

# Understanding the Motivations for SMEs in South Africa to Adopt Social Media

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**Abstract:** Since the covid-19 pandemic in 2020, many businesses have relied on social media to stay abreast with the latest news, developments and to predict the future world of business. Many countries around the world instigated lockdown restrictions to curb the spread of the covid-19 virus, and social media platforms were very popular tools used for spreading the news. The proliferation of social media has also increasingly drawn the attention of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa to improve their efforts of sustaining their businesses. Social media platforms have become popular in the business environments for their ability to increase market reach, transfer knowledge, and sustain the business. While many benefits of social media to enhance business performance have been studied, there are also skeptics on data privacy issues that social media brings to the business. In the SME sectors in South Africa, social media are adopted due to their cost effectiveness and ease of use. However, little is known about the effect of data privacy issues on SME business performance. The literature of social media adoption indicates that the older generation of SME owners are skeptical about sharing their confidential business insight on social media platforms. This is despite the availability of many other literature studies that report on the increase of social media studies to enhance business sustainability. This study aims to produce knowledge for understanding the key motivations of SMEs to adopting social media despite the existence of data privacy issues on social media. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 13 SME entrepreneurs who were purposively selected based on their knowledge of social media, experience of its application in the business, industries and premises of the SME business in South Africa. The results of the interviews indicated that SMEs are generally aware of the data privacy issues surrounding the use of social media, and the adoption rate differs from younger and older generation of SME entrepreneurs.

**Key words:** Social Media; Data privacy, Small and Medium Enterprises

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## 1. Introduction and background

The Covid-19 pandemic has devastated many economic activities globally. The first Covid-19 case was reported in China in the year 2019 (Kuckertz and Brändle, 2022). Subsequently, the virus quickly spread many parts of the world. Many countries implemented lockdown regulations to curb the spread of the virus. As a result, the Small and Mediums Enterprises (SME) were mostly affected by lockdown regulations and had to device means of remaining in sustainable, despite having limited finances and resources (Fubah and Moos 2022). Recently, studies paid particular attention to digital technologies that have a potential to enable SMEs to cope with effects of the Covid-19 pandemic (Gregurec, Tomičić Furjan and Tomičić-Pupek, 2021). In particular, studies focused on social media platforms as rapidly growing digital communication platforms which continue to attract SMEs (Sedalo, Boateng and Kosiba, 2022).

Although social media seems to be ideal digital communication platforms for SME businesses, studies show the lack of evidence for measuring the effectiveness of social media on SME performance (Mamorobela, 2021). Social media platform are diverse and SMEs need to identify those that are aligned to their performance expectations to achieve success (Hanafizadeh, Shafia and Bohlin, 2021). This is because social media platforms are also criticised for failing to protect data privacy (Safi, Movaghar and Ghorbani, 2022). Rathore et al (2017) argues that social media service providers are the biggest violators of data privacy. Thus this paper seeks to understand the motivations for SMEs in South Africa to adopt social media, despite the issues of data privacy. The paper is structure into seven main sections, namely, the introduction and background in section one, the research problem in section two, the research questions in section three, the literature review in section four; the research methodology in section five, the results of the study in section six, and the implications and recommendation for future research in section seven.

## 2. Research problem

With the growing number of literature reporting on the adoption of social media in SMEs, there are still sceptics surrounding its use in some parts of the business. In particular, data privacy on social media has become the biggest reason for concern because social media platforms are criticised for failing to provide secure data privacy mechanisms (Persia and D'Auria, 2017). It is from this perspective that this study was undertaken to understand the key motivations of SMEs to adopt social media despite the data privacy issues associated with the platforms. The study seeks to produce useful knowledge for academics and practitioners to advance research in social media studies and their applications in the SME environments.

### 3. Research questions

This study aims to address the following research questions:

- (i) What are the determinants of using social media to sustain the SME businesses?
- (ii) How do SMEs address the data privacy issues of social media?

### 4. Literature review

The literature review section starts by presenting the overview of SMEs in South Africa, followed by the use of social media during and post Covid-19, the determinants of social media use, and the data privacy mechanisms on social media.

#### 4.1. Overview of the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa

In South Africa, SMEs are defined as private business entities with one or more owners who are responsible for both business strategy and operations (Goldstuck, 2014). They employ between one and 200 staff, and make an annual turnover of R500K to R5m (DNT, 2017). Studies report that the SME business in South Africa creates well over 50 percent job opportunities for the youth and the unemployed, and about 34 percent contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country (Rajagopaul, Magwentshu and Kalidas, 2020). Moreover, 95 percent of private businesses in South Africa are classified in the category of SMEs. However, the SMEs in South Africa lack resources to sustain themselves and are often the least resilient at the time of economic crisis like Covid-19 pandemic.

