Assessing Digital Media Literacy among Adults in Rural Kerala: A Micro-level Investigation

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Abstract

This study endeavours to probe the realm of digital media literacy among adults residing in a rural setting in the state of Kerala, India. Digital media literacy encompasses the capacity to proficiently navigate, critically evaluate, and pose relevant, insightful inquiries to comprehend and derive meaning from content prevalent in the digital landscape. It often amalgamates the multifaceted aspects of media literacy with the technological prowess of digital literacy. As we step into an era where competence in employing, participating in, and comprehending digital media and services becomes an imperative prerequisite for active engagement in the digital economy and broader societal discourse, this study assumes paramount significance. In the backdrop of the "Satyameva Jayate" initiative launched by the Government of Kerala in 2021, with a primary focus on countering the proliferation of fake news, this micro-level investigation aims to provide insights into the contemporary state of digital media literacy among the adult population within a rural milieu. The primary objectives of this research were two-fold: firstly, to evaluate the patterns of digital media usage prevalent among adults, and secondly, to gauge their awareness levels concerning the reliability of information sources.

The findings, rooted in a comprehensive questionnaire survey conducted among adults residing in Thekkekkara Grama Panchayath, Alappuzha district, unveil intriguing facets of digital media engagement. A substantial proportion of respondents exhibited limited awareness regarding fact-checking mechanisms and the potential perils associated with disseminating counterfeit or unsubstantiated content encountered through various social media platforms. The study also disclosed that more than half of the surveyed households relied on broadband connections for internet access, while the remainder depended on mobile data services. These findings illuminate the urgent need to enhance digital media literacy among adult populations, particularly in rural areas, and underscore the importance of initiatives like "Satyameva Jayate'' in promoting media literacy and responsible digital engagement.

Keywords: Digital Media Literacy, Micro-level Study, Digital Economy, Reliability of Information

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Introduction

Digital media literacy has emerged as a crucial skill in the contemporary world. As the digital landscape rapidly evolves, the ability to navigate, critically assess, and comprehend the deluge of digital content becomes increasingly important. Digital media literacy is a multidimensional concept that encompasses various competencies required to effectively engage with digital media. Buckingham (2007) emphasises critical thinking, digital production skills, and the ability to analyse and evaluate media content. Hobbs (2010) posits that digital literacy includes technical skills for accessing and using digital tools and platforms, as well as the capability to critically assess and communicate information in digital environments.

In the Indian context, governmental initiatives have been implemented to promote digital literacy. The National Digital Literacy Mission, launched in 2012 by the Government of India, aimed to provide basic digital literacy skills to all citizens, particularly those in rural areas (Kumar, 2019). The Digital India campaign further emphasised the need to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy, advocating for digital literacy at the grassroots level (Sharma, 2016).

Digital media literacy in rural contexts

Research on digital media literacy often concentrates on urban settings, overlooking the unique challenges faced by rural communities. Singh (2018) highlighted the barriers in rural areas, including limited access to technology, linguistic challenges, and a lack of infrastructure. Singh (2018) emphasised the urgent need for tailored digital literacy programs designed for rural populations. The digital divide remains a significant challenge, particularly in rural areas, where access to resources and internet connectivity is limited (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007). Studies like Rangaswamy and Sridhar (2016) emphasise the necessity of raising awareness about fact-checking mechanisms, guiding individuals on identifying reliable sources, and fostering critical thinking skills to counter misinformation in digital spaces.

Governmental initiatives and media literacy programmes

The "Satyameva Jayate" initiative, launched by the Government of Kerala in 2021[2] , aimed to counter the dissemination of fake news and misinformation. The program underscored the significance of media literacy and responsible digital engagement among the populace (Kerala Government, 2021). However, an in-depth assessment of its effectiveness, especially in rural areas, is essential to gauge its impact on enhancing digital media literacy.

This study endeavours to scrutinise the current state of digital media literacy among adults in a rural setting. Thekkekkara Grama Panchayath of Alappuzha district in the state of Kerala had been selected as a study locale.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study was to scrutinise the current state of digital media literacy among adults in a rural setting.

Specific objectives of the study were as follows,

- To evaluate prevalent patterns of digital media usage among adults residing in rural Kerala.
- To gauge the awareness levels among rural population on the reliability of information sources accessed through various digital platforms.

