

Understanding Platform Choice Among Small-Scale Entrepreneurs: A Uses and Gratifications Perspective on Social Media and SEO In Chennai

K R Lalitha, *Research Scholar, Department of Communication & Journalism, Sri Padmavathi Women's University, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh*

Prof T. Tripura Sundari, *Department of Communication & Journalism, Sri Padmavathi Women's University, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh*

ABSTRACT

The current research investigates small-scale business owners' preference for using social media for their business needs instead of Search Engine Optimization (SEO). Their usage patterns of social media and their regard for the utility of other platforms were explored. The responses of 385 business owners located in Chennai, India, indicated that social media was utilized universally by all subjects. Business practices were largely influenced by peer recommendation, with 74.5% of participants indicating their choice of a certain platform based on their observations of other similar business activity. Overwhelmingly (80.5%), participants expressed their intention to invest in SEO; however, very few (7.6%) actually implemented some form of SEO, indicating a large intention-action gap. Social media platforms were perceived to be more immediate and visible than SEO when compared to the business owners' desire for social approval and to have a way of engaging with peers (defined as other business owners nearby). The business owners reported structural barriers--such as perceptions of complexity, time constraints, and confusion surrounding processes--to hinder them from making the switch to utilizing SEO. The study proposes that accessibility of the positive outcomes of SEO can lead small scale business owners to utilize SEO as their platform of choice while proposing that the selection of a platform is based upon the degree of media that meets social and functional needs by the media. Additionally, due to the noticeable visibility and demonstrability of such outcomes through the implementation of SEO, this may lead to enhancing small-scale business owners use of the same.

Keywords: Uses and Gratifications Theory, Digital Platform Adoption, Social Media, Local SEO, Small-Scale Entrepreneurs, Chennai, Gratification Needs, Collectivist Culture, Digital Media Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

A digital paradox exists for small-scale businesses in Chennai; although there is an extensive presence on social media, there is a lack of high visibility across search engines. There are more than 900 million internet users in India and approximately 63 million small-scale businesses in India (Ministry of MSME, 2022). The government has launched a number of initiatives to improve small-scale businesses' understanding of search engine optimisation (SEO) through various training programs. However, the small-scale business owners surveyed have not implemented SEO as intended, despite an increase in awareness of SEO. A survey of 385 entrepreneurs in Chennai showed that although 80.5% of respondents will invest in SEO; none of them reported comprehensive or systematic implementation. But, every person surveyed utilised social media for business purposes; thus, a significant gap exists between the use of social media and the use of SEO.

In order to help understand these findings, Katz et al.'s (1974) Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) can be used as a framework. UGT suggests that users of social media select their media platforms based on media's ability to satisfy cognitive, social, and integrative needs. Social media sites provide key social rewards when fulfilling the preceding list of needs, such as connecting with peers, gaining visibility, and building communities. In contrast, SEO is designed to provide businesses with long-term commercial benefits; however, social media provides users with no or little social benefits immediately after their implementation. This difference in gratification may explain, at least partially, why the use of social media for business purposes is widespread compared to the use of SEO for the same purposes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY

Origins and Core Propositions: The theory of Uses and Gratifications (UGT) is an alternative to the traditional one-dimensional view of the media and its audiences (i.e., passive and homogeneous recipients of the media's influence); it was developed primarily in response to these earlier theoretical models. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) provided a comprehensive set of assumptions about media audiences. They argue that they are active (or interactive) users of media that have specific goals and that they use media to achieve those goals. They outlined a number of central assumptions surrounding the nature of media audience behaviour, including: (1) Media audience behaviour is purposeful (i.e., they are aware of their motive(s) for media use), need satisfying (i.e., they use media to satisfy a need) and involves conscious awareness of the motivation(s) for media use); (2) Media compete with other sources of need satisfactions; and (3) Cultural significance can be measured through the relationship between need satisfactions and media used by masses (i.e., based on collected empirical evidence, media audiences have used media when they have wanted to be entertained, when they were seeking to gain information from the media (e.g., via surveillance and the attainment of knowledge), and when they wanted to use media as a means by which they can obtain social integration). Using this basic foundation, McQuail (1983) identified four broad classes of media gratifications: Information (e.g., surveillance, acquiring knowledge, and guidance); Personal Identity (e.g., value-clarification/reinforcement, and self-identity); Social Integration/Interaction (e.g., empathy/support, belongingness, and friend identification); and Entertainment (e.g., escape from reality, and relaxation). Research consistently shows that at the survival level of media use, Social and Integrative Gratifications (e.g., belongingness to a community, or gaining recognition from peers) have been the most compelling reasons for media use, particularly among collectivistic cultures (Ruggiero, 2000). McQuoid also developed four classifications of gratifications viewers seek from media; those are (1) Information: Surveillance, knowledge acquisition, & guidance; (2) Personal Identity: Reinforcement of values, role models & self-understanding; (3) Integration/Social Interaction: Empathy, social cognitive currency, and feeling of belongingness within a community or group of peers. (4) Entertainment: escape, relaxation, & appreciation of aesthetics. Along with this, numerous studies have repeated similar conclusions that social/integrative gratifications (e.g. community, peer recognition & belongingness) have proven to be the primary motivators for selecting media, especially in collectivist cultures (Ruggiero, 2000).

