



# **SOCIAL CHALLENGES FACED BY ELDERLY SOCIAL MEDIA USERS: A CASE STUDY IN KERALA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study explores the social media challenges faced by elderly social media users, focusing on real-life cases from Kerala. By analyzing specific incidents, this research aims to highlight the emotional, social, and cognitive toll of these digital threats, offering insights into preventive measures and strategies to empower elderly individuals to navigate social media safely. It also highlights how exposure to online fraud and deceptive content leads to emotional distress, including anxiety, embarrassment, and loss of trust, as well as behavioral changes like reduced social media engagement and reliance on family support. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research reveals that low digital literacy and misinformation, particularly related to health, heighten vulnerability among the elderly. The findings emphasize the need for digital literacy programs, stronger online security measures, and family involvement to safeguard elderly users and help them navigate the digital space more confidently.*

**Keywords:** Elderly Users, Social Media, Social Challenges, Scams, Misinformation, Loneliness, Digital Safety, Emotional Distress, Online Fraud, Etc.,

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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media has transformed the way people communicate, access information, and interacts with the digital world. While these platforms offer significant benefits, they also expose users to numerous risks, including scams and misinformation. Elderly social media users, often less digitally literate and more trusting, are particularly vulnerable to such threats. Scammers and misinformation spreaders exploit their lack of familiarity with technology, emotional susceptibility, and isolation, leading to financial losses, emotional distress, and social withdrawal. In addition to these risks, elderly users face several challenges in navigating social media platforms, including difficulty understanding privacy settings, recognizing credible sources of information, and adapting to the rapid evolution of digital tools. They also experience generational gaps, which make it harder for them to relate to younger users' content and interactions, further intensifying feelings of isolation. In recent years, there has been a surge in cases where the elderly have fallen victim to phishing schemes, fake health remedies, charity scams, and AI-powered manipulations, resulting in significant psychological consequences. These include heightened anxiety, guilt, loss of trust in technology, and even long-term mental health issues, as well as increased dependence on family members for digital guidance and protection.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**George & Raj (2023)** stated that elderly vulnerability to scams in Kerala, George and Raj found that elderly users were often targeted through emotional manipulation, such as fake charity scams or emergency frauds. These scams leveraged family values and the caring nature of elderly individuals, leading to significant emotional distress when the victims realized they had been duped. Victims commonly experienced guilt, anxiety, and a sense of betrayal. The study recommended the establishment of hotlines and support networks to assist elderly victims of scams and help them cope with the psychological consequences.

**Ravi & Sreedevi (2022)** focused on social media literacy among the elderly in Kerala, exploring how a lack of digital knowledge contributed to scams and misinformation. Their findings indicated that while many elderly individuals were becoming active on social media platforms, they did not fully understand privacy settings or the potential dangers of sharing personal information online. The study found that scams targeting elderly users often caused long-term psychological effects, such as fear of being scammed again and distrust of social media platforms. The authors emphasized the importance of community-based education and training programs to empower the elderly with the skills needed to navigate social media securely.

**Soman & Thomas (2021)** revealed that the prevalence of online scams among elderly individuals in Kerala focused on common scams like phishing and fake lottery frauds. They found that elderly victims in Kerala experienced severe emotional trauma after being scammed, with many feeling ashamed or embarrassed. Victims also reported a reduced trust in technology and social isolation, as they feared further exploitation. The study underscored the importance of community outreach programs to educate the elderly about digital safety and provide them with tools to recognize fraudulent activities.

**Thomas & Nair (2022)** explored the cybersecurity awareness of elderly social media users in the state. The authors found that many elderly users lacked awareness of online threats, including scams and misinformation, which made them highly vulnerable to fraud. Elderly users in Kerala were often reliant on family members for technological assistance, and due to this reliance, they were unaware of basic online safety measures. The study also highlighted that victim of scams

experienced anxiety, fear of technology, and social withdrawal, especially when financial losses occurred. The authors recommended digital literacy programs tailored for the elderly in Kerala to improve their understanding of online risks and build confidence in using digital platforms securely.

