

Adoption of Local Search Engine Optimization (SEO) among Small-Scale Entrepreneurs in Chennai: Thematic Qualitative Analysis of Expert Insights

K R Lalitha¹, Prof. Dr. T. Tripura Sundari²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Communication and Journalism, Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, India

Email: tripura9.cj@gmail.com

²Research Supervisor, Department of Communication and Journalism, Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, India

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ABSTRACT

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Search engines are essential to merchandising because they are the primary gateways to online information. Businesses vantage them to increase visibility, drive website traffic, generate leads, and finally boost sales. A search engine is a software system designed to carry out web searches. It helps users find information on the internet by indexing websites and retrieving relevant results based on user queries. A search engine scans the index of the website for relevant content searched by the user based on the relevance, authority and user engagement. Search engines play a crucial role in digital marketing through the practice of Search Engine Marketing which includes Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to improve a website's visibility and help attract targeted traffic in order to build brand credibility.

The present study investigates the level of awareness and understanding of Local Search Engine Optimization (SEO) among small-scale entrepreneurs in Chennai, with a specific focus on how digital visibility determines business growth in the local market. Using a thematic qualitative research approach, insights were gathered through in-depth interviews with digital marketing experts and consultants working closely with small businesses. The Qualitative study is aimed at understanding the level of awareness, challenges, and perceptions surrounding the adoption of Search Engine Optimization (SEO), integration of SEO Techniques with social media pages and websites among small-scale entrepreneurs in Chennai through a SEO Experts perspective. Using purposive sampling An open-ended interview of twenty five SEO experts was conducted and the Key themes were identified as perceived complexity and cost, misconceptions about social media's sufficiency, competitor's influence, localized strategies, and the long-term benefits of SEO. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase Thematic Analysis was employed for the study to understand the patterns and themes. The research is based on Diffusion of Innovation Theory to understand how new ideas spread and adopted and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology to understand why people accept or reject technology. The findings highlight focused digital literacy programs and simplified SEO packages to support micro-business owners as the need of the hour.

Keywords: Local SEO; Small scale enterprises; Digital Marketing Awareness; Online visibility; MSMEs.

Introduction

In today's busy digital world, where consumers have immediate access to vendors' potential products and services in seconds, establishing a strong online presence is important for businesses of all kinds - especially small businesses operating in large cities like Chennai. Customers expect businesses to not only exist, but to be visible, reachable, and interacted with on the web, and they ultimately rely on search engines (Google) to find local products and services. It is no longer a luxury to have local SEO (Search Engine Optimization) strategies for small business owners in Chennai, it has become a requirement.

Local SEO marketing strategies to help your business stand out in an increasingly competitive online market, from optimally listing your Google My Business profile page, using hyper-local social media and paid advertising on Facebook and Instagram, and getting client testimonials to establish credibility. Today, small business owners in Chennai have far greater access to online marketplaces than ever before, thanks to how the digital age has changed the business environment. Still, many micro and small business owners rely predominantly on social media platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp, failing to demonstrate even the great potential for their business when utilizing SEO. Due to various barriers, such as a lack of digital marketing knowledge, lack of specialized training, a lack of access to digital devices, a lack of agency, amongst other barriers, many small business owners will continue to be challenged by all of the nuances that come with establishing their business and brand online and as a result, will continue to leave market share - and sales - on the table.

Literature Review

Digital Transformation and SEO for MSMEs

Senjith (2022) carried out empirical investigations for small organic stores with headquarters in Chennai, and data on small-scale entrepreneurs were available. The penetration of digital and social media for small-scale entrepreneurs is deep but adopting structured Local SEO could not be widespread. Most entrepreneurs continued to use social media like Facebook and Instagram regularly but were not implementing local SEO tactics, hence negatively affecting their discoverability centered on hyper local customers (Senjith, 2022).

Dixit (2023) emphasized the importance of digital marketing, including SEO, for MSMEs development in India through a recent study. In the study, a statistically significant relationship was observed between developing SEO practice and small business growth of MSMEs, encouraging local optimization to increase visibility and revenue (Dixit, 2023).

SEO Awareness and Entrepreneurial Limitations

Guravaiah (2017) found a high commitment to grow MSMEs among new entrepreneurs. Although they have a strong intention to establish their own MSME, new entrepreneurs possess low or no knowledge and practices regarding local SEO or digital marketing strategies. This definitely restricts them from building MSP for competitive success in the contemporary digital market (Guravaiah, 2017).