Recently, challenges of the SMEs in South Africa mounted even more when the government implemented Covid-19 lock down regulations to contain the virus (De Villiers, Cerbone and Van Zijl, 2020). The lockdown regulations resulted in many SMEs having to explore low cost technologies like social media to be able to engage with their clients digitally to continue with business, despite facing covid-19 challenges.

#### 4.2. The use of social media during and post Covid-19 pandemic

Social media is commonly defined as “all the devices and platforms that allow users globally to virtually create and share information with each other” (Brooks and Gupta, 2013). The term devices in this case refer to all computing technologies, and the term platforms refers to all virtual environments where users connect to exchange information using the devices. Social media was first coined in the early 2000s as a technology that allows people who connect on the internet to create and manipulate their own content (Tsiakali, 2018). During the Covid-19 pandemic, social media platforms have been used extensively by SMEs to communicate and collaborate digitally (Sedalo et al, 2022). Covid-19 is defined as a deadly virus caused by a coronavirus known as SARS-CoV-2 (WHO, 2020).

Covid-19 left a devastating effect on the SME businesses in South Africa. Regular lockdown restriction were implemented by the South African government to contain the virus from spreading. This resulted in many SMEs losing revenue as they could not conduct their businesses during lockdown (Rajagopaul et al, 2020). The availability of low cost social media platforms come to the rescue for many SMEs in South Africa. Many SMEs used social media for communication, marketing and collaborating with others digitally, despite facing covid-19 challenges. This business phenomenon gave rise to the concept of cyber entrepreneurship.

Cyber entrepreneurship is a business phenomenon that enables entrepreneurs to conduct business on virtual environments (Tajvidi and Tajvidi, 2020). The phenomenon encourages SME entrepreneurs to leverage digital technology to become competitive. Undoubtedly, SMEs are quick to adopt cyber entrepreneurship due to their flexibility in how they execute their business strategies and operations. As such, many SMEs in South Africa are using social media technologies as part of their cyber entrepreneurship to cope with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Several studies show that a growing number of SMEs use social media since the year 2020 when Covid-19 started (Sedalo et al, 2022; Gregurec et al, 2021). The determinants of social media use were also studied in some literature.

### 4.3. Determinants of social media use in SMEs

The use of social media in SMEs is associated with several factors which have a potential to improve business performance. For example, Ainin et al (2015) suggests that the compatibility, low cost, and interactivity factors of facebook allows SMEs to reduce costs of marketing, information accessibility, customer service, and customer relations. Wamba and Carter (2016) discovered that factors like innovativeness, size of the SME, age of the owner, and the industry sector contribute to the adoption of social media by SMEs. Mamorobela and Buckley (2019) suggests that organisational factors like management style, limited access to finance, communication channel; and technological factors like sharing, reputation, relationships, and target audience are crucial for social media strategies to be a success. Jokonya and Mugisha (2019) suggests that low cost, connectivity, and relationships are the technology factors; management support, operational support, and technical support are the organisational factors; and competition and external support are the environmental factors that play a big role for SMEs in the retail sector to improve performance.

While studies on social media determinants are growing, the critics of social media's inability to protect user's private data are brewing (Safi et al, 2022). Data privacy and information security are a huge concern for businesses. Many are losing a large portion of their financial investments due to data mismanagement. IBM (2022) reports that over 45% of data breaches are a result of stolen user credentials on cloud based technologies like social media platforms.

### 4.4. Data privacy mechanisms on Social Media

The South African government enforced data security policies on businesses that deal with personal information. Regulations like the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) are in place to ensure that organisations do not misuse people's personal data (POPIA, 2022). Due to the large volumes of personal data being shared on social media, there is a growing interest on data privacy mechanisms applied on different social media platforms (Safi et al, 2022). Since social media are deployed on the internet, it is the responsibility of the social media service providers to ensure that there is no violation of data privacy. Studies report that social media service providers often violate data privacy due to their inability to strengthen data privacy mechanisms on their social media platforms (Persia and D'Auria, 2017).