**Krishnan & Menon (2020)** examined the psychological effects of misinformation on elderly social media users in Kerala, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors found that the elderly were especially susceptible to misinformation related to health and safety. Many believed in fake cures, miracle treatments, and unverified medical advice, which led to anxiety and confusion. The study noted that misinformation caused delayed healthcare responses, resulting in worsened health conditions and increased stress. The authors recommended that the government and NGOs collaborate to disseminate accurate information and provide training for elderly people on how to verify online content.

### Objectives of the study

- To understand the social challenges faced by elderly social media users in Kerala such as isolation, loneliness, trust issues, etc.,
- To identify effective measures to help elderly users prevent online scams and misinformation.

### Limitations of the study

- The study focuses on a small group, so it may not reflect everyone's experiences.
- The results apply only to specific cases and may not fit other areas or groups.
- The information depends on what people shared, which might not be fully accurate.

### Research Methodology

- **Research Design:** This study is based on descriptive and case study approach to understand the social challenges faced by elderly social media users in Kerala.
- **Sampling Technique:** Purposive sampling will be used to select specific elderly individuals who are active social media users and have experienced social challenges such as scams, misinformation, or isolation. The cases will be chosen based on their relevance to the research focus.
- **Sample Size:** The study will analyze 7 detailed cases of elderly users from various regions of Kerala, ensuring diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, education level, and social media usage patterns.

- **Ethical Consideration**

The study will ensure ethical practices by protecting participants' privacy and confidentiality. Consent will be obtained before collecting any information, and participants will be free to withdraw at any time. Sensitive topics will be handled with care to ensure comfort and respect, avoiding any emotional distress. No personal details will be shared, keeping all data secure and anonymous.

➤ **Data Collection Methods**

- **Primary Data:** In this study, interviews will be conducted with elderly social media users to understand their experiences with emotional distress, isolation, and coping strategies. Observations will be made to see how elderly users interact with social media platforms. Additionally, documents like messages or emails from scammers or misleading health information will be reviewed to analyze the challenges they face.
  - **Secondary Data:** Review of relevant case studies, news reports, and research articles focusing on social challenges for the elderly, digital literacy, and mental health implications.
- **Data Analysis:** The collected data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the social challenges faced by elderly social media users. This will include examining the emotional, social, and behavioral impacts of scams, misinformation, and isolation. Both qualitative insights from interviews and observations, as well as contextual evidence from document reviews, will be systematically analyzed to draw meaningful conclusions.

## **Case 1: Loneliness and Digital Disconnect**

### **Introduction**

In 2022, a 75-year-old man from Thrissur, Kerala, and experienced increased loneliness due to his difficulty in using social media to stay connected with his family and friends. Despite living in an urban area and having two children living nearby, he struggled to adapt to the digital world after retiring, leading to feelings of isolation.

### **Background**

The elderly man had always enjoyed spending time with his grandchildren and keeping up with his friends. However, after his retirement, he began to feel increasingly distanced from others, as most of his social interactions shifted to digital platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. Although his children encouraged him to use these platforms, he found the interface confusing and overwhelming, particularly because he had limited experience with technology. His attempts to learn were met with frustration, as he struggled to understand the various features and settings. Gradually, he stopped using his phone for anything beyond basic calls, missing out on social updates and group conversations that kept him connected with his family and social circle. His children, who frequently shared updates and photos on social media, grew concerned when they noticed his absence from their online conversations. Despite their efforts to show him how to use the platforms, his inability to keep up with the digital trend left him feeling more disconnected, and his loneliness deepened. He began to spend more time alone at home, withdrawn from social engagements, and rarely interacted with his neighbors.

## Challenges Faced

- **Increased Loneliness:** The elderly man felt disconnected from family and friends, leading to a heightened sense of isolation.
- **Depression and Despair:** His inability to engage with social media made him feel left out, leading to sadness and feelings of being unimportant.
- **Loss of Self-Esteem:** Struggling to adapt to technology made him feel inadequate, contributing to a diminished sense of self-worth.
- **Reluctance to Seek Help:** He was hesitant to ask for further assistance, as he felt embarrassed about his lack of digital skills.