Ray (2011) noted that the e-commerce boom creates room for small-scale businesses to grow in India but has restricted growth for entrepreneurs in cities like Chennai. The absence of technical skills that restricts SEO adaptation and certain knowledge will deter their entrepreneurial success (Ray, 2011).

iStudioTech (2025) went on to particularly emphasize that for small businesses in Chennai, Local SEO has evolved from being an option to a requirement, where local search visibility is directly proportional to customer acquisition and business survival (iStudioTech, 2025).

Specific case studies Based in Chennai

Raj and Amutha (2020) examine entrepreneurial behavior in Chennai and explain how most micro-businesses fail to utilize digital means such as Local SEO to their benefit, primarily because of a lack of technical know-how and unavailable professionals for hire to assist. Additionally, straightforward practices like local keyword optimization or Google Business profile management were overlooked (Raj and Amutha, 2020).

Vinodan and Meera (2021) examined social entrepreneurship activity in Chennai and suggested good digital presence, such as local SEO optimization, was a parameter to enhance trust and participation within the community, particularly for grassroots-level businesses (Vinodan & Meera, 2021).

Strategies and Recommendations

Singh et al. (2020) suggested organized local SEO tactics such as leveraging Google My Business (GMB), citation building, and local review management can boost MSME visibility in local searches eventually by 30%. According to the authors, small businesses underestimated constantly updating content consistency that is digital content and SEO-related (Singh et al., 2020).

Weboin (2024) also presented case studies indicating enormous benefits for startups following structured SEO and content marketing strategies: 40% traffic boost for SaaS startups and 50% sales growth for e-commerce startups in Chennai upon local SEO optimization (Weboin, 2024).

Krishnamoorthy et al. (2025) suggested MSMEs embrace agile digital marketing models wherein startups keep experimenting with localized content, online advertisements, and favorite SEO keywords with localized natural language over time, making their digital presence a lot quicker and better aligning with customer search behavior (Krishnamoorthy et al., 2025).

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory (2003) which describes how new ideas and technologies spread through communities, and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which examines user behavior, perceived usefulness, and ease of use. The study applies Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework when interpreting qualitative data.

Diffusion of Innovation Theory

In line with Rogers (2003), innovations are disseminated by categories of adopters: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. The relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, and observability influences the rate of adoption.

UTAUT Model

UTAUT model presents Performance Expectancy, Effort Expectancy, Social Influence, and Facilitating Conditions as essential determinants of the acceptance of technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

Methodology

This research borrows from Rogers' Theory of Diffusion of Innovation (2003), which accounts for the spread of new technologies and ideas in communities, as well as the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which addresses behavior, perceived utility, and ease of use. The research also borrows Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis guidelines for interpreting qualitative data.

This is qualitative research based on purposive sampling. Twenty five Chennai-based SEO professionals with more than three years of experience have been interviewed through semi-structured questions. The interviews have been audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic method. The research maintained anonymity and confidentiality for all participants.

5. Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Operational Challenges for Small Scale Businesses

Entrepreneurs lacked SEO awareness and also lacked resources.

"Small businesses have a tendency to overlook keyword research and social profile optimization, missing chances to grow their visibility" (Expert 3).

(UTAUT: Effort Expectancy and lack of Facilitating Conditions.)

- **Theme 1.1: Perceived Complexity and Cost** - Participants mentioned that entrepreneurs perceive SEO as costly and time-consuming, discouraging them from acquiring it.

"Hiring an SEO expert is costly... SEO is time-consuming for results." (Expert 14)

- **Theme 1.2: Misconceptions and Lack of Awareness** - Most associate visibility with social media presence and do not know SEO's function.

"Social media is sufficient... They are not aware how search engines work." (Expert 22)

Theme 2: Evolution and Future Directions of Digital Marketing

Experts pointed out swift digital transformations such as AI, voice search, and social commerce.

"Digital marketing is constantly changing, with AI-driven personalization and voice search offering new possibilities for businesses" (Expert 1). (Diffusion of Innovation: Early Adopters adopting AI trends.)

Theme 3: Strategic Integration of SEO and Social Media

Experts highlighted the alignment of SEO and social media platforms.

"Merging SEO with social media enhances online visibility and enhances brand credibility. It helps to reach more individuals and drive qualified traffic" (Expert 13).

(UTAUT: Performance Expectancy driving adoption.)

Theme 4: Local SEO Strategies for Visibility Enhancement

Localized techniques like review generation and GMB optimization were instrumental in visibility.