Study Method

This quantitative study involved a comprehensive questionnaire survey conducted among a sample size of 250 adults residing in Thekkekkara Grama Panchayath in the Alappuzha district of the state of Kerala. Out of a total of 19 wards in the panchayat, five wards were purposively selected, and 50 respondents from each of the wards participated in the survey. The selected wards were *Thadathilal, Choorallur, Ponnezha, Ponakam and Vathikulam*. The questionnaire was designed to encompass various facets of digital media literacy, including internet usage patterns, awareness of fact-checking mechanisms, and sources of information consumption.

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[2] In 2021, the Kerala government announced a programme named 'Satyameva Jayate' to empower people, especially the youth, with essential fact-checking tools and methods of combating fake news. Under the initiative, the government would encourage several schools and colleges to equip their curriculum with digital media literacy rules.

The sample was selected using a stratified sampling technique to ensure representation across different age groups, educational backgrounds, and occupational diversities within the rural area. From among the selected 5 wards, 50 each of the households were randomly chosen using the voters list (modified list-2019). From each selected household, one eligible adult was invited to participate. This process aimed to ensure a diverse representation of the village population in the final sample. Trained researchers with the help of ASHA workers conducted face-to-face interviews with the selected participants and noted down their responses in the questionnaire.

Analysis and Findings

A total of 267 responses were collected from the household survey through the structured questionnaire in the month of April, 2023. To enable a smooth and full response the investigators have helped the respondents by noting down their responses in the printed questionnaire. At the time of analysis of the data, 17 incomplete questionnaires were discarded and the rest 250 were selected for final analysis. Descriptive statistical analysis based on the responses are reported as follows;

Internet usage frequency of the respondents

The study revealed that a significant majority of respondents (88.8%) use the internet on a daily basis, with a smaller percentage accessing it a few times a week (8%). A minimal proportion of participants reported using the internet once a week or rarely (3.2%). This suggests a substantial level of data connectivity and usage in the study area. (see table 1).

Table 1
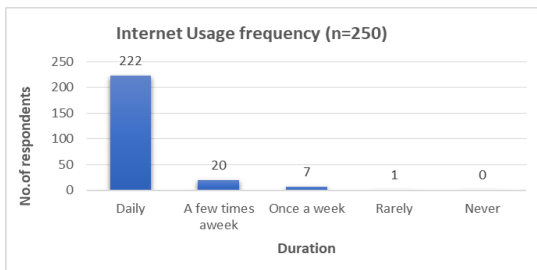
Device used to access the internet

The overwhelming preference for internet access is through smartphones, with 94% of respondents primarily using this device. Laptops/computers are used by 4% of respondents, while tablets and smart TVs are less commonly used. Smartphones dominate as the primary device for internet access indicating the increasing reliance on mobile technology for online activities (see Table 2).
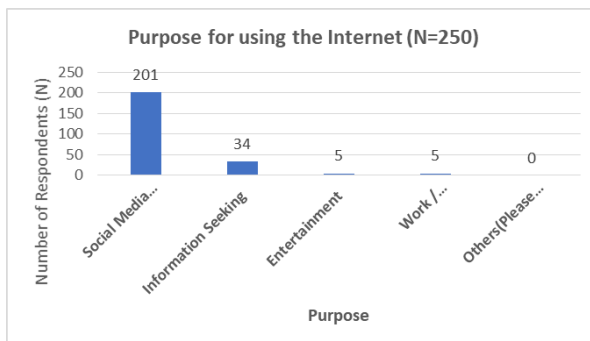
Table 2
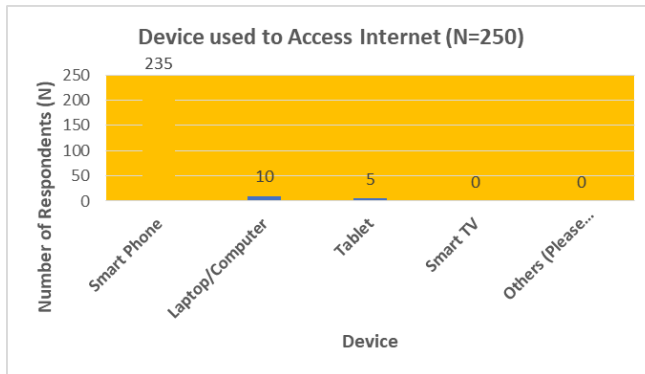
Main purpose for internet usage

