

The Influence of Social Media Algorithms on Small and Medium Enterprises in South Africa

Authors:

Isaac Nkoana (nkoanaisaac21@gmail.com)

University of Limpopo, Polokwane, South Africa

Kgalema Abbyton Mashamaite (kgalema.mashamaite@ul.ac.za)

University of Limpopo, Polokwane, South Africa

Abstract:

The article aims to investigate the influence of social media algorithms on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa which creates ability for SMEs to adapt to the evolving landscape. Algorithms are rules, signals, and data that govern the operation of social platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. These algorithms determine how content is filtered, ranked, selected, and recommended to users. Algorithms can play an important role in selecting what information is considered to be relevant to SMEs. This means that SME owners will be able to access information related to their business, which helps in terms of adapting to the changing environment. However, the article found that SMEs find it difficult to take advantage of algorithms due to challenges such as choosing the right platforms, balancing multiple platforms, expensive data, and lack of knowledge, which limits their ability to adapt to evolving landscapes. This article adopted a qualitative research methodology. It argues that a good understanding of social media algorithms can enable SMEs to adapt to the evolving landscape in South Africa. It recommends that SMEs should conduct thorough market research to select the most appropriate social media platforms for their target audience, instead of spreading themselves too thin across multiple platforms.

Keywords:

Social Media, Algorithms, Social Media Algorithms, Small and Medium Enterprises, Darwinism.

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Introduction

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are crucial tools for ensuring poverty reduction levels, creating jobs, and accelerating economic growth in both developing countries including Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa (Nkoana & Mashamaite, 2024; Abisuga-Oyekunle, Patra & Muchie, 2020). According to Muriithi (2017), SMEs make up more than 90% of all businesses and 50% of all jobs in Africa. In Kenya, SMEs employ approximately 85% of the workforce (about 7.5 million Kenyans of the current total employment) (Amran & Mwasiaji, 2019). In Zimbabwe, SMEs comprise 70% of economic activities, employ roughly 62% and approximately 50% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Dlamini & Schutte, 2020). South African SMEs contribute up to 52% to 57% of the nation's GDP, which shows that SMEs have the potential to reduce poverty (Madzimure, 2020). However, SMEs are unable to adapt to the changing environment. As a result, SMEs closed within five years of operation (Saah & Musvoto, 2020). A high number of people lose jobs through retrenchment. This results in many South African locals living below the poverty line or facing poverty.

Social media algorithms are an inevitable choice for enterprises to keep afloat, adapting to the changing landscape, competitive, and achieve sustainability in the SMEs (Yang, Chang, Huang & Mardani, 2023). In recent years, the role of social media algorithms cannot be ignored in helping SMEs adapt to the changing environment in South Africa (Jayadatta & Majeed, 2024). Nevertheless, SMEs often do not have the capacity to take advantage of social media algorithms due to challenges associated with social media algorithms. These challenges include choosing the right platforms, balancing multiple platforms, expensive data and a lack of knowledge, which limits their ability to adapt to the evolving landscapes (Salminen, Hopf, Chowdhury, Jung, Almerexhi & Jansen, 2020). SMEs in South Africa may struggle to grow and create jobs and reduce poverty if they are not able to effectively use social media algorithms (Jayadatta & Majeed, 2024). The purpose of this paper is to investigate the influence of social media algorithms on SMEs in South Africa.

Literature Review

Algorithms in Social Media

Algorithms analyse user behaviour, such as likes, shares, comments, and time spent on content, to recommend posts, videos, and other content that may interest users (Yanti, Subagja, Nurhayati, Rezeki, Limbong, & Hamid, 2024; Lee, Hosanagar & Nair, 2018; Maia, Almeida & Almeida, 2008). This personalization keeps users engaged by showing them relevant content. Social media platforms often use algorithms to determine the order in which posts appear in a user's feed (Lischka, 2021). This ranking is influenced by factors such as the reliability of posts, the user's relationship with the poster, and the overall popularity or engagement of the content. Algorithms play a crucial role in targeted

advertising. By analysing user data, such as demographics, interests, and online behaviour, platforms can show ads to specific audiences who are more likely to be interested in them (Bandy, 2021).

