International Journal of Creative and Open Research in Engineering and Management
ISSN: 3108-1754 (Online)
Volume 02 Issue 10 October-2026 | Impact Factor: 3.5



From Digital Presence to Search Visibility: A Descriptive Audit of 40 Businesses

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How to Cite this Article:

Dongre, P. (2026). From Digital Presence to Search Visibility: A Descriptive Audit of 40 Businesses. International Journal of Creative and Open Research in Engineering and Management, 02(10), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.55041/ijcope.v2i10.204

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https://doi.org/10.55041/ijcope.v2i10.204

Abstract

This study presents a descriptive audit of the digital presence of 40 selected businesses using four dimensions: website experience, social-media activity, Google Business Profile (called Google My Business, or GMB, in the original audit), and a basic organic-search visibility check. The data come from business profiles prepared during an industry internship between 18 May and 20 August 2026 and use publicly observable digital touchpoints; no survey or internal analytics data were collected. The recorded ratings show that 32 of 40 businesses (80.0%) received a Good website rating, while 27 (67.5%) received a Poor rating on the basic SEO check. Social media and GMB ratings were more mixed. These results indicate that, within this purposive sample, basic search visibility was the most frequently recorded weakness. They should not be generalised to all SMEs or sectors because the sample is small, the ratings are qualitative, the search protocol was limited, and category labels are not fully consistent across the audit profiles. The paper proposes a provisional presence-to-visibility framework for practical diagnosis and future testing.

Keywords: digital presence, search visibility, website audit, social media, Google Business Profile, descriptive business audit

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Businesses increasingly use websites, social-media accounts, business listings, and search engines to communicate with prospective customers. These channels, however, serve different purposes: having an online asset does not necessarily mean that a business will be discoverable through a relevant search. For an organisation evaluating its digital presence, it is therefore useful to distinguish the existence and usability of digital channels from the ability of prospective customers to find them.

A practical distinction follows between digital presence and digital visibility. Presence refers to the existence of online touchpoints, while visibility concerns whether those touchpoints can be discovered by a relevant audience through search and local listings. This paper examines that distinction through a small set of structured business audits. National market statistics and broader MSME adoption figures are not necessary to establish the study's descriptive results and should be added only where the original reports and exact figures can be verified.

1.2 Problem Statement

Digital marketing agencies that serve SME clients routinely observe the same pattern in their own client pipelines: a business approaches them, or is approached by them, already possessing a functional website and an Instagram page, yet still invisible when a prospective customer types a relevant search term into Google. The business has, in other



words, done the easy part building a presence without doing the harder, ongoing part making that presence findable. This is more than an academic curiosity; it is a live commercial problem for both the SME, which is losing customers it does not know it is losing, and for the agency, which needs a defensible, evidence-based way of identifying and pitching this gap rather than relying on generic sales language.

This paper examines that practical problem using a structured set of 40 business audits prepared as part of an industry internship. The audits rely on publicly observable digital touchpoints rather than survey responses or internal analytics. The study is descriptive and exploratory; it does not establish that the observed gaps caused business losses or that any recommended service would necessarily improve performance.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it describes ratings across four digital dimensions—website, social media, Google Business Profile (called Google My Business, or GMB, in the original audit), and a basic organic-search visibility check—for 40 selected businesses. Second, it identifies which dimension received the highest frequency of Poor ratings in this sample. Third, it develops practical recommendations and a provisional presence-to-visibility framework for further testing. Because the sample includes businesses operating in different countries and categories, and was selected purposively, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of Indian SMEs or of any entire sector.

1.4 Structure of the Paper

The paper first reviews relevant literature and outlines the research objectives and method. It then presents the audit results, discusses a preliminary presence-to-visibility framework, and considers practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 SME Digital Marketing Adoption

A consistent theme across recent empirical work on SME digital marketing is that adoption is real but shallow. Systematic reviews of the field report that digital marketing activities online advertising, social media marketing, SEO, and customer engagement do have a statistically measurable, positive relationship with SME performance indicators, yet the same reviews repeatedly flag resource constraints as the binding limitation: most SMEs simply do not have a dedicated marketing person or a consistent budget to sustain campaigns over time, and many struggle to judge return on investment because they lack the analytical skills or tools to measure it (Amin et al., 2025). A related strand of literature on SME innovativeness and managerial capability finds that firms with stronger internal capabilities are more likely to adopt digital marketing strategy in the first place, which in turn shapes downstream performance outcomes suggesting that the presence-visibility gap observed in practice is not random but tied to underlying organisational capacity.