## Recovery Measure

- **Family Support:** His children started visiting him more regularly to provide emotional support, share family news in person, and assist with understanding the digital platforms.
- **Simplified Training:** A local senior citizen's group in Thrissur offered a tailored digital literacy program specifically for the elderly, which used easy-to-understand language and provided hands-on training.
- **Community Engagement:** His neighbors, also seniors, created a small group to share tips and experiences, providing him with a sense of community and belonging.

## Analysis and Recommendations

- **Elderly-Friendly social media:** Social media platforms should introduce more senior-friendly features like larger fonts, simplified layouts, and easier navigation for elderly users.
- **Inclusive Digital Literacy Programs:** There is a need for digital literacy programs targeting the elderly, focusing on essential skills such as using messaging apps and engaging with online communities.
- **Family and Community Support Systems:** Families should take a proactive role in supporting elderly relatives to stay connected digitally, and local communities should foster environments that encourage digital inclusion for seniors.
- **Mental Health Support for Seniors:** Encourage mental health programs and counseling services to help elderly individuals cope with the emotional impact of social isolation, particularly in the digital age.

## Case 2: Social Isolation Due to Technological Barriers

### Introduction

In 2023, a 72-year-old widow from Alappuzha, Kerala, faced social isolation due to her struggle with using social media platforms. Despite having two children living in different cities, she felt disconnected and unable to engage with her family and friends online. Her lack of digital literacy, compounded by physical limitations like poor vision and hearing, made her increasingly withdrawn from the digital world.

## Background

The elderly woman had an active social life before her spouse passed away but found it challenging to keep in touch with her children and friends through digital platforms. Her children encouraged her to use WhatsApp and Facebook, but the complex interface, coupled with poor eyesight, made it difficult for her to engage with the content. While she had a smartphone, she only used it for basic tasks like calls and messages. Social media, with its fast-paced nature, became a source of frustration, leading to her withdrawing from it entirely. Over time, she felt alienated from her social circles, as her friends and family became more active on these platforms, leaving her out of their digital conversations.

## Challenges Faced

- **Loneliness and Isolation:** The inability to participate in social media conversations contributed to a sense of being left out, causing emotional distress.
- **Frustration and Inadequacy:** Struggling with technology made her feel inadequate and disconnected, leading to a diminished sense of self-worth.
- **Depression:** Her social isolation exacerbated feelings of depression and helplessness, as she felt she was unable to bridge the growing gap between herself and her loved ones.

## Recovery Measure

- **Family Support:** Her children patiently guided her through basic social media functions, offering step-by-step instructions. They also visited her regularly to provide emotional support.
- **Digital Literacy Programs:** The elderly woman participated in a local digital literacy workshop aimed at seniors. These workshops were simplified, addressing specific needs like adjusting font sizes and accessibility features.
- **Use of Voice-Activated Technology:** Her children helped set up voice assistants and screen readers, which eased her navigation on social media platforms.

## Analysis and Recommendations

- **Simplified Digital Platforms:** Design social media platforms with simplified interfaces and accessibility features for the elderly, including larger fonts and voice commands.
- **Targeted Digital Literacy Initiatives:** Organize community-based workshops tailored to elderly users, focusing on basic digital skills and social media navigation.
- **Encouraging Family Involvement:** Families should play an active role in teaching and encouraging the elderly to use digital platforms, helping them feel more connected.
- **Emotional and Social Support Programs:** Initiatives that offer emotional support for elderly individuals experiencing social isolation due to digital barriers can help them regain confidence and reduce loneliness.

## Case 3: Loneliness and Empty Nest Syndrome

### Introduction

In 2023, a 68-year-old retired homemaker from Kollam, Kerala, experienced loneliness and emotional distress due to *empty nest syndrome* after her children moved abroad for work. Despite being active on social media, the lack of in-person interaction and a sense of purpose in her daily life led to feelings of isolation and emptiness.