Algorithms help identify and filter inappropriate content, such as hate speech, misinformation, and spam (Gongane, Munot, & Anuse, 2022). Algorithms use natural language processing, image recognition, and other techniques to flag and sometimes remove such content (Khurana, Koli, Khatter & Singh, 2023). Platforms use algorithms to analyse how users interact with each other, identifying trends and patterns in social connections, conversations, and network growth (Lee *et al.*, 2018). These data can be used to suggest new connections or highlight trending topics. Algorithms help monitor and maintain the health of the platform by identifying and addressing issues such as fake accounts, bot activity, and cyberbullying (Jayadatta & Majeed, 2024). Information Technology (IT) professionals ensure that the platform remains a safe and trustworthy space for users. Algorithms power search engines on social media platforms, helping users find relevant content, users, and groups based on keywords, hashtags, and other criteria.

Motivation Factors for Small and Medium Enterprises in South Africa

It is globally agreed that people venture into SMEs for various reasons (Kaftan, Kandalov, Molodtsov, Sherstobitova, & Strielkowski, 2023; Patrick, Rizal, Hee, Mahadi & Kamarudin, 2019; Aliman & Jalal, 2012; Gelderen & Jansen, 2006). In South African townships people start SMEs because they want to be self-employed and be their own boss (Patrick *et al.*, 2019; Aliman & Jalal, 2012). These people despise working for a supervisor or having to follow rules that are imposed from outside, which is why they prefer to be their own boss or have control over SMEs (Gelderen & Jansen, 2006). These individuals frequently denigrate other clients who don't have enough money, indicating that they are profit-oriented and prioritize money. Furthermore, locals in King Williams' township frequently start SMEs because they possess capabilities such as cooking, building, and dancing (Omonona, Oni, & Oluwole, 2021). These types of individuals who start SMEs because they master certain skills often do not have other skills such as marketing, financial literacy, and managerial skills, as they focus more on what they can do better (Changwasha, 2019). In divergence, SMEs in Mankweng Township are established to ensure the creation of employment opportunities for people from poor backgrounds and give them the means to earn money that enable them to buy basic needs around the world (Maloka, 2013).

According to Mukwarami & Tengeh (2017), locals in Gugulethu and Nyanga Townships start SMEs because there is no job available, and they are sick of staying home and doing nothing. Pyper (2016) states that people join SMEs because of job losses and are forced to start the enterprises, not out of love or passion. Thus, SMEs are confronted with a high failure rate as most people view SMEs as their final resort and frequently when they no longer have the means of income (Mukherjee, Scott, Deakins,

& McGlade, 2023; Manzoor, Wei & Sahio, 2021; Madichie, 2019; Bushe, 2019). Furthermore, locals start SMEs because the person closest by has already opened one; as a result, competition has led to an increase in conflict between the SMEs owners. Some people have grown up in families with SMEs, which may have influenced on their plans to work for themselves. Business parents can act as role models and advisors for their children and instil the desire to open their own businesses (Mamun, Nawi, Mohiuddin, Shamsudin & Fazal, 2017). However, some people in Tshwane Townships start SMEs because there is a market need, therefore, for SMEs to create services or products to fill the gap that exists (Dhlomo, 2017). Consequently, the success of SMEs will improve (Fatoki, 2018).

Methods and Data

The research used qualitative research methodology by relying on secondary data to gather relevant information. The author reviewed secondary data, also known as existing literature, to investigate how social media algorithms impact SMEs in South Africa. The authors used qualitative research methodology to reach a significant conclusion in this study. Table 1 below shows the inclusion and exclusion criteria for this paper.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication date	Articles published from 2006 to 2024, which enable collection of rich social media algorithms on SMEs in South Africa	Articles published before 2006 and articles not addressing the research problem and topic.
Type of Population	Original research, peer-reviewed articles, books, conference articles, and published dissertations.	Unpublished articles, books, conference articles, and published dissertations.
Language	English articles.	Articles in other languages.
Relevance of Publications	Articles addressing social media algorithms and its influence on SMEs in South Africa	Articles not relevant to the research topic in question.
Sample Number of Publications	The study considered seventy-one (n=71) publications as the target sample, but only 41 (n = 50) were included in this study	Twenty-four (n=30) publications were excluded because they were considered irrelevant to the topic and did not focus on