Uses and Gratifications in the Digital Media Context

UGT's usefulness for researchers dramatically increased as the Internet and technology have developed. According to Ruggiero (2000), the changes brought about by the digital age allow users to have more control over their media, which makes finding and fulfilling their media needs through UG Work more relevant and visible when using digital media. The large amount of research that has used UG theory to study the use of social media allows for abundant data on social media use. The most commonly identified social media use gratification is a need for social interaction, followed by the need for information and entertainment (Whiting & Williams, 2013; Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

In their qualitative study of social media gratifications, Whiting and Williams (2013) identified ten different gratifications that users receive through social media including: social interaction, information seeking, relaxing and having fun, passing time, entertainment, communication utility (being able to contact and communicate with people), convenience utility (to connect with people), to express one's own view, to share information, and to know what other people are doing. Of these gratifications, social interaction is the most frequently identified as a social media gratifier followed by the gratification of information seeking and entertainment. Importantly, the intended use of the social media provides precisely the same matching gratifications identified by UG & what search engine optimization does not provide.

SEO has a strong commercial incentive, but it doesn't provide immediate social rewards (i.e., peer validation, sense of belonging) for entrepreneurial communities who rely primarily on social media for media use. As such, Entrepreneurs who have Optimized Google Business Profiles have successfully achieved commercially based Discoverability; however, they were unsuccessful in gaining immediate social rewards, peer recognition, and community validation.

UGT and Collectivist Entrepreneurial Culture

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) suggests that advertisers need to be mindful of the different motivations people have for using the internet when targeting ads via SEO. For instance, people who live in collectivist cultures (e.g., Asia, Africa, South America) tend to have stronger desires for social and integrative gratifications than people who live in individualist cultures (e.g., North America and Europe). Consequently, advertisers in collectivist cultures must use different methods to engage customers and provide customer satisfaction than those advertisers in individualist cultures.

In India, the business network operates using collective cultural practices. Through these methods, the majority of social entrepreneurs will be more strongly motivated to utilise local SEO (search engine optimisation) because of their close-knit business ties and through a peer-supported entrepreneurial system which produces the two strongest influences for each local SEO use intention. The primary influence within UGT (Use & Gratification Theory) is the level of social gratification received from using the available media, whereas the secondary comparison through UTAUT (Unified Technology Acceptance) model is referred to as 'social influence' by comparison to UGT, and both these variables support the use of Local SEO.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper summarizes the mixed-methods doctoral study of local SEO adoption by small-scale entrepreneurs in Chennai. The quantitative phase included a structured survey of 385 small-scale entrepreneurs across four sectors— retail (34.8%), services (27.3%), manufacturing (24.4%) and e-commerce (13.5%)—with a mean age of business of 10.44 years (52% male and 47% female). The researchers measured the UTAUT and DOI constructs using five-point Likert scale items, and found Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.699 to 0.848 indicating good internal consistency. In addition, they also collected data to determine how the entrepreneurs were using the platforms, how social influences on use were measured and the intention to use.