## Background

The woman had devoted her life to raising her children and managing her household. Once her children left for better opportunities abroad, she found herself struggling with the quietness of her home and the absence of their presence. She turned to social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook to stay connected with her family. Initially, these platforms provided a sense of relief, as she could see updates about her children and grandchildren. However, over time, her reliance on social media highlighted her feelings of isolation, especially when her messages went unanswered for long periods.

She also followed health-related groups on social media, but misinformation about remedies and medical advice caused her additional anxiety. The lack of face-to-face interactions with her family and friends further deepened her loneliness, and social media engagement began to feel superficial and unsatisfying.

## Challenges Faced

- **Emotional Loneliness:** She missed the warmth of in-person connections, as virtual conversations often felt impersonal.
- **Sense of Emptiness:** With no one to care for daily, she struggled to find meaning in her routine.
- **Increased Anxiety:** Misinformation on social media heightened her worries about health and safety.
- **Social Withdrawal:** Over time, her feelings of loneliness caused her to withdraw from local social gatherings and activities.

## Recovery Measures

- **Family Support:** Her children scheduled regular video calls to bridge the emotional gap and encouraged her to share her feelings openly.
- **Community Activities:** She joined a local senior citizen group that organized weekly meet-ups and cultural events, giving her a sense of belonging.
- **Digital Literacy Training:** Her grandchildren helped her identify reliable sources of information online, reducing her anxiety about misinformation.
- **Hobby Engagement:** She started attending gardening workshops and participating in neighborhood events, which helped her rediscover a sense of purpose.

## Analysis and Recommendations

- **Support Networks for Seniors:** Encourage the formation of local senior communities that provide emotional and social support.
- **Family Involvement:** Families must maintain consistent communication with elderly relatives, even when living apart, to reduce feelings of neglect.
- **Combating Misinformation:** Tailored digital literacy programs can teach elderly individuals how to identify credible online information and avoid misinformation.
- **Encouraging Offline Engagement:** Communities and families should motivate seniors to engage in hobbies, volunteer work, and offline activities to reduce reliance on social media for emotional fulfillment.

## Case 4: Emotional Distress Due to Scams

### Introduction

In 2023, a 68-year-old retired school teacher from Ernakulam, Kerala, became a victim of a financial scam through social media. She was an active Facebook user and often relied on the platform for news and staying connected with friends and family. Her lack of awareness about online security made her vulnerable to manipulation.

### Background

The elderly woman received a Facebook message claiming she had won a large cash prize in an international lottery. The message appeared genuine, with logos of reputable organizations and official-looking certificates. She was asked to pay a "processing fee" of ₹50,000 to claim the prize. Trusting the message, she transferred the amount through an online payment gateway.

Soon after the transfer, she received additional requests for more money under different pretexts (e.g., customs clearance and taxes). When she shared this with her son, he realized it was a scam and contacted the authorities, but by then, ₹1.5 lakh was already lost.

### Challenges Faced

- **Emotional Distress:** The woman experienced severe guilt and anxiety for losing her hard-earned savings.
- **Loss of Trust:** She became skeptical of using social media and even hesitated to interact online with her friends and family.
- **Shame and Social Isolation:** Fear of judgment from others made her withdraw from her regular social circles.
- **Paranoia:** She developed a fear of being tricked again, leading to over-cautiousness even in legitimate online transactions.

### Recovery Measure

- The woman's family provided emotional support and encouraged her to seek help.
- She attended digital literacy workshops organized by a local NGO in Kochi, which focused on online safety.
- Authorities were able to identify some scam operators, but the money could not be recovered.

### Analysis and Recommendations

- **Awareness Campaigns:** Conduct regular social media workshops for the elderly, focusing on identifying scams and misinformation.
- **Technological Assistance:** Introduce simplified security features, like scam alerts in regional languages, for elderly users.
- **Community Engagement:** Encourage family members to monitor and guide the elderly in their online activities.