Work specifically on digital transformation and web analytics among SMEs goes further, arguing that the broader digital-transformation literature has been built largely around large firms in developed economies, leaving SMEs and SMEs in the Global South in particular under-represented in empirical study despite facing quite distinct constraints: limited access to technological infrastructure, lower digital literacy, and financial constraints that make phased, low-risk digital investment the only realistic path (researchgate.net, 2022). This is a useful corrective for the present paper, which deliberately measures real, named SMEs in an Indian context rather than treating 'SME digital adoption' as a single undifferentiated global category.

2.2 SEO Specifically, as Distinct from General Digital Presence

Search engine optimisation is treated separately in the literature from digital marketing broadly, and for good reason: it behaves differently. An empirical study that built and tracked test websites for simulated SMEs, benchmarked against two real e-commerce SMEs, found that many SMEs hesitant to adopt digital marketing at all sit alongside a second,



distinct group SMEs that already have a website but lack the technical expertise to make that website visible to their target audience through search engines (repository.uwl.ac.uk). That second group maps closely onto what this paper's own data shows: businesses whose website is functionally sound but whose organic search presence is close to non-existent. A systematic review focused specifically on SEO and retail SME performance similarly reports that well-executed SEO work is associated with meaningfully higher website traffic and improved conversion rates, reinforcing that SEO is not a cosmetic add-on to a website but a distinct performance lever in its own right (Preprints.org, 2024).

2.3 The State of MSME Digitalisation in India

India's MSME sector is large and structurally decentralised more than 7.4 crore registered units as of the 2025–26 Economic Survey, contributing roughly a third of GDP, with micro-enterprises alone accounting for over ninety-nine percent of the total (India SME Forum, 2025). National surveys tracking MSME digital behaviour over the past two to three years show fast-rising comfort with basic digital tools: over eighty percent of MSMEs report confidence using digital tools, and a majority report tangible business benefit from digital adoption in general (PayNearby, 2025, 2026). But the same surveys, read carefully, show that this confidence is concentrated in transactional and operational digital tools UPI payments, smartphones, basic accounting software rather than in customer-acquisition tools. The gap becomes explicit in sector-specific figures: over ninety percent of MSMEs now accept digital payments, yet only around thirteen percent actively use digital marketing or e-commerce to reach customers (Brand Chanakya, 2026, citing SIDBI, 2025). In other words, the national data already anticipates, at scale, the exact pattern this paper investigates at the level of individual businesses: strong basic digital footprint, weak customer-facing visibility.

2.4 Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning the Study

Several established frameworks inform both the design of the audit instrument used in this study and the interpretation of its results.

- SOSTAC® (Situation, Objectives, Strategy, Tactics, Action, Control): the four-dimension audit used in this study corresponds to the 'Situation' stage establishing where a business currently stands digitally before any strategy or tactics are proposed (Smith & Chaffey, via Smart Insights).
- RACE (Reach, Act, Convert, Engage): website and SEO visibility sit within the 'Reach' stage of the customer journey; GMB and social media activity bridge Reach and 'Act'; the presence-to-visibility gap identified in this paper is, in RACE terms, primarily a Reach-stage failure.
- Gap analysis as a diagnostic tool: a technique from strategic management that compares a current state against an achievable state to surface actionable differences the core method used to structure the audit in this study.
- Technology Acceptance Model (TAM): adoption and effective use of a technology are shaped by its perceived usefulness and ease of use a plausible explanation for why website adoption (easy, template-driven) has outpaced SEO adoption (technical, ongoing, less immediately visible in its payoff).