The main purposes for internet use vary, with the majority of respondents engaging in social media interaction (80.4%). Information seeking is the second most common purpose (13.6%), followed by entertainment and work/professional use. (see table 3).
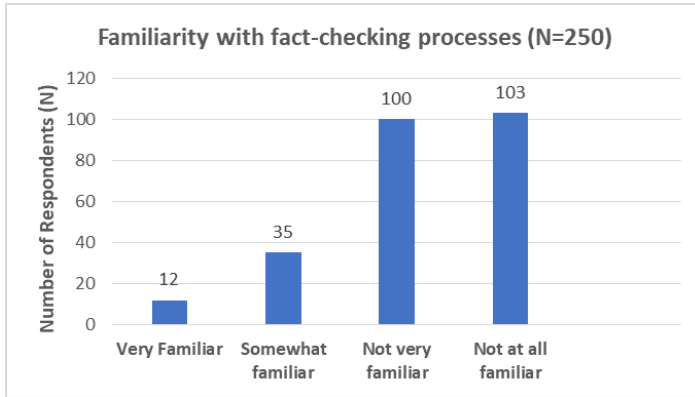
Table 3

Familiarity with fact-checking processes

Respondents show varying degrees of familiarity with fact-checking processes, with a significant number indicating they are not very familiar or not at all familiar (80%).

This suggests a potential need for education or awareness campaigns regarding online information verification. (see table 4).
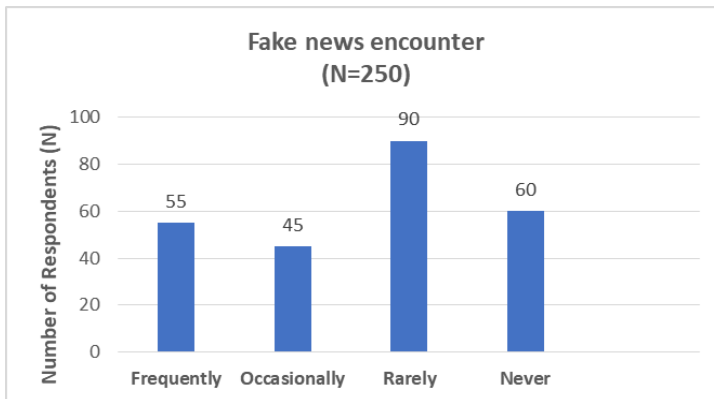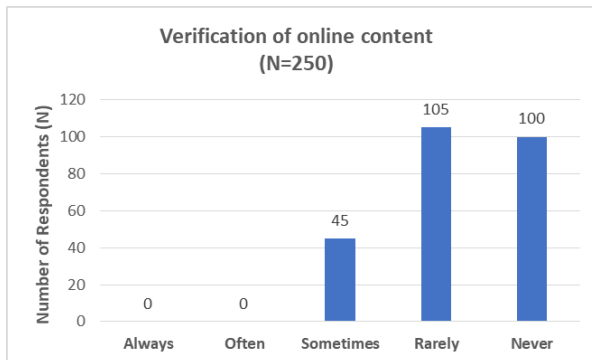
Table 4

Encountering fake news

A notable portion of respondents frequently (22%) or occasionally (18%) comes across fake news online, emphasising the importance of cultivating critical online information consumption habits. (see table 5).

Table 5

Verification of online information

A significant proportion of respondents (54%) rarely or never verify the sources of the news or information they encounter online. This highlights a potential area for improvement in digital media literacy and fact-checking behaviours. (see table 6).

Table 6

**Confidence in identifying credible information**

While a substantial number of respondents express confidence in identifying credible information online (56% very confident, 40% somewhat confident), a notable percentage (44%) feel less confident. This suggests a diverse range of digital media literacy levels among the surveyed population. (see table 7).