	because they were more relevant.	the algorithm of social networks and SMEs.
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Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The criteria in Table 1 outline the factors considered when determining which publications to include or exclude in the literature review examining the impact of social media algorithms on SMEs in South Africa. The writer performed a thorough online search using different databases like Google Scholar, Sabinet, university libraries, and Google. The investigation took place for half a year, starting in April 2024 and ending in September 2024, focusing solely on materials written in English to maintain uniform quality throughout the research. The researchers carefully evaluated 71 research articles and selected only 41 for this study due to their greater relevance. The author/s employed purposive sampling methods, eliminating duplicate publications, and meticulously picking studies to guarantee the data's quality and reliability. The authors also utilised thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method used to examine qualitative data. Usually, it is used for a set of texts such as interviews or transcripts (Nkoana, Modiba & Selelo, 2024). The data is carefully examined by the researcher to identify common themes, topics, ideas, and important patterns that are frequently found. Therefore, the themes identified in the literature review were thoroughly explained, examined and understood to provide insight and understanding.

Results and Discussion

One key finding is that social media algorithms favour bigger companies, which could make it more difficult for South African SMEs to increase their visibility. This is necessarily because SMEs would be able to receive new trends and innovative ideas at a later stage compared to larger companies that receive new trends and innovative ideas at an early stage. The paper highlights the pitfalls faced by SMEs associated with social media algorithms, such as choosing the right platforms, balancing multiple platforms, expensive data and a lack of knowledge, limiting their ability to adapt to evolving landscapes. The article underscores the importance of social media algorithms within SMEs. Using the importance of social media algorithms can ensure that SMEs are more likely to see industry trends, competitor activities, and business strategies aligned with their specific needs, allowing them to stay informed and competitive. However, SMEs that cannot benefit from social media algorithms are likely to be left behind in adopting new trends, technology, and markets, as they do not see the advice or information provided by social media algorithms. Therefore, SMEs must take advantage of social media algorithms in their premises as a guide to adapt to the changing environment.

Social Media Algorithms and Small and Medium Enterprises in South Africa

Algorithms are designed to present content that is most relevant to users (Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). For SME owners in Tembisa Township, this means that they are more likely to see industry trends,

competitor activities, and business strategies that are aligned with their specific needs, allowing them to stay informed and competitive. Additionally, social media platforms use algorithms to continuously adapt and update the content that users see based on their interactions (Arshanapally, Green, Slaughter, Muller, & Wheaton, 2022). For SMEs in Seshego Township, this means that they can quickly access new information, trends, and tools that help them adapt to market changes or changes in consumer behaviour. However, algorithms may have advantages but may also pose difficulties by favouring bigger companies or more popular content, which could make it more challenging for SMEs to increase their visibility (Lee & Shin, 2020). This means that SMEs can expect to receive information about creativity and innovation after larger companies do.

Algorithms provide SME owners in Mankweng Township with real-time insights and feedback on how their content is performing (Han & Trimi, 2022; Zamani, Griva & Conboy, 2022). This allows them to make quick adjustments to their marketing strategies, product offerings, and customer engagement tactics, ensuring that they stay relevant in a fast-changing environment. Algorithms can recommend specific tools, resources, or content that are highly relevant to the particular industry or niche of an SME (Lischka, 2021; Swart, 2021). This personalized approach enables SMEs in Gauteng province to implement strategies and practices that are more likely to produce positive results. By understanding what content resonates with their audience, SME owners can allocate their resources more effectively, focusing on what works and reducing the time and money spent on less effective strategies.

Pitfall Confronting Small and Medium Enterprises Associated with Social Media Algorithms in South Africa

Social media algorithms continue to play a crucial role in helping SMEs adapt to evolving environments in South Africa. However, SMEs in the country are often seen to be inexperienced in using social media and face numerous challenges. This part highlights the pitfalls that SMEs face due to social media algorithms.

- **Choosing the right platforms:** SMEs may lack the resources or expertise to conduct thorough market research to understand where their target audience spends time online (Malesev & Cherry, 2021). This can lead to decisions based on assumptions rather than on data-driven insights. Without in-depth knowledge of digital marketing and social networks, SMEs may not fully understand the strengths and weaknesses of different platforms (Kano, Choi, subhan Riza & Octavyra, 2022). This can make it difficult to assess which platforms align best with your business objectives and target audience. The sheer number of available social media platforms can be overwhelming (Bandy, 2021). SMEs may struggle to keep up with the latest trends and developments in social media, making it challenging to choose the most suitable platforms. SMEs can sometimes choose platforms based on trends or perceived popularity rather than

strategic fit. For example, SMEs might be tempted to join a new or trending platform without considering whether their target audience is present there or whether the platform's format suits their content.