- **Policy Interventions:** Strengthen cybercrime laws and improve grievance redressal mechanisms to support scam victims.

## Case 5: Loss of Trust in Social Media Platforms

### Introduction

In 2022, a 72-year-old retired bank employee from Thiruvananthapuram became a victim of misinformation spread through WhatsApp. The elderly man, who lived alone, relied on social media platforms like WhatsApp and YouTube for news and health-related advice.

### Background

The man received a viral WhatsApp message claiming that a specific herbal remedy could completely cure diabetes. The message included unverified testimonials and a video link to a self-proclaimed health expert. Trusting the information, he decided to stop his prescribed medication and shifted entirely to the herbal remedy. Over the next two months, his blood sugar levels rose dangerously, leading to a severe diabetic episode that required hospitalization. His doctor explained that the misinformation had caused his condition to worsen, and he was lucky to have received timely medical attention.

### Challenges Faced

- **Guilt and Regret:** The man felt deep regret for trusting the misinformation, blaming himself for the deterioration of his health.
- **Anxiety and Fear:** The incident created a lingering fear about his health and the reliability of online information.
- **Distrust of Technology:** He became hesitant to use WhatsApp and other platforms, even for legitimate purposes, due to fear of being misled again.
- **Isolation:** His self-esteem was affected, leading to reduced interaction with friends and family.

### Recovery Measure

- His family intervened to provide emotional support and help him regain confidence.
- The local Residents' Association organized a seminar on health misinformation and safe online practices, which he attended.
- The doctor emphasized the importance of consulting healthcare professionals for medical advice and not relying solely on online sources.

### Analysis and Recommendations

- **Health Awareness Drives:** Local health authorities should work to debunk viral misinformation and promote fact-checked medical advice through accessible channels.
- **Digital Literacy Programs:** Tailored workshops for the elderly to help them differentiate between credible and fake information.

- **Community Monitoring:** Encourage local communities to report and address misinformation in groups, especially on WhatsApp.
- **Stronger Regulations:** Platforms like WhatsApp and YouTube should take proactive steps to flag and remove harmful health-related misinformation.

## CASE 6: COPING MECHANISMS AND FAMILY SUPPORT

### Introduction

In 2023, a 70-year-old grandmother from Kozhikode became a victim of a sophisticated social media scam that exploited her emotions. She was an active WhatsApp user and frequently stayed in touch with her family through video calls and messages.

### Background

One day, she received a video call from an unknown number. The caller used AI-generated technology to mimic her grandson's voice, claiming he had been kidnapped and urgently needed ₹2 lakh for his release. The video even showed her "grandson" tied up, crying for help. Panicked, she immediately transferred the money to the bank account shared by the scammer. It was only after she called her actual grandson—who was safe at his workplace—that she realized she had been duped. The scammers had used her social media activity to gather details about her family and orchestrate the scam.

### Challenges Faced

- **Severe Emotional Trauma:** The experience left her in a state of shock, with feelings of betrayal and helplessness.
- **Sleep Disturbances:** She began suffering from insomnia, replaying the incident in her mind and fearing similar scams.
- **Distrust of Technology:** She stopped using WhatsApp and reduced her phone usage altogether, fearing further attacks.
- **Social Withdrawal:** Ashamed of falling for the scam, she avoided family gatherings and became reclusive.

### Recovery Measure

- Her family stepped in to provide reassurance and helped her file a complaint with the cybercrime police.
- The local police issued an advisory warning about such scams, which were targeting elderly individuals in the area.
- She attended counseling sessions arranged by her family to overcome her anxiety and regain confidence in using technology.

### Analysis and Recommendations

- **Cybersecurity Awareness:** Elderly users need training to recognize red flags, like urgency in financial requests or unfamiliar calls.

- **Enhanced Social Media Privacy:** Family members should assist elderly relatives in setting strict privacy controls to limit access to personal information.
- **AI-Driven Scam Alerts:** Technology platforms should develop real-time detection systems to warn users about deepfake and voice-mimicking scams.
- **Community Watch Programs:** Local communities should set up groups to educate the elderly about emerging cyber threats and scams.