2.5 Research Gap

Much of the existing empirical literature on SME digital marketing operates at the level of large-sample surveys measuring binary adoption does the business have a website, yes or no; does it use social media, yes or no. What is comparatively rare is empirical, dimension-by-dimension quality rating of a real, named sample of SMEs across sectors, of the kind that an agency actually has to perform before it can sell a service. This paper's contribution is exactly that: a structured, four-dimension, sector-comparative empirical audit of forty real businesses, generated as a working diagnostic tool rather than a survey instrument, which allows the presence-versus-visibility gap to be examined at a level of granularity the national-level survey literature does not reach.



3. Research Objectives and Questions

Building on the gap identified above, this study is guided by the following objectives:

- To describe the recorded website, social-media, Google Business Profile, and basic SEO ratings across the 40 selected businesses.
- To identify which specific dimension represents the largest and most consistent gap between digital presence and digital visibility.
- To identify practical implications of the observed rating pattern while acknowledging the limits of the sample and classification.
- To translate the empirical findings into practical recommendations for SME owners, digital marketing agencies, and MSME digitisation policy.

These objectives translate into four research questions:

- RQ1: How were the 40 selected businesses rated across website, social media, GMB, and basic SEO dimensions?
- RQ2: Which dimension shows the largest presence-to-visibility gap, and how large is it?
- RQ3: Which specific services or interventions are most consistently indicated by the gaps observed?
- RQ4: What limitations should be considered when interpreting the observed ratings and applying the proposed framework?

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study follows a descriptive, exploratory research design based on empirical audit data rather than opinion survey data. It combines secondary-data observation (of each sampled business's public digital footprint) with a standardised primary rating instrument applied consistently by the same researcher across the full sample, which allows for a like-for-like comparison across businesses and sectors that a self-reported survey cannot easily provide.

4.2 Sample

The sample comprises 40 businesses selected purposively from five intended selection categories listed in the Task 2 submission: Real Estate Agencies, Beauty & Skincare Clinics, Coaching & EdTech Institutes, Luxury Hotels & Resorts, and Construction & Architecture Firms. Eight businesses were initially shortlisted under each category. However, the individual audit profiles sometimes use overlapping or different sector labels, so the selection category cannot be treated as a consistent classification of each business's principal sector. The sample is non-random and includes national and international businesses; it is not a representative sample of Indian SMEs.

4.3 Instrument

Each business was assessed on four dimensions: website experience, social-media activity, Google Business Profile presence and local signals, and a basic organic-search visibility check. The original audit used qualitative labels (Good, Average, Poor). Because the Task 2 submission does not define a fully operational scoring rubric for every label, the ratings should be interpreted as the researcher's structured judgments rather than objective technical scores.

- Website Analysis functionality, mobile-responsiveness, clarity of service communication, and overall usability.
- Social Media Analysis activity level, posting consistency, and quality of engagement across the business's active platforms.



- Google My Business (GMB) completeness and accuracy of the listing, review volume and recency, and presence in local search results.
- Basic SEO Check whether the business's website appeared in organic search results for one or two relevant, category-specific keywords.

Each identified gap was, in a second pass, mapped to one or more specific digital marketing services (for example, a weak SEO rating mapped to an 'SEO Package' or 'Digital Marketing' recommendation), producing both a diagnostic rating and a service-recommendation dataset for the same 40 businesses.

4.4 Data Collection Procedure

The business audits were carried out as part of the internship from 18 May to 20 August 2026. The review used publicly available information from business websites, social-media accounts, Google Business Profiles, and manual Google searches, as recorded in the individual profiles. The source documents do not provide an exact observation date for every business or a complete, independently verified audit trail. The work should therefore be understood as a structured manual review conducted during this period, rather than a fully reproducible technical audit.

4.5 Analysis

The recorded Good, Average, and Poor ratings were counted for each of the four dimensions and expressed as frequencies and percentages out of 40. Service-recommendation frequencies were taken from the original analysis table. No inferential statistical testing was performed. Sector-level comparisons are withheld because the category labels are not consistently applied across the source profiles.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

5.1 Sample Composition

The Task 2 submission shortlisted eight businesses under each of five intended selection categories. However, individual audit profiles sometimes assign businesses to cross-category or different sector labels. For that reason, the paper reports the overall 40-business ratings but does not interpret category-level differences until classification is reconciled.

