

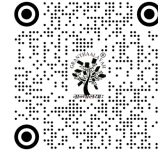
Original Article

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT, SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS, AND ONLINE VULNERABILITIES AMONG OLDER ADULTS IN KERALA: A MEDIA USE STUDY IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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ABSTRACT

The constant and increasing intrusion of digital communication technologies and artificial intelligence in the lives of older adults has made a paradigm shift in their communication patterns. Older adults that are labelled as 'digitally excluded' earlier are now avid consumers and users of various digital devices and applications like smart phones, social networking sites, digital payment modes and AI-powered applications that facilitate social connectivity, information access and daily life tasks. In a state like Kerala where digital literacy rates and consciousness is quite high, the older adults are fast emerging as active consumers in the digital communication sphere. At the same time, their involvement in the digital world has also opened up a gamut of vulnerabilities like misinformation, cyber fraud, lack of privacy, emotional addiction, lack of confidence and knowledge about technology.

This research is a study to investigate the relationship between digital engagement and social connectivity, and the online vulnerability of older adults in Kerala in the era of AI-powered communication systems. The study is quantitative research design where structured questionnaires were distributed among elderly individuals aged 55 and above in different districts of Kerala with reference to the use of digital media, communication channels preferred and awareness about artificial intelligence technologies, emotional connectedness and online vulnerability among elderly people.

The results indicate that smartphones, WhatsApp, YouTube and other social media platforms are used significantly by the older adults for communication and virtual social interaction, and it strengthens their emotional ties and alleviates the loneliness of those living apart from their kith and kin. On the other hand, the elderly feel concerned about fake news, online fraud, privacy concerns and AI generated false information because of their low digital literacy, awareness and knowledge about online security practices. The conclusion drawn emphasizes on digital literacy, cyber safety education and the design of inclusive technology that make their experience in the digital space safer and more meaningful. It adds to the existing research on ageing, media, digital communication and artificial intelligence in the present-day context.

Keywords: Older Adults, Digital Engagement, Social Connectedness, Online Vulnerability, Artificial Intelligence, Media Use, Kerala, Digital Literacy

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INTRODUCTION

The increased growth of digital communication technology has changed the pattern of communication, interaction, and societal participation. Smart phones, social networking websites, on-line payment modes, artificially intelligent systems/applications and on-line communication tools are integrated into everyday lives. Younger generation is generally considered the main users of digital technology but with increasing use of digital technology the senior generation is also actively involved in digital communication sphere.

In Kerala increased use of digital technology among senior citizens has become increasingly noticeable. Due to family structures like migration, dispersal of family members at distant places, easier internet access, the aged citizens in Kerala depend more on digital communication tools for maintenance of social relationships and intimacy. Use of applications like WhatsApp, YouTube, face book, video calling applications, are frequently found among senior citizens for communication, entertainment, accessing healthcare, acquiring knowledge etc.

During COVID-19 the dependency of elderly people on digital technology grew. They remained connected with their family members through online modes of communication when physical interaction was impossible and reduced due to the restriction in their physical movements. The fear from being socially isolated and emotional suffering can be mediated and managed by keeping touch with the family and acquaintances through digitally facilitated communication. Thus, it has become an integral part of the social and emotional life of the elderly.

As digital communication technology develops and evolves, it has also become increasingly intertwined with artificial intelligence. Recommendation algorithms, voice assistants, automated messaging and artificial intelligent contents now play a significant role in the information accessibility for users in digital domain. In spite of these benefits, it also causes the older persons to new type of online vulnerabilities.

Many old people may lack the necessary understanding on algorithmic processes, protection of privacy, misinformation, and safe practices of digital interaction due to their low digital literacy, therefore they become vulnerable to online attacks like phishing, misleading information or false news, financial scams and exploitation, fabricated digital media contents and manipulation by others.

On one hand it helps in establishing and maintaining relationships which can reduce social isolation, mobility impairment and emotional vulnerability of the elderly but the use of this technology may lead to some negative social and emotional consequences to the aged individuals. Therefore, in this study I propose to investigate relationship of digital involvement, social connectedness and online vulnerability of older adults in Kerala within the context of AI driven communication systems. [Arora et al. \(2025\)](#)

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To study the pattern of digital use among older people of Kerala.
- To analyse the correlation between digital use and social connectedness among older users.
- To explore the types of online vulnerabilities experienced by older adults in AI enabled digital world.
- To explore the level of awareness on AI tools and safety aspects among elderly people.
- To analyse the effect of demographic factors on digital use and online vulnerability.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the patterns and intensity of digital engagement among older adults in Kerala?
- 2) How does digital communication influence social connectedness among elderly users?
- 3) What types of online vulnerabilities are experienced by older adults in AI-driven communication environments?
- 4) How aware are older adults about artificial intelligence technologies and digital risks? What role does digital literacy play in reducing online risks and improving online safety?
- 5) Do demographic variables influence digital engagement and online vulnerability among older adults?