The qualitative phase included a directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of 52 written survey responses from entrepreneurs; of these, 49 had sufficient detail for inclusion in the analysis. There were open-ended items related to how entrepreneurs make decisions regarding digital marketing; whether or not they use SEO; and which platforms are used. To triangulate results, four experienced digital marketing experts (4-15 years) provided structured consultations. All three data sources are self-reported; thus, there is a limitation to relying on self-reports, as they may not accurately represent behaviours on the platforms. While results provide empirical patterns that are consistent with Uses and Gratifications Theory, they cannot be accepted as definitive proof of causal relationships.

The UGT framework serves as a guide to examine existing mixed methods data. This document does not assert that UGT has been directly tested — that is only possible through the use of a purposefully designed gratification assessment instrument — but it shows how UGT can provide a consistent and simple rationale for the platform adoption trends found in the data, adding to what was found in the full doctoral study through UTAUT and DOI framework analysis of the data.

FINDINGS: SOCIAL GRATIFICATION AS THE DRIVER OF PLATFORM SELECTIVITY

Social Media Adoption: Saturated and Socially Gratifying

The survey results show that the hierarchy of platforms corresponds to the social gratifications predicted by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). Social media platforms provide social interaction, connection to peers, community belonging and entertainment – all of which are identified by UGT as the most important factors in determining what media we choose – to a large extent, have been completely adopted by Chennai's small-scale entrepreneurs. 100% of respondent's report using social media for business purposes and 88.1% report having more than one social media account.

Social Influence, which measures how much peers impact decisions about adoption, received the highest overall score across all four sections in the overall questionnaire (M = 3.97 out of 5.0) and was equivalent to 79.3% of the total score on that scale. Three items provided the most agreement: Q25 (I closely monitor industry trends and competitors' digital behaviours.; M = 4.30); Q26 (If I see something working for similar businesses, I would adopt it in a digital tool.; M = 4.22); and Q24 (I base my purchase decisions for digital tools on what other people say.); M = 4.18).

According to the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), people seek out social gratifications by observing their peers as they consume content and what is considered valuable in relation to community currency. We look to other entrepreneurs to determine which tools we should adopt in order to establish social belonging and compete at the same level as others in our industry. Additionally, we will rely primarily on our peers' recommendation in order to receive trusted social guidance. Social media platforms provide access to all three of these gratification-seeking behaviours through the use of visible engagement metrics, shareable success stories, and community-embedded communication. In contrast, there is little-to-no direct facilitation of these social gratification-related behaviours by search engine optimisation (SEO).

Platform / Construct	Usage or Score	UGT Gratification Satisfied	Key Observation
Social media (business use)	100% of respondents	Social interaction, community belonging, peer recognition	Saturated adoption; spontaneous; socially embedded
Multiple social media platforms	88.1% of respondents	Entertainment, information sharing, social currency	Multi-platform use reflects active gratification seeking
Social Influence construct mean	M = 3.97/5.0 (79.3% of max)	Peer validation, social surveillance, community norms	Highest construct mean in the study
SEO adoption intention	M = 4.10/5.0	Commercial discoverability (not social)	Aspirational but not enacted
High-level SEO integration	No respondents reported comprehensive or systematically integrated SEO practices	Limited alignment with immediate and socially visible gratifications	Intention-action gap: 80.5% intend, 0% implement

Table 1: Platform Adoption and UGT Gratification Alignment (N = 385)

The Gratification Gap: What SEO Does Not Provide

The analysis of 49 written survey responses shows an inside view of the discrepancy between social media and SEO-related gratification. When entrepreneurs talk about why they don't use SEO even though they are aware of it, their language is always related to the lack of the social part of gratification that motivates them to use a social media platform.

“No time to learn and apply SEO.” — R10, Female, 53, Services, Micro Scale

“I don't see the need for SEO.” — R08, Male, 47, Retail, 20 years in business

“I don't see the need for SEO.” — R19, Female, Retail, Micro Scale, 6+ years

The phrase ‘I don't need it’ is important. This is not stating that SEO is of no value; it simply means that entrepreneurs feel no need for SEO to meet a need they have. In the terms of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), there is no identified satisfaction of a need that SEO provides for

entrepreneurs in a way that is more effective than how entrepreneurs currently meet their needs through their use of social media. This should not be considered a lack of knowledge, but, instead, indicates they are making a logical choice of which medium to use based on the UGT proposed rationale for why all media are used.