"Local business listings and Google My Business optimized profiles are instrumental in serving customers in target locations" (Expert 8).

(UTAUT: Social Influence and Diffusion Observability.)

- **Theme 4.1: Localized and Low-Cost Strategies**

Solutions such as Google Maps, geo-targeted keywords, and multilingual content are regarded as entry-level solutions by experts.

"A Tamil-language blog and Google Business listing can go a long way." (Expert 25).

Theme 5: Role of Content and Personalization in Trust Development

Content marketing was viewed as an instrument of authority and engagement.

"Content marketing — through blogs, videos, and guides — makes startups become authorities in their field" (Expert 5).

(UTAUT: Performance Expectancy and Effort Expectancy.)

Topic 6: Social and Market Influence

Founders tend to take cues from friends or competitors instead of deciding smartly.

"They start inquiring about SEO only when they see their competitor better placed.

Theme 7: Personalization and Content as Trust Building Tools

Personalized educational materials and learning resources were viewed as long-term trust-builders. *"Use local keywords in blog posts. Make videos and tutorials to demonstrate your expertise." (Expert 9) "Content marketing establishes authority and trust and also serves your SEO purposes." (Expert 11)*

Theoretical support in this case is with both Performance Expectancy (UTAUT) and the Trialability construct of Diffusion Theory: high-quality content enables audiences to "try" a brand in a safe way before committing commercially.

Discussion:

1. Results indicate that Local SEO uptake by small scale business is a multifaceted innovation process, driven by perceived benefits, ease of use, peer pressure, and infrastructural support — in accordance with both Diffusion of Innovation Theory and UTAUT.
2. Innovators and early adopters (Rogers, 2003) in Chennai are using AI and advanced SEO techniques.

3. High perceived performance expectancy (Venkatesh et al., 2003) triggers integration of social media and SEO.
4. High perceived effort and absence of facilitating conditions restrict diffusion of SEO and social media among the late majority.
5. Observability of successful peers (e.g., startups reaping rewards from SEO) hastens adoption.

Evolution and Future Trends of Digital Marketing

The digital marketing evolution is occurring rapidly, driven by (among other factors) AI-powered personalization, voice search and social commerce. All the experts concur that small businesses embracing new digital tools and methodologies early on enable them to become "innovators" or "early adopters" in their entrepreneurial community (Rogers, 2003). Slow-to-adopt small businesses falling into the "late majority" of adopters and losing competitive ground.

Strategic SEO and Social Media Coupling

The integration of SEO and social media was found to be synergistic, as opposed to complementary. Specialists noted that content is optimally designed and supported by social actions appropriate to optimizing traffic and trust. This aligns with the construct of Performance Expectancy in UTAUT — these business owners are placing their faith in comprehensive digital strategies to assist their business' performance (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

Technical and Operating Challenges to MSMEs

Challenges ranged from zero SEO experience, low budgets, and difficulty in finding expert assistance amidst continually changing algorithms. Concerning the UTAUT Model this would fall under Effort Expectancy and Facilitating Conditions. The entrepreneurs experienced SEO as a technical process and could not readily have access to cost-effective expert advice.

As per the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, the lack of transparent results and trialability slowed down the adoption rate of SEO among the lagging entrepreneurs.

Local SEO Practices to Enhance Adoption

The tactics as mentioned above consisted of local keyword targeting, GMB optimization, customer review management, and localized content. Specialists confirmed that Social Influence (UTAUT) - peer success stories and industry norms were a key element to convincing entrepreneurs to engage in local SEO.

The early adopters revealed a greater increase in their visibility thus were positioned on the early adopters of the Diffusion of Innovation curve.

Recommendations:

This study recommends:

- Training Programs: Local SEO best practices workshops for Small Scale Businesses.
- Policy Support: Subsidized digital marketing consulting for Small Scale Businesses.
- Awareness Campaigns: Circulate success stories to maximize social influence.

Limitations and Future Research

The research forms a part of a mixed method that consists of a survey among Chennai based entrepreneurs. The research is grounded in expert views and not on direct interviews of entrepreneurs. Longitudinal methods, mixed-methods designs, or case studies with small business owners can be used in future studies to offer deeper insights.

Conclusion

Local SEO provides a revolutionary chance for small-scale business owners in Chennai. Adoption is influenced by the perceived value, complexity, social norm, and infrastructural availability as outlined in the Diffusion of Innovation and UTAUT models. Combating operational impediments and enabling success exposure can accelerate widespread adoption, increasing MSMEs' digital competitiveness.

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