Various data privacy schemes for social media have been proposed in literature. For example, Yang and Jia (2013) proposes and data privacy scheme that uses multi-authority attribute-based access control in the cloud. Jung et al (2014) proposed a semi-anonymity access control with full anonymous access-based encryption for cloud environments to protect both the data privacy and the privacy of people's identities. Yang et al (2016) proposed a secure cloud data sharing scheme using the end-to-end ciphertext-policy attribute-based encryption (CP-ABE) which is built on the conditional proxy re-encryption (CPRE). Li et al (2017) proposed a lightweight secure data sharing scheme for mobile cloud processing that uses CP-ABE to control access from the external proxy servers, transferring the majority of computational load from mobile devices. Fugkeaw and Sato (2018) proposed a special access control model based on combining CP-ABE and role-based access control (RBAC) to produce an effective key update function in data outsourcing environments. Schillinger and Schindelbauer (2019) proposed an end-to-end encryption method that uses public key Rivest-Shamir-Adleman (RSA) encryption as well as advanced encryption standard (AES) symmetric key encryption algorithm for online messaging and chat services on social networking sites. Abdulla and Bakiras (2019) proposed a flexible system based on encryption-based access control that provides security and privacy for users named as hide in the crowd (HITC) to allow users to decrypt the data they post on social networking platforms based on access control with appropriate granularity levels. Yang et al (2020) proposed a hierarchical blockchain-based approach and CP-ABE scheme for social media privacy that provides users with a choice of fine-grained features along with protecting their data on semi-hosted servers in social networking. Zhang et al (2021) proposed a blockchain-based privacy-preserving framework for online social networking platforms which uses hybrid blockchain and public-key encryption to prevent damages to the privacy of users and to provide social networking users with security in sharing, retrieving, and accessing data. Li, Zhu and Fu (2022) proposed an intelligent privacy protection for online social networking users to protect the privacy of the location and the trajectory of users who use social networking platforms for educational purposes. Safi et al (2022) proposed a data encryption scheme for mobile social networking that enhanced data security in an end-to-end manner.

Given the abundance of literature reporting on social media determinants and data privacy mechanisms, this study seeks to produce knowledge for understanding the key motivations of SMEs for adopting social media, despite issues of data privacy. To enable an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, the study followed the

qualitative methodological procedures that are inductive in nature and focus on subjectivity and different perspectives of SME entrepreneurs.

## 5. Research methodology

Research needs to follow a rigorous methodological process to achieve more realistic results. Creswell and Creswell (2018) distinguishes between three research approaches that are commonly used in social science research, namely the qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach. The qualitative approach focuses on the subjective and sensitive insights to understand reality, and the quantitative approach understands reality by being objective and focusing on statistical facts, hard data, and tangible evidence. The mixed methods approach combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches in one study to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Rahman, 2020). Scholars need to identify the domain of the study to produce more realistic results (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2019). Although the mixed methods approach sound ideal for producing a holistic knowledge of the phenomenon, it is very cumbersome and time consuming (Mamorobela, 2022).

The qualitative approach was more relevant for this study to ascertain the perceptions of SME entrepreneurs on their motivations for adopting social media despite the data privacy issues associated with the platforms. Open-ended interviews were conducted with 13 SME entrepreneurs who were purposively selected based on their age groups, knowledge of social media, and the application of social media in their respective businesses. The age groups were distributed between the young generation who are younger than 50 years of age and the older generation who are 50 and above years of age. In particular, the maximum variance purposive sample technique was applied due to its ability to identify samples that have a potential to provide rich and different perspectives to strengthen the research (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

The interviews were recorded digitally using an audio recorder and transcribed for analysis on Atlas.ti version 22. The data was analysed using the five step thematic analysis process suggested by Archer et al (2017). The steps include, (1) text familiarisation where each interview data was transcribed and cleaned to ensure confidentiality by allocating fictitious names instead of the real names of the SMEs and the respondents, (2) coding of data in the transcripts on Atlas.ti and generation of the codebook, (3) revision of the codes to check for repetitions and similarities in the codes, (4) creation of themes by grouping the codes that address the same research questions, and (5) revision of the final themes to check and correct existing repetitions and similarities in the themes.

## 6. Research findings and discussions

The thematic analysis process was guided by research questions of the study. The analysis process resulted in two primary themes being addressed and synthesised with the literature.

### (i) Theme 1: Determinants of using social media in SMEs

The respondents were asked questions relating to the determinants of using social media in their organisations to ascertain their motivations for using social media. It was discovered that social media affords SMEs the ability to market their businesses even to markets were ordinarily out of reach for them due to their limited resources. These sentiments were expressed as follows:

*'Well the effectiveness is the instant reach that one can have. So you have a high number of people on social media that you can reach instantly, so that you can clarify issues as quickly as possible...'* [respondent 1]

*'We sort of selected those platforms because of the number of people that will find in those platforms. Because of that, we then decided to say, look, is it worth it to share what we are doing on social media, but also we believe that the business that we are in is more attractive to young people. And the young people are the people that today you'll find in the social media platforms. So then it makes sense for us to share our stories there, in that sense, we also attract people to watch what we're doing. But also we sort of share the direction that as a company we're taking and in one way or the other then contribute towards knowledge of understanding that this is possible. It can be done in South Africa (sic)'* [respondent 3].

*'...So it makes it easier for us as SMEs in the print industry to utilise it as another output tool that can present information to a large audience in a simplified manner'* [respondent 11].