Theme T1 of the content analysis, Complexity and Time as a Key Barrier to Adoption, was present in 80.9% of the responses. According to an interpretation of these results that is consistent with UGT, effort expended to get SEO will be seen by entrepreneurs as being out-of-proportion to the eventual benefits of getting satisfaction from social media learning; therefore, the delay in achieving gratification from using SEO is seen as too much.

Peer Observation as Social Gratification: Theme T3 and the Adoption Mechanism

Social Influence as the Primary Decision Pathway (Theme T3) was found in 74.5% of the total number of written survey responses, the vast majority of which (55.3%) stated that they use other companies in their industry as their main source of digital marketing strategy. This behaviour is an example of competitive monitoring, and it is a form of social gratification in UGT terms because by watching others, we get social gratification through social surveillance, community information, and competitive parity.

A very interesting UGT observation about social surveillance is that it acts in a selective manner. Entrepreneurs observe their peers' digital practices and activities in the same social channels they currently have (social media feeds, community groups, and business groups) where they see examples of social media success (eg: viral posts) frequently, and with clarity. However, when it comes to seeing examples of SEO success (ie: better Google Maps placement), they will not be able to find out through any social platforms (i.e. social media feeds) that a competitor has improved its placement in the search engine, nor will they receive notification that placement improvement has occurred when they are using business networking channels.

Therefore, selective visibility may contribute to increased utilisation of social media by peers, and at the same time, there is no apparent social proof associated with the use of SEO can be seen in the manner that UGT would consider that there is social proof of the use of active media. A number of expert practitioners confirmed this mechanism directly:

"Observing competitors' success with SEO is what drives most small business owners to finally act — they need to see it working for someone like them before they believe it will work for them too." — Expert E3, Digital Marketing Agency Owner, 7 years' experience

The expert defines a gratification deficit with respect to how entrepreneurs perceive SEO's commercial success. Entrepreneurs need to have a visible peer success to be motivated to actively choose a new medium. In terms of the adoption trigger for SEO, entrepreneurs require social gratification (visible peer success); however, the medium does not currently provide visible information about social gratifications in the social channels available for entrepreneurs to make media decisions.

DISCUSSION

An expert defines a gratification deficit in terms of the perception that entrepreneurs have about the commercial success of SEO(S). Entrepreneurs need to see visible success from their peers before they will choose to use a new medium. In relation to the adoption trigger of

SEO(S), entrepreneurs require social gratification (i.e., visible peer success) before the use of the medium. However, the medium does not currently provide visible social gratifications in the social channels available to entrepreneurs when making medium-related decisions.

This study is designed to answer why there is a large disparity between the high level of social media use and low level of SEO(S) adoption by small-scale entrepreneurs in Chennai. Generally speaking, the data from the present study supports the Uses and Gratifications (UGT) theory; however, each researcher must take care when applying the interpretation of this data to the explanatory power of UGT theory or any other theoretical framework since doing so would extend that theoretical framework's explanatory power beyond its originally intended purpose. It is important to note that UGT supports the researcher's interpretation of their data as an indicator, whilst not confirming the researcher's hypothesis. The difference between the two variables: the level of participants' intention to use SEO (80.5%) and the number of participants actually implementing any systematic integration of SEO practices, demonstrates that social gratification is not the sole contributor to this disparity as many respondents provided qualitative examples that even show that SEO does not offer immediate gratification or similar levels of social activity when compared to social media. Additionally, other previously documented barriers to the implementation of SEO, such as difficulty of use, time needed to implement and lack of clear procedures for implementing, all contributed to the lack of implementation of SEO.

There are many constructs from both the UTAUT model (e.g. effort expectancy and facilitating conditions) and the Diffusion of Innovation theory (e.g. complexity and trialability) that explain the lack of implementation of SEO. Together, prior research studies provide clear evidence that structural and cognitive barriers play a strong role in determining and influencing the behaviour of adopting technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Rogers, 2003).

In this way, the role UGT plays in these environments is more accurately conceptualized as an auxiliary or secondary role than a primary or first-order theory of explanation. UGT provides insight into the immediacy of attraction and habitual use of social media platforms, especially in environments characterized as entrepreneurial and socially embedded; however, it does not describe the limitations resulting from lack of adoption of other higher-level or technologically-oriented tools such as Search Engine Optimization (SEO). This is important as UGT has been extensively critiqued for the heavy reliance on self-reported motivation, as well as the fact that much of the explanation for observed behaviour is post hoc (Liestia, 2023; Wu & Kuang, 2021).