- **Balancing multiple platforms:** SMEs typically operate with smaller teams and budgets compared to larger companies (Abisuga-Oyekunle *et al.*, 2020). Managing multiple social media platforms requires dedicated personnel, time, and financial resources, which SMEs may not have in abundance. Managing social media platforms involves creating content, scheduling posts, engaging with followers, responding to messages, and analysing performance metrics (Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). SMEs often have limited time to devote to these activities, especially when the same individuals are also handling other business functions. SMEs may lack employees with specialized skills in social media management, content creation, or digital marketing. This can make it difficult to effectively manage and optimize content on different platforms, each of which may require a unique approach. Successful social media management requires ongoing monitoring and engagement with followers (Beauvisage, Beuscart, Coavoux, & Mellet, 2023). SMEs may not have the bandwidth to keep up with comments, messages, and interactions on multiple platforms, leading to reduced responsiveness and customer satisfaction.
- **Expensive data:** SMEs lack financial access, which prevents them from purchasing costly data needed to log onto social media platforms (Mashamaite, 2023). Due to expensive data in South Africa, SMEs struggle to access essential information, market research, and online platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram that could help SMEs grow and compete (Nordin, Samsudin & Yusoff, 2023). Thus, lack or limited data limits the ability of SMEs to stay informed about market trends and best practices. Furthermore, SMEs cannot rely on digital marketing and e-Commerce to reach customers. Necessarily because expensive data limit the ability of SMEs to maintain an online presence, run effective digital marketing campaigns, and engage with customers through social media and other online channels.
- **Lack of knowledge:** Social media algorithms determine which content is seen by users (Lischka, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2018). SMEs may not understand how these algorithms prioritize posts, leading to lower visibility and engagement for their content. Without knowing factors such as timing, engagement, and content type, SMEs may struggle to reach their target audience effectively. Furthermore, algorithms play a crucial role in targeting specific audiences (Jayadatta & Majeed, 2024). SMEs lacking knowledge about how to use algorithmic features such as hashtags, keywords, or ad targeting can fail to reach potential customers (Lischka, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2018). This can result in wasted marketing efforts and resources. For SMEs that invest in social media advertising, a lack of understanding of how algorithms work can lead to poor ad

performance. SMEs may not know how to optimize ads for better placement or target the right demographics, resulting in lower returns on investment.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that social media algorithms offer valuable opportunities for SMEs in South Africa to improve their competitiveness and adapt to the changing environment. However, the article found that social media algorithms present significant challenges, such as choosing the right platforms, balancing multiple platforms, expensive data, and a lack of knowledge in effectively using these algorithms. This limits the extent to which SMEs work in the country to improve economic growth, development, and reduce poverty in South Africa. To address the pitfalls that SMEs face associated with social media algorithms, the following recommendations are proposed: Firstly, SMEs should conduct thorough market research to select the most appropriate social media platforms for their target audience, instead of spreading themselves too thin across multiple platforms. Second, SMEs should conduct thorough market research to select the most appropriate social media platforms for their target audience, rather than spreading themselves too thin across multiple platforms. Third, despite resource constraints, SMEs should consider strategic investments in data and digital marketing tools that can help them maximize their online presence and engagement. Lastly, keeping abreast of changes in social media algorithms and adapting strategies accordingly will be crucial for SMEs to maintain their competitive edge in the digital marketplace. These recommendations aim to help SMEs navigate the challenges posed by social media algorithms while harnessing their potential for long-term growth and sustainability. Additionally, this paper offers strategic guidance for practitioners responsible for driving SME development and expansion.

- Digital marketing experts should offer affordable consulting services, create free educational resources like webinars and guides, and establish mentoring programmes where experienced entrepreneurs help SMEs develop effective social media strategies.
- The South African local government should offer incentives such as tax breaks or grants for SMEs investing in social media management tools and skilled personnel, while also establishing regional SME Digital Hubs where businesses can access shared digital marketing resources, including content creation services and social media experts.
- SMEs should be trained to create low-data content, such as compressed videos and text-based ads, explore offline digital marketing solutions, such as SMS marketing and USSD campaigns, and collaborate with ISPs to secure SME-friendly data plans.
- South African local government and digital marketing professionals should develop step-by-step courses or mentorship programmes for SMEs, facilitate SME networks for knowledge sharing

and best practices, and teach simplified practical strategies to help small businesses use social media algorithms effectively.

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