*'We do a lot of international calls and the like, so Skype works for us a lot, others like Facebook, WhatsApp, etc. we just use on an ad-hoc basis. I see a lot of young stars engaging on these platforms more than us because we are slow to catch-up, hahaha' [respondent 13]*

Odoom et al (2017) also attests to these sentiments and add that SMEs in emerging markets continue are even conducting their marketing campaigns on social media platforms. Indeed, connectivity and interactivity of social media are part of the determinants of its use, especially in the times of covid-19 pandemic. A view on connectivity was shared by the respondents as follows:

*'One of the things that we do a lot is most of our meetings, are online meetings because we've got clients in the USA, because of where they are, or even in GAUTENG because of traffic, we will typically either use Skype, or our preferred one is either use Zoom quite a lot, okay, Because then we can record the meetings and then get back to it, we also use the Hangouts a lot' [respondent 4].*

*'People tend to focus quickly, because they're looking at the time, because its scheduled, say about 30 minutes to one hour, and they want to make sure that the time is used profitably... And you'll find that typically, even the meeting that's scheduled for an hour, now turns out to be 30 minutes - 45 minutes' [respondent 10].*

It was interesting to discover that there is a direct compatibility between social media and the business processes of SMEs. These views were shared by respondents as follows:

*'That is the main tool today, probably the main that is easily affordable, okay, especially for us SMEs. Because if we were to look at someone say why don't you use your television or other platforms, but those ones then you need to pay and as an SME, then you find it difficult to that. So, Social Media becomes the best option in that sense that you can then be able to utilise it, in the manner that it benefits your organisation' [respondent 3]*

*'... in the process of that discussion we then use the tools within those online services, yes to either share information, capture it online, then later we then compile it, okay. To make sense of it, but because that's the business we're in in terms of managing data, social media is compatible in that sense' [respondent 4]*

*'Like 60% of our meetings are over Skype and Zoom and then everything else is over the telephone and we are able to meet our service levels with our clients accordingly' [respondent 8]*

Evidently, the determinants of social media use are perceived to serve as motivations for SME entrepreneurs to adopt the platforms. The issue of data privacy on social media was also discussed in-depth by the SME entrepreneurs to address theme 2 of the study.

(ii) Theme 2: Social media's data privacy issues

Safety-sensitive behaviour of SME entrepreneurs in different age groups were investigated to ascertain their perceptions on data privacy mechanisms of social media. The research respondents were asked questions regarding their data privacy requirements to ascertain if the existing social media platforms are capable to cater for such requirements. They expressed their views as follows:

*'I'm very sceptical on LinkedIn. It's a lot of people connected to each other every day. But I don't see how those conditions get used in business. A lot of companies now especially SMEs, they you flooding LinkedIn, with marketing messages, about their products. They're being sent to the world. How much of that world is interested in what that company does?' [respondent 2]*

*'My first email address was a dot alt as it was called those days. One of probably 20,000 on the planet. So I've grown up with the technology. So the first question is what is defined to social media? And in these days is publications like Facebook, LinkedIn and various platforms, Instagram, All the rest of the collaboration. Yeah, it was systems that I use, because I find the machine useful business. Facebook is interesting that is now it started after the social media platform. A lot of companies now have the corporate websites on Facebook. Yeah, absolutely. But do have a formal old fashioned website aswell' [respondent 6].*

*'If you want an old fart opinion! And I've seen it many times over 30 years of working on the IT game, the modern wave is very easy to try and subdues the old way. Yeah, so email is old, is legacy, why use it? Yeah. Most of the business platforms are Email based. And modern social media platforms cannot replace. I've just picked up a new project. I need to have a contract. How do we discuss that contract? We discuss it on Email. We also use Skype' [respondent 13]*

Evidently, there is a lot of scepticism from senior SME entrepreneurs on the use of social media for business. Despite the existing literature on data privacy mechanisms available for social media platforms, the elderly SME entrepreneurs are still very slow adopters of social media platforms and usually find it difficult to trust such platforms with their business sensitive data.

## 7. Implications and recommendations

The results of the study has implications on scholars who advance research on social media to understand issues affecting different age groups of SME entrepreneurs, and to provide generic mechanisms for social media adoption by SME entrepreneurs of all age groups. The study has practical implication on SME entrepreneurs to identify social media platforms that are compatible to their SME operations. In particular, future studies can develop models for understanding the determinants of social media use and offer practical guideline to measure the effectiveness of social media for SMEs.

## 8. Conclusions

This study discovered that different age groups of SME entrepreneurs have different views on the adoption and use of social media platforms. The young generation are very quick to adopt social media platforms to share marketing content and derive new knowledge by networking with others. However, the elderly generation of SME entrepreneurs are very sceptical to conduct their business on social media mostly because they don't trust the platforms with their company's sensitive data. This study presents a gap in literature for future studies to develop models of social media adoption to be applied generally by SMEs entrepreneurs of all ages.

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