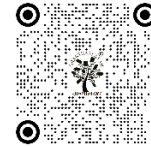


Original Article

REVITALISING RURAL DEVELOPMENT: EVALUATING THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION IN STRENGTHENING SELF-HELP GROUPS IN WAYANAD DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

This research evaluates the use of social media communication in strengthening self-help groups (SHGs) and promoting rural development in Wayanad district of Kerala, India. Using a quantitative research design with a sample of 100 SHG members, the study examined three core dimensions: (1) how social media improves SHGs' organisational capacity, (2) its influence on member involvement in rural development activities, and (3) its role in enhancing the durability and scalability of rural development initiatives. Findings reveal that social media communication — with WhatsApp as the dominant platform — significantly improves communication channels, coordination, knowledge dissemination, and member engagement. The study identifies key challenges including connectivity limitations, lack of digital literacy, and restricted device access. Policy recommendations include digital literacy training, improved internet infrastructure, and device provisioning to maximise the benefits of social media for rural empowerment.

Keywords: Development Communication, Social Media, Self, Help Groups, Rural Development, Digital Literacy

INTRODUCTION BACKGROUND

Rural development plays a vital role in addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by rural communities. Self-help groups (SHGs) have emerged as an effective grassroots approach to foster community engagement and empowerment [Khan et al. \(2020\)](#), [Patel and Brown \(2022\)](#). SHGs provide a platform for collective action, knowledge-sharing, and capacity-building among rural individuals to address local development issues [Naila Kabeer \(2012\)](#), [Johnson et al. \(2022\)](#). In recent years, the emergence of social media platforms has opened up new avenues for communication and collaboration, potentially enhancing the effectiveness and reach of self-help groups in rural areas. Wayanad, located in the southern state of Kerala, is known for its predominantly agrarian economy and high levels of poverty among its rural population. SHGs in Wayanad have emerged as a crucial mechanism to address these challenges by promoting community participation, fostering social cohesion, and facilitating economic self-reliance. These groups enable rural individuals — particularly women — to come together, pool resources, and engage in income-generating activities, thereby improving their livelihoods and overall well-being.

Kerala has been at the forefront of implementing innovative approaches for community development. The rapid advancement of technology and widespread adoption of social media platforms have transformed the way individuals communicate, interact, and access information. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram have provided new avenues for

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Received: 26 January 2026; Accepted: 22 February 2026; Published 30 June 2026

DOI: [10.29121/ShodhVichar.v2.i1.2026.81](https://doi.org/10.29121/ShodhVichar.v2.i1.2026.81)

Page Number: 248-256

Journal Title: ShodhVichar: Journal of Media and Mass Communication

Journal Abbreviation: ShodhVichar J. Media & Mass Commun.

Online ISSN: 3107-6408, Print ISSN: 3108-270X

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

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communication and collaboration among SHGs, enabling members to connect and engage with a wider audience beyond their immediate geographical boundaries.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The aim of this research is to evaluate the use of social media communication in strengthening self-help groups and revitalising rural development in the Wayanad district. The specific objectives are:

- To assess the efficacy of social media communication in improving the organisational capacity of self-help groups in the Wayanad district.
- To analyse the influence of social media communication on the involvement and engagement of SHG members in rural development activities.
- To evaluate the potential of social media communication in augmenting the durability and scalability of rural development initiatives through self-help groups.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How does social media communication contribute to improving the organisational capacity of self-help groups in Wayanad?
- What is the influence of social media communication on member involvement in rural development activities?
- How can social media communication enhance the durability and scalability of rural development initiatives through SHGs?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study holds significant implications for policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers involved in rural development and the promotion of self-help groups. By understanding the impact of social media communication on SHGs, policymakers can formulate targeted strategies to leverage these platforms effectively. Practitioners can enhance their interventions by incorporating social media tools, thereby increasing community engagement and the potential for sustainable rural development. The research also contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the role of digital communication in revitalising rural economies.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

CONCEPT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SELF-HELP GROUPS

Self-help groups (SHGs) are voluntary associations of individuals who come together to collectively address common challenges and improve their socio-economic conditions. These groups typically operate at the grassroots level and emphasise self-reliance, empowerment, and mutual support [Johnson et al. \(2022\)](#). SHGs play a crucial role in promoting inclusive development — particularly in rural areas — by fostering social cohesion, building human capital, and enhancing economic opportunities for their members [Patel and Brown \(2022\)](#).