HYPOTHESES

The study is guided by the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between digital engagement and perceived social connectedness among older adults in Kerala.

H2: There is a significant relationship between digital engagement and AI-related risk exposure among older adults.

H3: There is a significant relationship between awareness of artificial intelligence technologies and online vulnerability among older adults.

H4: Demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and rural–urban location significantly influences digital engagement and online vulnerability among older adults.

H5: Higher levels of digital literacy reduce the likelihood of online vulnerability among elderly users.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

LITERATURE REVIEW

The increased growth of digital communication technology has changed the pattern of communication, interaction, and societal participation. Smart phones, social networking websites, on-line payment modes, artificially intelligent systems/applications and on-line communication tools are integrated into everyday lives. Younger generation is generally considered the main users of digital technology but with increasing use of digital technology the senior generation is also actively involved in digital communication sphere.

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RESEARCH GAP

Past literature on digital media use and social media behaviour among the aged have been widely explored. Few studies exist which specifically investigate the effects of AI-driven digital media on social connectedness and the online vulnerabilities among the elderly, but instead they focus either on the benefits of digital communication or general risks of internet usage, but seldom both. In the Indian setting, particularly in the context of Kerala, little research has been carried out on the digital use by the aged, despite a high level of literacy and increasing levels of digital usage among them. It also deals less with topics like AI-generated misinformation, online scams, privacy issue and digital safety awareness among the aged. This research aims to identify and fill these research gaps by examining the links between the use of digital media, social connectedness and online vulnerability in an AI-driven communication system among the aged in Kerala. [Guzman et al. \(2023\)](#)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory is supplemented with Uses and Gratifications theory, Technological Determinism theory, and Personal schema theory. Uses and Gratifications theory is applied to the study as elderly users proactively seek and use the digital media to gratify communication, emotional, social, and informational needs. Aging individuals use the digital media to keep family members in touch and obtain entertainment, and reduce their feelings of solitude. Technological Determinism theory is employed in this study because digital media and artificial intelligence system influence the behavior pattern of communication and social interaction among the user group. AI platforms determine the information old people are given and how they interact. Personal schema theory assists to interpret how old users understand the digital content through the filter of their personal beliefs, experiences, and previous social cognitions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The quantitative research design has been used for studying the digital media usage and experiences of the aged people of Kerala in a systematic manner. This type of research design could help the researcher to analyze the quantified data by application of descriptive statistics which has become instrumental for tracing patterns.

TARGET POPULATION

The study targeted all elderly individuals aged 55 and above residing at different locations across Kerala from different socio-cultural strata and streams of education so as to make it a heterogeneous study and to draw a broad representative sample for understanding the different aspects of digital media use.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

Purposive sampling design has been used to select elderly people belonging to all the districts of Kerala with an objective to get geographical and socio-cultural diverse data of the respondents. The respondents aged above 55 years have been chosen to get heterogeneous samples belonging to different streams of education.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

The study made use of a structured questionnaire as the instrument for collecting data. The questionnaire contained different sections focusing on dimensions of frequency of use of digital media, ownership of smart phones and application and applications, usage of social media applications and platforms, understanding of artificial intelligence, exposure to on line scam and fake news, awareness of the protection of information, trust on other users, the feeling of loneliness being overcome by digital media, etc.

DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

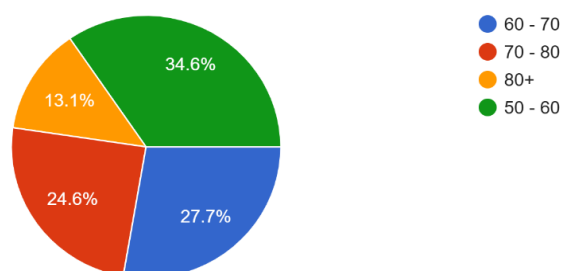
The data collected from the 321 respondents was analyzed by descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics is a quantitative approach to summarize and describe the properties of a variable. It describes the patterns of the respondent's answers which have been presented in the forms of tables, figures and other diagrams and help to draw appropriate conclusion on the study of the subject.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

AGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS

From 321 responses, a large majority of the participants were in the 50-60 age group and this represented 34.6% of the total sample, with a quarter of participants falling into the 60-70 age bracket and just over 13% being over 80 years old. A significant portion of the respondents were within the 50–60 age group, accounting for 34.6% of the total sample, while 27.7% belonged to the 60–70 age category. Individuals aged above 80 represented 13.1% of the participants. The distribution shows that the study covered older adults from diverse age ranges, which helped in gaining a broader understanding of how digital engagement differs across various stages of later life. [Ivan et al. \(2020\)](#)

1 Your Age group?
321 responses

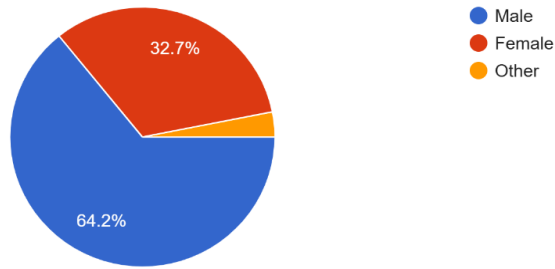


GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS

Out of the total participants, the proportion of males is the highest, with 64.2% while that of the females is 32.7%. A marginal number of respondents marked "other" in the sex column. The overall analysis concludes that among the old in Kerala now, it is relatively more the males.

2. Gender

321 responses

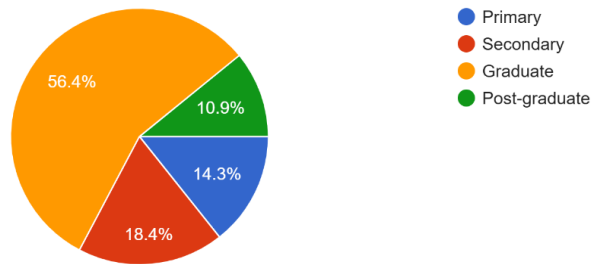


EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION OF RESPONDENTS

In the present sample, a little over half (56.4%) had a university degree. Those who had completed only primary education formed the smallest category of the present sample. Results indicated that education could have played a role in the awareness of and comfort with new technology in the present sample.

3. Education Level

321 responses

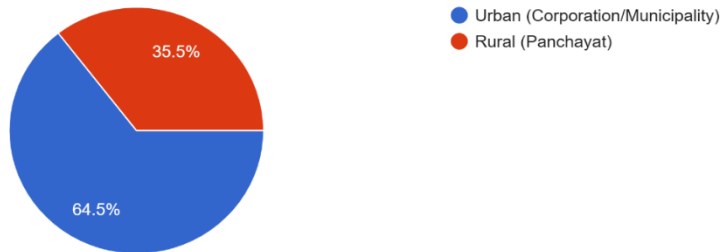


GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS

The participants from urban centres represent 64.5% of the total sample. 35.5% of the respondents live in rural areas. This suggests the greater extent to which urban areas are technologically accessible and provide smartphones as compared to rural areas.

5. Location:

321 responses



DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT PATTERNS

The research found that one of the most commonly used digital devices by elderly people in Kerala were smartphones. Most of the elderly people responded positively saying that they used digital devices like WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, video calling and more in their everyday lives for communicating, seeking information and for entertainment etc. The main reason stated by elderly people for using digital media was to be in touch with their family members. Many aged persons revealed that these digital devices allowed them to be regularly connected with their sons, daughters, grandchildren and other relatives living far away. In addition to

this, elderly people listed many other reasons like getting news, watching religious videos, other sources of entertainment and learning about health issues etc. As major uses for digital media. The analysis therefore indicates that digital engagement among older adults in Kerala is no longer limited to basic communication. Instead, digital media has become part of their social, informational, and emotional lives. [Lei et al. \(2023\)](#)

