting, listening, and analysis tools to support B2B brands regardless of their goals, and port managers use analytics and reports to improve their sustainable branding performance. To prove the return on investment and optimize the performance of ports, analyzes can provide answers.

Two other sub-topics are social media management, content organization in social media, and stakeholder management. Most port websites contain a significant amount of content. Therefore, one of the most vital aspects of redesigning any port website is the content transfer process. This is significant since the process involves many different groups within the port deciding what content to move to the new site. Therefore, port website administrators, according to communication

instructions, access standards, content usability, regulatory reviews, legal reviews, and stakeholder reviews, should ensure that design and development activities are carried out as soon as possible.

One of the biggest challenges that ports face in social media is the production of rich and attractive content. This is where sustainable content comes into play. Especially for B2B companies, sharing a port's sustainability story on social media is an opportunity to share compelling content and create an emotional connection with your audience. Social media contributes to sustainable brand growth and development through compelling storytelling. Port sustainability efforts, transparency, and sustainability reporting; better than any other post that advertises a product or service, it can attract the attention of the audience. Social media also gives ports a platform to select inspiring stories from their dense sustainability reporting and put them in front of audiences who care about them. Finally, talking about ports' sustainability priorities on social media allows managers to position their brand as a thought leader. They can use the 80/20 rule, where 80% of the content is inspirational, educational, or entertaining for the audience, and the remaining 20% directly promotes the port's business; Instead of focusing only on your own initiatives, share inspiring stories aligned with the purpose. It is suggested that managers help the sustainable branding of the port by classifying social media according to customer feedback and the level of customer attraction, as well as matching the content produced with social media. With the help of social media and maximizing the power of digital marketing to qualify leads and attract potential customers through the marketing funnel, brand awareness increases, and brand presence expands throughout the shipping and container shipping industry. More visitors visit the port's website, spend more time on the site and view more pages while visiting. In this way, their community grows continuously. On the other hand, the managers and officials of the port must be accountable to the beneficiaries of the port who live around the port.

What is important to the stakeholders, and what can be done about them? Managing, coordinating, and communicating with a large and diverse group of stakeholders brings a deep and comprehensive understanding of the input

they receive from employees, partners, and stakeholders.

The second main theme is the brand mantra. The brand mantra expresses the "heart and soul" of the brand. Keller & Kotler (2022) have also emphasized; Brand mantras create a mental filter to screen out inappropriate brand marketing activities or any actions that may have a negative impact on customers' perception of the brand. Therefore, the sub-themes of the brand mantra, brand legitimacy, value perception framework, and brand-related links were named.

The sub-theme of brand legitimacy refers to the legitimacy of port brand activities. Gustafson & Pomirleanu (2021) emphasize that; Legitimacy is necessary for a central role in an ecosystem, and as a process, it starts from the individual level and extends to groups, communities, and networks. Ports must be considered legitimate to meet and balance the expectations of various stakeholders such as employees, suppliers, customers, investors, and society.

Czinkota et al. (2014) emphasize; Sustainable brand legitimacy is mutual support measures that lead to increasing the competitive advantage and improving the company's social position. By expressing the ethical concerns of the port and its environmental legitimacy on social media and the port's website, ports can help to change the expectations and perceptions of the stakeholders of the organization.

The sub-theme of the value perception framework refers to the fact that what decision-making processes do B2B customers use in practice to improve the port's brand value? The development of supporting marketing programs to create special brand value can play an important role for ports in the image association of the brand. Many employees or even marketing partners may not recognize their role in influencing brand equity. The existence and communication of a suitable brand image and architecture indicate the importance of the brand for the organization and understanding its meaning, as well as the vital role of employees and marketing partners in its management.

Brand management has evolved to become a corporate brand orientation that serves the organizational culture. In addition, the corporate brand expands the identity of the organization and creates a point for reflection. Therefore, port brands are tools to gain insight

into uniform and competitive pressures on the organization. Brand personality is a key aspect of corporate identity, and seaports actively adjust their positioning and marketing communications to target specific customer segments, depending on whether they want to take an overtly offensive or defensive stance to attract new customers. As Grohmann (2009) emphasizes, It may seem counter-intuitive for seaports to have a brand personality, but it can be argued that seaports are exposed to humanization and human characteristics in the way seaports choose to communicate (a point of sale unique to individual) and expertise prevail. Cavusgil & Zou (1994) also state that brand personality helps to maintain individuality and create differentiation by emphasizing psychological values beyond the functional utility of a brand or product. For example, the performance and behavior of ports can be attributed to brand personality, and the characteristic of "competence" can be determined as a key criterion for judgment.

It has been found that instead of relying on consumers' perceptions of a sustainable brand's personality, seaports can analyze the words used to communicate the brand's personality to measure what the brand actually says about itself. Although seaports use social media and their website to communicate with shipping lines, but the lens of brand personality should still be used for seaports, in particular, to understand how social media is used to create differentiation. As Peighambari et al. (2016) emphasize, while a sustainable port brand can act as a powerful differentiator, it must be activated by authorities (identity nurturers) and residents (image holders) as perpetrators of the port brand.