Table 7
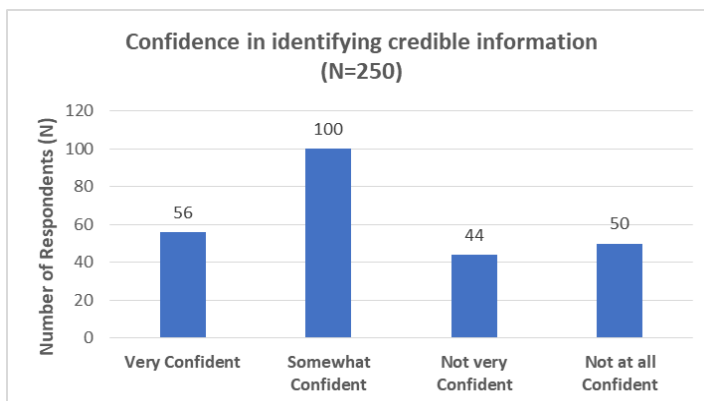
Reliance on digital platforms for news

Social media platforms, especially Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, are the primary sources for obtaining news and information for the majority of respondents (88%). This dominance raises questions about the potential impact of social media on information dissemination. (see table 8).

Table 8

Reliance on digital platforms for news (N=250)
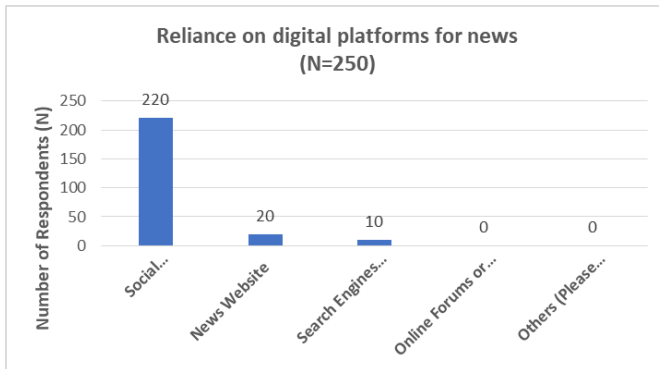
Fact-checking before sharing on social media

Majority of respondents (79%) rarely or never fact-checks information before sharing it on social media. This behaviour may contribute to the spread of misinformation. A significant number (54%) rarely or never verifies online information sources, suggesting a need for increased awareness and education on information validation. (see table 9).

Table 9

Fact-checking before sharing on social media (N=250)
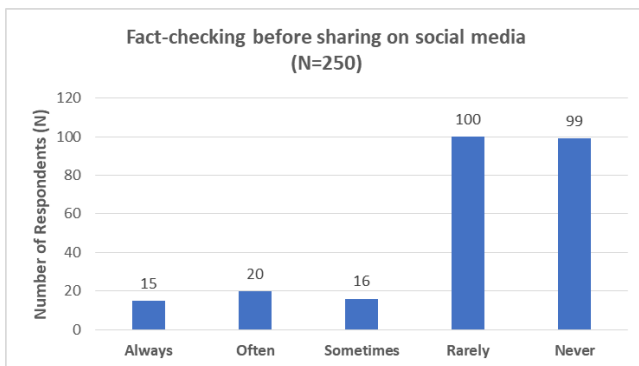
**Trust in news shared by friends or family on social media**

The majority of respondents (80.4%) are very likely to trust news shared by friends or family on social media. This highlights the influence of personal connections in shaping trust in online information. A noteworthy percentage frequently (22%) or occasionally (18%) encounters fake news, emphasising the challenge of misinformation. (see table 10).

Table 10

Trust in news shared by friends or family on social media(N=250)
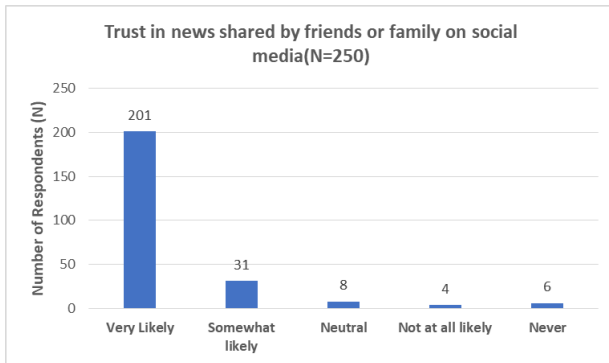
Seeking alternative viewpoints

A substantial number of respondents actively seek out alternative viewpoints when consuming online content (40.4% always, 20.4% often). This suggests a willingness to explore diverse perspectives. The majority (74.4%) is very likely to change opinions based on new information, reflecting adaptability in forming viewpoints. (see table 11).