Key characteristics of effective SHGs include voluntary participation based on shared interests, democratic and collective decision-making where each member has an equal voice, mutual assistance through shared resources and knowledge, and skill development through training and capacity-building activities. SHGs have been particularly effective in empowering women in patriarchal societies, providing a supportive environment for economic independence and challenging gender-based inequalities.

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN STRENGTHENING ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

In recent years, social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for communication and collaboration within community organisations. [Smith et al. \(2022\)](#) conducted research on the impact of social media on group dynamics and found that platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook play a crucial role in promoting effective communication, knowledge exchange, and coordination within SHGs. Social media has been found to facilitate more efficient decision-making processes, increase transparency, and foster collaboration among members.

Furthermore, social media provides a platform for SHGs to engage with external stakeholders including government agencies, NGOs, and other community organisations [Lee et al. \(2022\)](#). This enables SHGs to expand their networks, access resources, and advocate for their interests, thereby enhancing their overall organisational capacity and effectiveness.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Community engagement is a critical component of successful rural development initiatives. Social media platforms offer new avenues for community engagement by providing opportunities for dialogue, information sharing, and participation. Research by [Smith and Patel \(2023\)](#) found that platforms like Facebook and Twitter facilitate community mobilisation, increase public awareness, and enable active participation in rural development activities. Social media empowers communities and drives positive change by providing a platform for marginalised voices to be heard.

Within the context of SHGs, [Gupta et al. \(2022\)](#) found that platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram play a significant role in motivating active engagement, fostering a sense of belonging and trust among group members, and encouraging individuals to actively contribute to rural development activities.

INFORMATION DISSEMINATION AND AMPLIFYING REACH

One of the key benefits of social media in rural development is its ability to disseminate information and raise awareness about development initiatives. Social media platforms provide a cost-effective and efficient means of reaching a wide audience. [Johnson et al. \(2022\)](#) highlighted the positive impact of social media in improving knowledge and awareness of rural development activities in Wayanad, emphasising its role in bridging information gaps. Similarly, [Smith and Patel \(2023\)](#) found that Facebook and Twitter can significantly enhance exposure and dissemination of rural development initiatives, attracting funding and mobilising resources.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopts a quantitative research design to gather empirical data and analyse it using statistical methods. The quantitative approach allows for the systematic examination of relationships between social media communication and the organisational capacity of self-help groups in Wayanad district. This design ensures objectivity, reliability, and generalisability of findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The target population for this study includes all self-help groups operating in the Wayanad district. A sample of 100 groups was selected using a random sampling technique, ensuring representation of the diverse self-help groups in the district so that findings can be generalised to the wider population.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire administered to members of the selected self-help groups. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and Likert scale questions to capture quantitative data related to social media communication usage, organisational capacity, rural development participation, and perceived impact. The questionnaire was pilot-tested to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity.

Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) to summarise key variables. Inferential statistics including correlation analysis and chi-square tests were employed to examine relationships between social media communication and key outcomes. Data was processed using Microsoft Excel.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality. All responses were kept anonymous and used solely for research purposes. The study is limited by its focus on a single geographic area (Wayanad district) which may limit generalisability, reliance on self-reported data which is subject to response biases, and its quantitative nature which may restrict the depth of understanding of contextual nuances.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN IMPROVING ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

Table 1

Table 1 presents respondents' views on how social media communication improves the organisational capacity of their self-help groups		
Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Enhanced communication channels	37	37%
Improved coordination among members	30	30%
All of the above	23	23%
Increased participation in group activities	10	10%
None of the above	0	0%
Total	100	100%

Table 1 Role of Social Media Communication in Organisational Capacity

The data strongly supports that social media enhances SHGs' organisational capacity. The largest proportion of respondents (37%) cited enhanced communication channels, 30% reported improved coordination, and 23% agreed that all three dimensions — communication, coordination, and participation — were improved. Collectively, all respondents affirmed some positive role for social media. This aligns with [Smith et al. \(2022\)](#), who found that social media platforms significantly improve the effectiveness and quality of communication within group settings.