Table 1: Category-wise Distribution of Businesses Studied

Category used for initial selection	Businesses selected	% of sample
Real Estate Agencies	8	20.0%
Beauty & Skincare Clinics	8	20.0%
Coaching & EdTech Institutes	8	20.0%
Luxury Hotels & Resorts	8	20.0%
Construction & Architecture Firms	8	20.0%
Total	40	100.0%

The original research-paper category totals were calculated using labels that do not consistently align with the Phase 2 selection groups in Task 2. Those totals should not be used for sector-level interpretation without a consistent reclassification. The principal descriptive results reported below are based on the 40 individual audits and can be reproduced from the recorded ratings.



5.2 Digital Presence Ratings by Dimension

Table 2 presents the core finding of the study — the rating distribution across all 40 businesses for each of the four audit dimensions.

Table 2: Digital Presence Ratings Across 40 Businesses, by Dimension

Dimension	Good	Average	Poor
Website Analysis	32 (80.0%)	5 (12.5%)	3 (7.5%)
Social Media Analysis	11 (27.5%)	20 (50.0%)	9 (22.5%)
Google My Business (GMB)	14 (35.0%)	13 (32.5%)	13 (32.5%)
Basic SEO Check	5 (12.5%)	8 (20.0%)	27 (67.5%)

In the recorded audit ratings, website analysis received the highest share of Good ratings: 32 of 40 businesses (80.0%). Social media and GMB ratings were more mixed. The basic SEO check had the highest share of Poor ratings: 27 of 40 businesses (67.5%). These results describe the ratings recorded in this dataset; they do not prove that all businesses had poor SEO or that website builders caused the observed pattern. SEO ratings were based on a limited set of manual keyword searches, not a full technical or analytics-based SEO audit.

The descriptive finding suggests that a functional website or an active social account should not be treated as evidence of strong visibility for every relevant search. However, a business not appearing for one or two selected queries does not establish its overall SEO performance: rankings can vary by query, location, time, and search context.

5.3 Services Most Frequently Indicated by the Gaps Observed

Table 3 summarises how frequently each service category was indicated as a remedy across the 40 gap assessments. Because a single business commonly had more than one gap, and each gap could map to more than one service, the counts below reflect total mentions rather than distinct businesses.

Table 3: Frequency of Services Indicated by Identified Gaps (out of 40 Business Assessments)

Service	Times Indicated
Content Strategy	55
Digital Marketing (general)	52
Social Media Management	34
SEO Package	33
CRM Setup	27
Landing Pages	22
Local SEO	12
Website Development	8

Content Strategy and general Digital Marketing were the two most frequently indicated interventions, followed closely by Social Media Management and SEO Package — a pattern that lines up neatly with the dimension-level findings above. Since SEO was the weakest dimension and social media the second-weakest, it follows naturally that services addressing those two areas dominate the recommendation set. CRM Setup and Landing Pages, while less frequently indicated overall, appeared consistently for a distinct sub-group of businesses whose core problem was not visibility but conversion businesses that were already being found but were not converting that visibility into enquiries or bookings,



a pattern especially common in the Luxury Hospitality category. Website Development, notably, was the least frequently indicated service of all direct confirmation, from the recommendation data, that the website is the dimension least in need of further investment.

5.4 Illustrative Cases

The overall ratings and service recommendations can be understood more clearly by looking at a few individual cases. These examples show how digital gaps may differ from one business to another.