Table 11

Seeking alternative viewpoints (N=250)
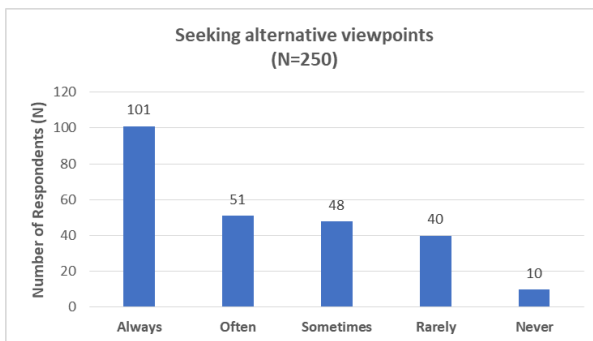
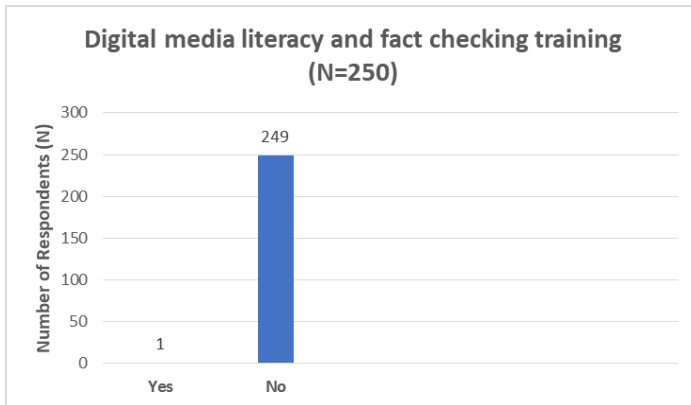**Digital media literacy training**

The majority of respondents (99.6%) have not received training or education on digital media literacy and fact-checking. This underscores the potential value of educational initiatives to enhance online information literacy. (see table 12).

Table 12

Encountering conflicting information

A significant portion of respondents (44.8%) frequently encounter conflicting information on different websites or platforms. This raises concerns about the consistency and reliability of online information. (see table 13).

Table 13
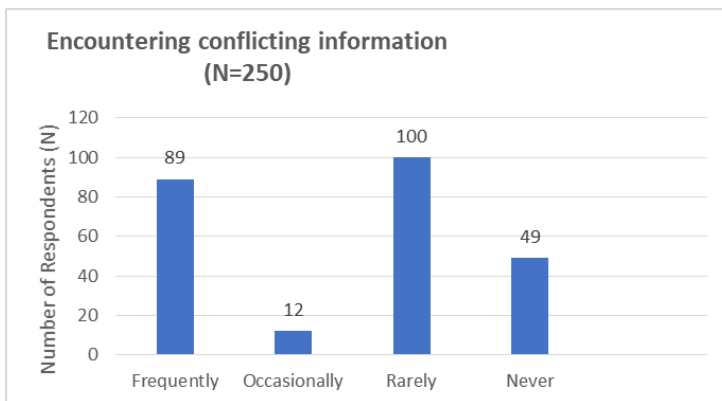
Concerns about online information reliability

A considerable percentage of respondents (61.6%) express some level of concern about the reliability of information found online. This suggests a need for increased awareness about critically evaluating online information sources. (see table 14).

Table 14
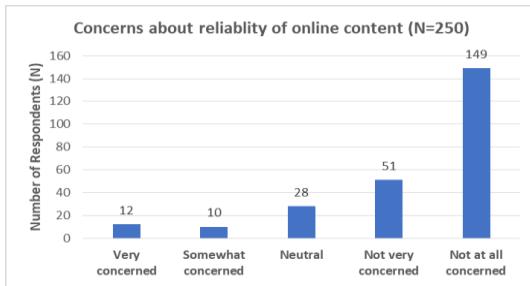
Likelihood to change opinion based on new information

The majority of respondents (74.4%) are very likely to change their opinion based on new information found online. This indicates a dynamic and adaptable approach to forming opinions based on the information available.