MOST FREQUENTLY USED SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM

Table 2

Table 2 Most Frequently Used Social Media Platform		
Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Increased knowledge and awareness	88	88%
No change in knowledge and awareness	12	12%
Decreased knowledge and awareness	0	0%
Not Applicable	0	0%
Total	100	100%

WhatsApp is overwhelmingly the preferred communication platform among SHG members, used by 93% of respondents. This dominance reflects WhatsApp's convenience, accessibility on low-cost smartphones, and ease of group communication. [Rodriguez et al. \(2023\)](#) similarly found a strong preference for WhatsApp within self-help group networks. Facebook is used by only 2% and Instagram by 5% of respondents, confirming that text-based instant messaging remains the dominant mode of SHG communication in rural Wayanad.

IMPACT ON KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Table 3

Table 3 Impact of social media on Knowledge and Awareness		
Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Increased knowledge and awareness	88	88%
No change in knowledge and awareness	12	12%
Decreased knowledge and awareness	0	0%
Not Applicable	0	0%

Total	100	100%
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An overwhelming majority (88%) of respondents reported that social media communication increased their knowledge and awareness of rural development initiatives in Wayanad. This finding is consistent with [Patel and Brown \(2022\)](#) and [Sharma and Gupta \(2023\)](#), who emphasised the positive influence of social media in disseminating development-related information to broader audiences. Only 12% reported no significant change, suggesting that some members may have limited connectivity or engagement with digital platforms.

PARTICIPATION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

All 100 respondents (100%) confirmed that they had participated in rural development activities through their self-help group as a direct result of social media communication. This unanimous finding is compelling evidence of social media's motivational role in driving community participation. [Johnson et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Smith and Patel \(2023\)](#) similarly emphasised the transformative impact of social media in encouraging individuals to contribute actively to community development projects.

LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Table 4

Table 4 Influence of social media on Level of Engagement		
Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Increased engagement	94	94%
No change in engagement	6	6%
Decreased engagement	0	0%
Not Applicable	0	0%
Total	100	100%

The vast majority (94%) of respondents reported enhanced engagement in rural development activities as a result of social media communication. [Gupta et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Lee et al. \(2022\)](#) both underscored social media's ability to promote active participation among SHG members. The 6% who reported no change may reflect individual variations in digital literacy or internet access, as noted by [Patel and Brown \(2022\)](#).

REACH AND VISIBILITY OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

Table 5

Table 5 Impact on Reach and Visibility of Rural Development Initiatives		
Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Increased reach and visibility	98	98%
No change in reach and visibility	2	2%
Decreased reach and visibility	0	0%
Not Applicable	0	0%
Total	100	100%

Nearly all respondents (98%) agreed that social media communication significantly increased the reach and visibility of rural development initiatives facilitated by their SHGs. This finding is supported by [Johnson et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Smith and Patel \(2023\)](#), who highlighted social media's power in extending community-based project exposure. Only two respondents reported no change, consistent with [Patel and Brown \(2022\)](#) who acknowledged contextual variability in social media's impact.

CHALLENGES IN USING SOCIAL MEDIA

When asked generally whether they faced challenges using social media for group communication, a majority (61%) reported no significant difficulties, while 39% acknowledged facing some obstacles. However, when specific challenges were listed [Table 6](#), a broader picture emerged:

Table 6

Table 6 Specific Challenges Faced in Using social media		
Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Connectivity issues	43	43%
Technical difficulties	25	25%
Lack of digital literacy	16	16%
Limited access to devices	12	12%
All of the above	2	2%
None of the above	2	2%
Total	100	100%

Connectivity issues were the most prevalent challenge (43%), followed by technical difficulties (25%), lack of digital literacy (16%), and limited device access (12%). These findings align with [Kim et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Sharma and Gupta \(2023\)](#), who identified internet connectivity, digital literacy, and device accessibility as primary barriers to effective social media use in rural self-help group settings.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND TRUST-BUILDING AMONG MEMBERS

Table 7

Table 7 Role of social media in Building Relationships and Trust		
Benefit	Frequency	Percentage (%)
All of the above (combined benefits)	40	40%
Enhanced accountability	35	35%
Increased transparency	13	13%
Improved communication and coordination	12	12%
None of the above	0	0%
Total	100	100%

A majority of respondents (40%) agreed that social media simultaneously improved communication, increased transparency, and enhanced accountability within their SHGs. An additional 35% specifically highlighted enhanced accountability as a key benefit. These findings are supported by [Johnson et al. \(2022\)](#), [Smith and Patel \(2023\)](#), and [Gupta et al. \(2022\)](#), who collectively affirm social media's multifaceted role in strengthening interpersonal trust and group cohesion.