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Secondly, the present study tried to establish the relationship between the utilization of digital communication and felt social connectedness by the old. The findings confirm the purposes of digital communication use in the social networking of the old. It can be clearly seen that most of the respondents in this study had stated that the use of digital communication has increased the feeling of being connected to their families. They expressed less feelings of being alone and more interactions through conversations on internet with their families who reside far away. People reported being involved in numerous virtual communities and WhatsApp groups. Findings support that family, neighbours, religious communities, social circles among others can increase connections in old age. It was shocking that people deprived of using digital communication have been socially excluded from their community which reflects the social importance of digital communication even in old age for many activities one must own and utilize a smartphone to digitally connect. It was tested with a statistical test and the relationship between usage and connectedness has been found to be significantly positive. Individuals having active and greater use of their mobile phones stated feeling more supported and included. 62 H1: There is a significant positive relationship between digital engagement and felt social connectedness among older adults in Kerala. Was found to be true with the results mentioned. Therefore, digital communication tools could be one effective tool for maintaining emotional ties, community participation, and social connectedness among older adults.

VULNERABILITIES ON THE INTERNET AND RISKS RELATING TO AI

It is evident that there are significant issues concerning the vulnerabilities associated with the use of the internet in relation to the survey. It is evident that a number of participants seemed to be confused about fake news, misinformation, suspicious internet messages and fraudulent internet material and indicated that they did not find it easy to work out when they had encountered manipulated data or the difference between real and fake online messages.

The survey also showed that older users' awareness of AI, recommender algorithms and AI-created digital content is poor. They indicated that they felt most concerned about:

- Cyber-scams and fraud
- Lack of privacy
- Online financial fraud
- Misinformation on the internet
- Misuse of their private data

Digital communication that makes them feel emotional

The vulnerability of older users is more prevalent in users with lower levels of digital literacy and less awareness of safe on-line activities.

Table 1

Indicator	Yes	No
Received suspicious calls/messages	66.7%	33.3%
Experienced financial loss due to online fraud	14.0%	85.0%
Verify news before sharing	76.3%	23.7%
Attended digital literacy programme	21.5%	78.5%
Know where to report cyber fraud	70.1%	29.9%

In spite of a small percentage actually falling victim to scams, an overall awareness of fear and anxieties pertaining to internet fraud was evidenced. Respondents expressed concerns of going online for mobile banking applications for fear of getting frauded, hacking and of being made to spread fake news.

Many participants confessed forwarding videos or news from the internet without assessing the genuineness of the content. In many situations trust in forwarded messages via WhatsApp was still in place even when it pertained to the digitally illiterate.

Majority of participants felt that AI produced video, sound effects and other synthesized elements could be very believable to older persons. This indicates growing understanding of the problem of AI fake content and deepfakes.

Most participants felt uncertain whether they would know how to identify fake or AI produced content by themselves. Older people felt aware of the danger posed by AI based fake content but struggled to identify and tackle them effectively.

The second hypothesis was partially confirmed.

H2: A statistically significant relationship exists between digital engagement and AI-related risks faced by older people.

The association appears to be that higher engagement with the internet allows older persons to access domains where they are likely to become victims of scams, fake information and fraudulent messages. However, AI-related risks are not merely a function of digital engagement; digital literacy and awareness also play a critical role. [Leist \(2013\)](#)

AI AWARENESS, DIGITAL LITERACY, AND PROTECTIVE BEHAVIOUR

The study further investigated AI-related awareness and understanding among the older adults.

It found that respondents had moderate understanding on issues of fake news generated by AI and digital deception. Majority of the respondents had an understanding on how AI technology can be utilized to deceive older adults through fake videos, modified voices and fake online content.

At the same time respondents had limited digital literacy training. More than three quarters of respondents never attended any digital literacy or cyber awareness program. This shows a great disparity in digital usage versus digital safety education.

Family support was also found to be an important protective factor in the study. Many of the respondents replied that they were guided by their family members on issues of cyber safety, prevention of cyber fraud, and verification of dubious messages.

Respondents who showed high awareness of AI and online misinformation had relatively better protective behavior like verification of news prior to sharing, avoiding dubious links etc.

The above finding is in accordance to the third hypothesis:

H3: There is a significant relationship between AI awareness and AI-related risk exposure among the older adults.

This implies that higher awareness of the risks caused by the development of AI may lead to decreased vulnerability and better online behaviour in older adults.

INFLUENCE OF DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Finally, the objective was to study the impact of demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education and rural-urban location on the digital involvement and the exposure to risks of older adults.

From the study analysis, it was evident that younger elderly within the age range of 50-70 age group have relatively greater involvement in digital technologies than in those above 80. Young old utilize most of the social networking sites, mobile banking, and communication tools as well.