Third, while peer observation appears to play an important role as a mechanism identified in the analysed data, interpretation of this role also requires some level of nuance. Although this study has demonstrated that many entrepreneurs look to others for modelling their use of digital platforms through peer observation, we cannot conclude whether these behaviours are motivated by a need for social gratification, the influence of normative pressure, or a need for pragmatic learning strategies. Each of these motivating mechanisms is theoretically distinct and can be better represented within an integrated framework that incorporates UGT (motivation), UTAUT (social influence) and DOI (observability). If peer observation were to

be viewed solely from a gratification perspective, this would create an overly simplistic representation of a complex set of processes.

An important conclusion drawn from this research is the possibility that the visibility of results impacts the pathways that entrepreneurs use to adopt certain means. The public nature of social media success allows peer-to-peer measurement and sharing, while there is less visibility of SEO outcomes and the speed with which they occur is not only slower than with social media. Thus, these differences may play a role in determining how entrepreneurs see the relative value of each form of media, and how signals regarding adoption flow through communities of entrepreneurs. This relationship is inferred but not tested in this study; therefore, this finding should be treated as a hypothesis for further exploration rather than a definitive cause.

The collectivist cultural context of Chennai's entrepreneurial environment serves as an interesting reference point for this paper; therefore, research on these variables is needed. Previous studies have established that in collectivist cultures, the social impact of social influence is greater than in individualistic cultures. This research, however, did not include any cultural measures or comparisons to support the experimental design employed here. Consequently, the cultural interpretation of this research should be viewed only as a contextual addition rather than as a basis for empirical validation.

The conclusions of this study are best explained by the combined use of multiple theoretical frameworks. Social media use seemed to be reinforced by the social context in which the medium is used, particularly by the observed behaviour of peers. In addition, the reasons for limited use of SEO seem to be associated primarily with the structural barriers of difficulty related to implementation, complexity of use and time required for use. Although UGT does provide insight into why some digital platforms are more engaging than others, it is insufficient on its own to account for why certain digital platforms were not used. Therefore, this study proposes an integrated theoretical framework including motivational, cognitive and structural influences for understanding digital platform selection in entrepreneurship.

CONCLUSION

Using a mixed methods approach, this research investigates the difference between high levels of social media use and low levels of search engine optimization use among small entrepreneurs in Chennai. Findings reveal that social media is used in many aspects of day-to-day business activity and has been influenced by factors such as visibility and vis-a-vis other peers; however, search engine optimization use remains low, even though there is a high degree of awareness and intent to use it.

It cannot be inferred from this study that there is one single cause leading to the disconnect between social media and search engine optimization. It appears that there are many reasons driving the disconnect between social media's acceptance by entrepreneurs and search engine

optimization's acceptance by entrepreneurs. It seems likely that social media offers entrepreneurs more immediacy and visibility in terms of their interactions with peers than does search engine optimization. This likely explains the difference in both the types of interactions and social media's high level of acceptance compared to search engine optimization due to the differences in the investment of time, technical knowledge required, and the time it takes to achieve an outcome from using the two forms of media.

The role of Uses and Gratifications Theory will provide an understanding of how socio-culturally embedded social practices resulting in perceptions of usefulness and engagement that develop over time through interaction will shape how entrepreneurs perceive the two forms of media, but the role of Uses and Gratifications Theory should not be used to confirm the findings of this study; however, the findings of this study can be validated through the development of a framework that incorporates the three theoretical perspectives of Uses and Gratifications Theory, the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology, and the Diffusion of Innovations.

Outcome Visibility May Influence How Entrepreneurs use Advertising Systems One of the major findings of this research suggests that outcome visibility is important in the extent to which people will adopt an advertising system. Improving the visibility, shareability, and comparability of SEO outcome results among an entrepreneur's network may enhance their perceived relevance and ultimately enhance their likelihood of adopting an advertising system. Future research should empirically validate this hypothesis through using objective direct measures as well as behavioral data and cross-cultural comparative analysis.

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