The sub-theme of brand-related links in B2B branding seems far from the mind. According to the research of Lynch & De Chernatony (2004), one of the biggest myths in B2B branding is that the nature of the decision-making process is so logical that emotions do not really play a role. Undoubtedly, consumer brands can take advantage of different types of emotions more effectively than B2B brands. But at least three feelings of security, social approval, and self-esteem can be identified that play a key role in many different customer decisions in an online B2B environment. The branding of the port can give its customers a sense of security and confidence by using social media. It also gives

customers a positive feeling or satisfaction regarding the reaction of others towards them and makes customers feel better about themselves. Customers feel pride, success, or satisfaction.

In an online environment, it is necessary to pay attention to creating an emotional connection with the audience. And it is important to engage in conversation with new, alternative, interesting, different, and like-minded people. Conversations are always an integral part of the business. McKee (2010) also emphasizes; Conversation creates opportunities to improve brand image. Conversations in communities can attract a larger audience. Communities provide collaborative communication in an informal and informal environment. This provides customers with valuable interaction opportunities.

As Wang et al. (2017) emphasize, Ports should gain customers' trust and transparency in sustainability strategies through platforms. They need to learn how to engage in the digital marketing side of their company, as this is what strengthens their customer relationships and improves brand awareness. According to recent research by the Content Marketing Institute, there are a few select channels LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, which are the best when it comes to B2B social media. Through these networking platforms, port managers and employees can communicate with other professionals who want to be in contact with them and create a searchable database for other companies and other employees. McKee (2010) also emphasizes that networks provide the context for the brand. Because active participation in industry-, market-, or brand-related groups can provide a channel for business people to find, evaluate, and shape brand perceptions.

Because nowadays, it is necessary to focus on the sustainability of ports for their branding. 36% of LinkedIn members report that seeing a company committed to sustainability influences their purchase decision (LinkedIn). 41% of LinkedIn members want brands to be more transparent about sustainability practices (LinkedIn). It's clearer than ever that forward-thinking brands have something to say about sustainability.

The third main theme was called sustainability action, which includes three sub-themes of environmental sustainability, social

sustainability, and economic sustainability. Environmental sustainability is actually the responsibility of preserving natural resources and protecting global ecosystems to support health and well-being, now and in the future. Since many decisions that affect the environment are not immediately felt, a key element of environmental sustainability is its forward-looking nature. Since the pollution caused by the ports cause a lot of damage to the environment, especially the seas, it seems necessary for ports to take measures to reduce this pollution and preserve the environment, such as moving towards cleaner fuels, using low-sulfur fuel, energy management, and also taking measures to reduce greenhouse gases. For example, ports can allow ships to turn off their diesel engines when docked and connect to the power grid to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. Ports that provide LNG for ship refueling can also help reduce air pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions. The establishment of facilities to receive balance water and oil waste in commercial ports can also be effective as a solution to the problem of the existing marine environment caused by the activity of commercial ports. Also, ports can take great steps by joining the coalition of hydrogen ports of international agencies and cooperating with the Environmental Quality Commission to find new solutions to reduce pollution. On the other hand, these collaborations can lead to strengthening the brand's reputation and creating a pro-environment image among the stakeholders. Of course, the transparency of ports in showing environmental sustainability practices and sustainability reporting on social media and the port website is also important. The greater the transparency, the greater the trust between ports and stakeholders.

The second sub-theme is social sustainability. Social sustainability is about identifying and managing business impacts, both positive and negative, on people. In general, the quality of relationships and interaction of a company with its stakeholders and transparency in showing social sustainability practices are important. Therefore, it is suggested that the ports increase the quality of their relations with the stakeholders through social media through social listening, social participation, and setting goal-oriented messages under the title of

corporate citizenship. It should be noted that the nature of social media is to listen to the community, not to tell them what to do and what to think. The third subcategory is economic stability. Economic sustainability refers to actions that support long-term economic growth without negatively impacting the social, environmental, and cultural aspects of society. Ports can achieve economic sustainability with activities such as creating a circular and transparent economy, reducing costs, creating a sustainable economy, a green economy, and paying attention to investment costs in sustainability.

Finally, previous research show that service quality related to cost is the most effective factor of brand equity for container shipping companies in ports. Worrall et al. also argued that container shipping companies' sustainability efforts in ports are an important

part of their brand image and, thus, their brand equity. However, more studies are needed to analyze this relationship for sustainable branding of ports.

In the current research, the researchers were faced with limitations such as the non-cooperation of some port managers to conduct interviews with the researcher, the time-consuming nature of the interviews and their coding, and the participants' lack of familiarity with the concept of sustainable branding. On the other hand, due to the country being under embargo and the special situation of Iran's ports, it was difficult to collect data and access information. Replication of this research on different social media channels such as Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook can provide important insights into integrated social media communication in sustainable port branding.

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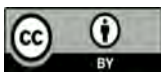
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