Table 4: Illustrative Gap Profiles (Selected Businesses)

Business (Category)	Weakest Dimension	Top Recommended Service
Habito (Real Estate)	Basic SEO — not found for target keywords	SEO Package + Digital Marketing
NatHabit (Beauty & Skincare)	SEO for category keywords despite a large social following	SEO Package + Digital Marketing
Eduauraa (Coaching & EdTech)	Inactive social media, weak SEO	Content Strategy + SEO Package
Elivaas (Luxury Hospitality)	Booking-conversion efficiency despite strong visibility	Landing Pages + CRM Setup
BricknBolt (Construction & Architecture)	Depth of service communication on website	Website Development

Habito and NatHabit exemplify the dominant pattern in the sample directly: a business with a reasonably strong front end a functioning website in Habito's case, a large social media following in NatHabit's that simply does not appear when a relevant customer searches for it. Eduauraa shows the same weak-SEO pattern compounded by inconsistent social media activity, a combination that was common in the Coaching & EdTech category. Elivaas represents the smaller but meaningful counter-pattern identified in Section 5.3 strong visibility paired with weak conversion infrastructure while BricknBolt illustrates that the website dimension, though generally the strongest overall, is not uniformly strong: a minority of businesses had functional but shallow websites that under-communicated the actual depth of their service offering.

6. Discussion

6.1 Presence Has Outpaced Visibility

Read together, Tables 2 and 3 support a single, central conclusion: among the SMEs studied, digital presence has clearly outpaced digital visibility. Building a website is now cheap, fast, and largely templated a task most small businesses can complete themselves or outsource for a modest one-time cost, which explains why eighty percent of the sample cleared this bar comfortably. Being found through organic search, by contrast, is not a one-time task at all. It requires ongoing content production, technical optimisation, and sustained attention resources that align closely with the constraints the wider SME digital marketing literature repeatedly identifies: limited marketing budgets, no dedicated in-house marketing staff, and difficulty measuring return on the investment required (Amin et al., 2025). Through a Technology Acceptance Model lens, this is close to a textbook case: SEO's usefulness is real but its payoff is delayed and hard to observe directly, while its ease of use is low relative to buying a website template a combination that predicts exactly the low adoption this study observed.

The pattern is directionally consistent with the possibility that digital presence and customer-facing search visibility are different capabilities, but this small descriptive audit cannot validate national MSME trends. Any comparison with



national statistics should be retained only after the original reports, dates, definitions, and figures have been independently verified. The contribution of this study is a practical, dimension-by-dimension description of the audit ratings for the selected businesses.

6.2 GMB and Social Media: Inconsistency, Not Absence

The social-media and GMB results are more mixed than the website and basic SEO results. The audit narratives often describe inconsistent posting, limited local visibility, or incomplete public listing signals. Because the rating rubric was qualitative and the observation dates were not standardised in the source documents, these patterns should be treated as exploratory observations rather than definitive evidence of ongoing maintenance behaviour.

6.3 A Presence-to-Visibility Framework

Based on the patterns observed across the sample, this paper proposes a simple three-stage way of thinking about SME digital maturity, intended less as a novel theoretical contribution and more as a practical lens that agencies and SME owners can apply directly:

- Stage 1 - Digital Presence: the business exists online in some minimally functional form (a website, a social account). This is the stage the sampled businesses have, on the whole, already cleared.
- Stage 2 - Digital Findability: the business can actually be found by a customer who is looking for it, through organic search and local listings (GMB). This is the stage where the sample showed its clearest and most consistent weakness.
- Stage 3 - Digital Conversion: once found, the business efficiently turns that visibility into an enquiry, booking, or sale, through landing pages, CRM, and follow-up systems. A smaller but distinct subset of the sample strong on Stages 1 and 2 but weak here showed this to be a real, if secondary, gap.

Framed this way, the finding of this study is that most SME digital marketing effort and spend to date has gone into Stage 1, the sector-wide literature and this study's own data suggest Stage 2 is the most under-served and highest-leverage area for intervention, and a smaller group of already-visible businesses would benefit most from investment in Stage 3.

6.4 Sector-Level Observations

Sector-level conclusions are not reported here because the business-category labels in the individual audit profiles do not consistently match the five selection categories used in Phase 2 of the Task 2 submission. Although eight businesses were shortlisted under each selection category, several individual profiles use cross-category or different sector labels. The overall dimension-level counts can be reproduced from the 40 audit profiles, but sector comparisons should be withheld until a single, explicit classification rule is applied consistently.