Education level of respondents influenced the digital confidence and knowledge. Higher level education of respondents (graduate and postgraduate) exhibit comparatively more experience on digital platform and is relatively better to identify the suspicious behaviour of online.

The urban population utilized their smart phones, engage more on social networks and exhibits better digital confidence when compare to rural participants. Rural participants are relatively hesitant in utilizing the complex digital applications and primarily in using mobile banking and on-line payments system.

Significant role was played by gender in the case of digital involvement. Male participants show comparatively more utilization of digital technologies while female participants are more dependent on family members for support in using digital platform.

From the results, all four hypotheses that were taken are confirmed:

H4: The demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and rural-urban location significantly predict the digital involvement and AI-related risk exposure among elderly in Kerala.

This study indicates that demographic features considerably influence the opportunities, challenges and vulnerabilities of the old generation on the digital landscape of Kerala. [Makita et al. \(2019\)](#)

DIGITAL LITERACY AND SECURITY BEHAVIOUR

A high proportion of respondents used digital communication regularly but most did not seem to have a good understanding of on-line security behaviour. [Mari \(2026\)](#)

A number of respondents reported that they rely on members of their family to help them work out how different digital communication applications work, how privacy settings are set up and what to do about anything that seems out of the ordinary. Higher levels of digital literacy among elderly respondents were associated with greater security behaviour when dealing with online

risks. The survey suggests that educational programs on digital literacy could be effective in promoting the safe use of digital communications among older users. [Sharma and Gautam \(2023\)](#), [Wangler \(2023\)](#)

DISCUSSION

The present study's results prove older adults are increasingly exposed to digital threats. Henceforth, this research supports the main hypothesis that characteristics associated with old age can make the elderly more susceptible to cyber fraud and online misinformation. From the study it can be concluded that the less digital literacy, lower knowledge about AI-driven scams and absence of family assistance contribute to the increased risk of elderly in using the internet.

Henceforth the researcher suggests the following to overcome the deficiency; improve digital literacy training specifically targeted at older adults in terms of their mobile safety, fraud recognition, and knowledge about deepfake. Financial institutions need to assume their share in providing easy, clear, and language appropriate assistance on safe internet banking. Family can provide the first aid for older adults as young family members help in combating risky internet behaviour; therefore, intergenerational guidance would be very useful. Community level cyber-security awareness through panchayats, libraries, and resident associations is crucial as elderly people have more trust in these organizations compared to other sources. Furthermore, technology providers need to consider elderly people in designing user-friendly interfaces and simple fraud reporting systems and responsible helpline service to act immediately against the risk.

The results show a growing usage of digital communication technologies by older adults in Kerala. The main reasons of elderly internet users for engaging with digital technologies include seeking emotional support and connection, entertainment and accessing information. The Uses and Gratifications Theory applies as elderly users voluntarily and consciously engage with digital technologies to address social and emotional needs, and WhatsApp, YouTube and video calling apps have become indispensable for maintaining family connections and preventing social isolation among elderly users. It supports the Technological Determinism Theory as the technology infrastructure based on artificial intelligence gradually influence and define the information environment of the older adults, especially recommendation algorithms, automated news feeds, and AI generated communications create users' experience of online space often unconsciously. The study supports the Personal Schema Theory as elderly users view digital content based on their prior experiences, level of digital literacy and social knowledge. Elderly users who lack a high level of digital literacy may fail to critically assess the information provided, thereby becoming susceptible to online fraud and misinformation. In addition to enhancing social connectivity, this study also demonstrates that digital technology fosters an emotional and technological dependence and excessive access to online information contributes to uncertainty, distrust and anxiety among the elderly.

CONCLUSION

This research analyses the extent of their digital participation, the dimension of social connection and the risks associated in digital world, with respect to the elderly in Kerala, within the new frame of communication system being developed on the artificial intelligence.

The results suggest that it is not valid anymore to regard the elderly as digitally excluded population. Smartphones, applications and digital means have come to take an integral role in their lives. Digital communication is effective to provide them mental support by connecting them with others, combating loneliness. However, more and more digital involvement has created greater vulnerability on the elderly including fake information, cybercrimes, privacy and AI trickery, on the part of inadequate digital literacy and ignorance about digital security measures. It also underscores the need for an improvement in digital literacy education, creation of cyber awareness and building age friendly communication system.

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