## Case Study 7: Elderly Man Falls Victim to Fake Charity Scam

### Introduction

In 2023, a 74-year-old retired government employee from Thrissur, Kerala, became a victim of a scam that exploited his compassion. He regularly used Facebook to stay updated on social issues and followed pages of NGOs and charitable organizations.

### Background

The man came across a Facebook post about a child in need of urgent surgery. The post included heart-wrenching images, a fabricated story about the family's financial struggles, and a link to donate. Wanting to help, he clicked the link, which directed him to a fake payment gateway. He ended up transferring ₹50,000, believing it would save the child's life. Later, he discovered through local news that the same scam had duped several people. The story and images were stolen from legitimate charity campaigns and reused by fraudsters.

### Challenges Faced

- **Emotional Manipulation:** The man felt betrayed and heartbroken for being deceived while trying to do a good deed.
- **Loss of Trust:** He grew wary of supporting genuine causes online, even hesitating to donate to verified charities.
- **Embarrassment:** He avoided discussing the incident with family or friends out of shame for being tricked.
- **Increased Anxiety:** The incident left him feeling paranoid about other online interactions, fearing further scams.

### Recovery Measure

- His son reported the incident to Kerala's Cybercrime Cell, which initiated an investigation but could not recover the funds.
- Family members educated him on verifying the authenticity of online campaigns by using platforms like *GiveIndia* or *Milaap*.
- A local NGO conducted a seminar in his community on identifying fake charity scams and other online threats.

## Analysis and Recommendations

- **Verify Authenticity:** Encourage elderly users to cross-check charitable campaigns with official websites or organizations before donating.
- **Digital Literacy Campaigns:** Conduct workshops in Kerala on recognizing scams, particularly targeting the elderly.
- **Regulated Crowdfunding:** Strengthen oversight of online fundraising platforms to prevent misuse by fraudsters.
- **Family Involvement:** Relatives should guide elderly individuals in verifying social media posts and making online transactions.

## Findings of the study

The study revealed several key findings regarding the social challenges faced by elderly social media users in Kerala. Many elderly individuals experienced significant emotional distress, including anxiety, guilt, and fear, particularly when they became victims of scams or misinformation. This emotional turmoil often led to increased feelings of isolation and loneliness, as many participants withdrew from social media platforms due to fear of further deception. A lack of digital literacy was identified as a major contributing factor, with many elderly users unable to recognize online threats, making them more vulnerable to scams and false information. As a result, several participants reduced their social media usage or became more cautious and skeptical in their online interactions. The study also found that elderly individuals who received support from family members or trusted individuals were better able to cope with these challenges and regain confidence in using social media. Additionally, the research highlighted the need for awareness campaigns and digital literacy programs to help elderly users navigate social media safely. Those involved in community groups, both online and offline, felt more connected and supported, suggesting the importance of fostering social networks to combat isolation.

## Suggestion

- Provide digital literacy training to help elderly users stay connected online.
- Encourage families to stay in touch with elderly members through social media.
- Help elderly users recognize scams and use online security features.
- Encourage families to assist elderly users in staying safe online.
- Make social media security tools easier for elderly users to understand and use.
- Raise awareness about scams through media and community events.
- Provide support and advice for elderly users affected by scams.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the profound social challenges faced by elderly social media users in Kerala, particularly in relation to emotional distress, isolation, and vulnerability to online scams and misinformation. The lack of digital literacy plays a central role in making elderly individuals more susceptible to these threats, which in turn leads to anxiety, mistrust, and social withdrawal. As a result, many elderly users distance themselves from social media, further deepening their sense of isolation from family and community. To mitigate these challenges, it is crucial to prioritize digital literacy programs, promote awareness about online safety, and encourage active family involvement in guiding elderly users.

By fostering a more supportive and secure digital environment, elderly individuals can regain confidence in using social media, reducing isolation and helping them reconnect with their social circles.

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