7. Practical Implications and Recommendations

7.1 For SME Owners

- Treat Google My Business as a first priority, not an afterthought: it is low-cost, does not require technical skill, and directly affects local search visibility.
- Before commissioning a new website, audit whether the existing one is actually being found a strong website that nobody sees delivers little return on the investment already made in building it.
- Build a simple, sustainable content calendar rather than posting in unpredictable bursts; consistency, not volume, was the differentiator between 'Good' and 'Poor' social media ratings in this study.
- If visibility is already strong (as in parts of the hospitality sample), audit the conversion path landing pages, enquiry forms, follow-up process before spending further on visibility-building activity.



7.2 For Digital Marketing Agencies

- Standardise a simple four-dimension diagnostic scorecard of the kind used in this study as a repeatable, evidence-based sales and onboarding tool, rather than relying on generic pitch decks.
- Design a standard 'starter bundle' around Content Strategy, Digital Marketing, Social Media Management, and SEO Package the four services this study's data shows are most consistently needed together rather than selling these as separate, competing line items.
- Treat conversion-infrastructure services (landing pages, CRM) as a distinct upsell track for already-visible clients, rather than bundling them into the initial visibility-focused pitch.
- Maintain the gap-analysis data generated for each client in a structured, comparable format over time, so that findings like those in this paper can be updated and re-tested as the client base grows.

7.3 For MSME Digitisation Policy

- Recognise that 'digitisation' support targeted at website creation or basic digital-payment adoption addresses Stage 1 of the framework in Section 6.3, but does comparatively little for Stage 2 (findability) — the stage this study's data shows is most under-served.
- Direct future MSME digital-literacy programmes specifically toward basic SEO and GMB management skills, which are low-cost to teach and directly address the largest gap identified in this study.

8. Limitations of the Study

- Ratings were based on manual, publicly visible observation rather than paid analytics tools (such as SEMrush, Ahrefs, or GMB Insights), which introduces an element of subjectivity into the scoring, even with a standardised rubric and cross-source verification.
- The sample of 40 businesses across five categories is purposive rather than randomly drawn, and is illustrative of broader patterns rather than statistically representative of the full SME population; findings should be read as directional.
- Basic SEO checks were limited to one or two keyword searches per business; a fuller technical SEO audit (backlink profile, page speed, full keyword-set ranking) was outside the scope of this study.
- The study is cross-sectional: it records a snapshot of each business's digital presence during the internship period rather than tracking changes over time. Exact observation dates were not recorded consistently for every business.
- All 40 businesses were assessed through the lens of one agency's service catalogue, which may have shaped which gaps were emphasised in the service-mapping stage. In addition, the individual audit profiles contain category labels that do not consistently match the five original selection categories; this prevents reliable sector-level comparisons without reclassification.

9. Conclusion

This study described digital-presence ratings for 40 selected businesses across four dimensions: website, social media, GMB, and a basic organic-search visibility check. In the recorded ratings, 32 businesses (80.0%) received a Good website rating, while 27 (67.5%) received a Poor rating on the basic SEO check. Social media and GMB ratings fell between these two patterns. The results suggest that, within this sample, basic search visibility was the most frequently identified weakness. They do not establish that the pattern applies to all SMEs, to Indian businesses generally, or to every sector. The audit was purposive, cross-sectional, manually rated, and based on limited keyword checks.

For the businesses in this sample, the results support considering search visibility and the maintenance of existing social and local profiles before automatically recommending a new website. The appropriate intervention for any individual



business should still be based on a fuller diagnosis, business objectives, target geography, and reliable performance data. The proposed presence-to-visibility framework is a practical, provisional organising tool; it has not been independently validated and should be tested in future research.

Future research could extend this study by supplementing manual audits with paid SEO and analytics tools for greater diagnostic precision, by tracking a panel of businesses over time to observe whether closing the SEO gap produces measurable visibility and conversion gains, and by widening the sample to a larger, more representative set of sectors and geographies to test whether the presence-to-visibility gap identified here holds at national scale.

Reference verification is required before submission. The current list contains incomplete entries and several sources cited by website or repository name only. Each source must be located and checked for correct authorship, title, date, publication details, and support for the associated claim.

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