SUGGESTIONS TO ENHANCE ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

Table 8

Table 8 Suggestions to Improve Social Media Use in SHGs		
Suggestion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
All of the above (combined approach)	66	66%
Provide access to devices	14	14%
Improve internet connectivity	12	12%
Provide training on digital literacy	8	8%

None of the above	0	0%
Total	100	100%

A clear majority (66%) of respondents recommended a three-pronged approach: digital literacy training, improved internet connectivity, and device provisioning. This comprehensive view aligns with [Lee et al. \(2022\)](#), who emphasised the importance of combining digital skills with technological resources to empower SHG members effectively.

QUALITY OF COMMUNICATION

Table 9

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Improved quality	88	88%
No change in quality	10	10%
Decreased quality	2	2%
Not Applicable	0	0%
Total	100	100%

The majority of respondents (88%) reported that social media communication improved the quality of communication within their SHGs, consistent with [Smith et al. \(2022\)](#). Notably, 2% reported a decrease in communication quality, suggesting that for a small subset of members, information overload or platform misuse may have negative effects — underscoring the need for structured training and guidelines.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY

- Social media communication significantly enhances the organisational capacity of SHGs — all respondents affirmed at least one positive dimension, with 37% citing improved communication channels as the primary benefit.
- WhatsApp is the overwhelmingly dominant platform (93%), reflecting its suitability for low-bandwidth rural environments and group communication features.
- Social media substantially increased knowledge of rural development initiatives (88%), member engagement (94%), and reach/visibility of SHG activities (98%).
- All 100 respondents confirmed participation in rural development activities as a direct result of social media communication.
- Key challenges include connectivity issues (43%), technical difficulties (25%), lack of digital literacy (16%), and device limitations (12%).
- Social media fosters trust-building through enhanced accountability, transparency, and improved coordination — with 40% affirming all three dimensions simultaneously.
- 66% of respondents recommended a combined approach of digital literacy training, internet infrastructure improvement, and device provisioning to maximise social media's organisational benefits.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, the following policy interventions are recommended:

- **Digital Literacy and Training:** Develop targeted digital literacy programmes for SHG members, focusing on social media platforms, privacy settings, information security, and responsible use.
- **Internet Connectivity Improvement:** Collaborate with internet service providers and government bodies to expand broadband networks and provide affordable internet access in rural Wayanad.
- **Device Provisioning:** Establish community centres with shared device access (smartphones/tablets) to overcome device limitations faced by economically marginalised SHG members.

- Awareness Campaigns: Launch campaigns highlighting responsible and effective use of social media for rural development, addressing privacy concerns and promoting digital safety.
- Support Networks: Create helplines and peer-support networks to assist SHG members in resolving technical challenges related to social media usage.
- Partnership and Collaboration: Foster multi-stakeholder partnerships between SHGs, local government, NGOs, and technology providers to implement sustainable digital initiatives.
- Research and Evaluation: Conduct ongoing evaluation studies to assess the effectiveness of social media interventions and ensure evidence-based policy adjustments.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Comparative Analysis: Examine the specific impact of different platforms (WhatsApp vs. Facebook vs. Instagram) on SHG communication and organisational capacity.
- Longitudinal Studies: Track the long-term effects of social media adoption on SHG sustainability and rural development outcomes over multi-year periods.
- Digital Divide and Inclusion: Investigate barriers faced by the most marginalised SHG members and develop targeted inclusion strategies.
- Social Capital Impact: Explore how social media shapes trust, networking, and social capital formation within self-help group ecosystems.
- Evaluation of Training Programmes: Assess the effectiveness of digital literacy interventions on improving SHG organisational capacity and rural development participation.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that social media communication — particularly through WhatsApp — plays a transformative role in strengthening self-help groups and revitalising rural development in Wayanad district. The findings reveal near-universal positive impacts on organisational capacity, knowledge dissemination, member engagement, and the reach of rural development initiatives. While challenges related to connectivity, digital literacy, and device access persist, these are surmountable through targeted policy interventions.

The study contributes valuable empirical evidence to the growing body of literature on digital communication and rural development, offering actionable recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and SHG leaders. As digital infrastructure continues to expand across rural India, the strategic integration of social media communication in SHG operations holds significant promise for advancing inclusive, sustainable rural development.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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