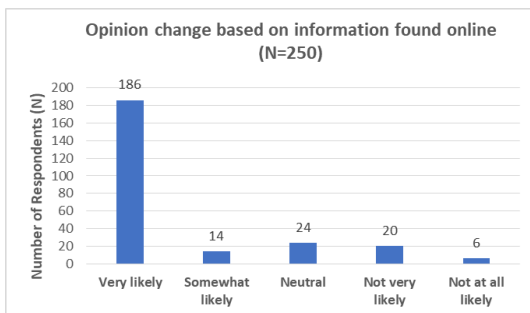In summary, the data reflects a complex landscape of internet usage, information consumption habits, and digital literacy levels among the surveyed individuals. Efforts to enhance digital media literacy, fact-checking awareness, and critical thinking skills could contribute to a more informed and discerning online community. (see table 15).

Table 15

Summary of Findings

Digital landscape and internet usage

The high frequency of daily internet usage (88.8%) underscores the ubiquity of digital technology in the lives of the surveyed individuals. The overwhelming preference for smartphones (94%) as the primary device for internet access highlights the increasing

reliance on mobile technology. This suggests a need for digital infrastructure development to ensure equitable access and support for users across various devices.

Purpose and nature of online activities

Social media interaction emerges as the dominant purpose for internet use (80.4%), emphasising the social aspect of online engagement. However, the relatively lower percentages for information seeking (13.6%), entertainment, and work-related use suggest a potential opportunity to diversify online activities and promote a more balanced and purposeful use of the internet.

Digital literacy and awareness challenges

The data reveals a significant gap in digital literacy, particularly in the familiarity with fact-checking processes (80% not very familiar or not at all familiar). The lack of verification practices (54% rarely or never verify sources) raises concerns about the potential spread of misinformation. To address these challenges, there is a pressing need for comprehensive digital literacy programs that empower individuals to critically evaluate and validate online information.

Trust dynamics and concerns

The juxtaposition of encountering fake news (40%) with a high likelihood of trusting news shared by friends or family on social media (80.4%) highlights the complex nature of trust dynamics. This suggests that personal connections play a substantial role in shaping trust, even in the face of potential misinformation. It emphasises the importance of fostering a culture of critical thinking and source evaluation within social circles.

Critical thinking and adaptability

While a significant number actively seeks alternative viewpoints (40.4% always, 20.4% often), indicating a willingness to diversify perspectives, the data also reveals that a considerable percentage (74.4%) is very likely to change opinions based on new information. This underscores the importance of promoting a flexible and adaptive approach to information consumption, encouraging individuals to reevaluate their views based on credible and updated information.

Concerns about reliability and confidence in identifying credible information

The expressed concern about the reliability of online information (61.6%) suggests a need for strategies to enhance confidence in navigating the digital landscape. While

a majority expresses confidence in identifying credible information, a significant percentage (44%) feels less confident. Addressing this confidence gap requires targeted interventions to enhance media literacy skills and provide individuals with the tools to critically assess the credibility of online content.

Recommendations and Suggestions

To bridge the digital literacy gap, it is imperative to implement comprehensive digital literacy programs at educational institutions, workplaces, and community centres. These programs should cover fundamental aspects such as fact-checking processes, source verification, and critical evaluation of online information. Collaborative efforts between government bodies, educational institutions, and non-profit organisations can play a pivotal role in designing and delivering these programs.

Collaborate with fact-checking organisations to promote fact-checking initiatives. This can include awareness campaigns, workshops, and online resources to educate individuals about the importance of verifying information before sharing it. Encourage the integration of fact-checking tools within popular online platforms to facilitate real-time verification.

Encourage a diverse range of online activities beyond social media interaction. Promote the use of online platforms for educational purposes, skill development, and professional networking. By diversifying online engagement, individuals can derive greater value from the internet and develop a more well-rounded digital presence.

Implement community-based initiatives to foster critical thinking within social circles. Encourage open discussions about information consumption habits, share tips on source evaluation, and promote a collective commitment to responsible information sharing. Leveraging social networks for positive influence can contribute to building a culture of critical thinking.

Work with education authorities to integrate digital literacy education into school curricula. Equip students with the necessary skills to navigate the digital landscape responsibly from an early age. This proactive approach can cultivate a generation of digitally literate individuals who are better equipped to discern reliable information from misinformation.

Collaborate with major online platforms to enhance user awareness and promote responsible information sharing. Platforms should actively participate in initiatives that encourage users to verify information before sharing and provide clear guidelines on distinguishing credible sources.

Work with employers to incorporate media literacy training into workplace development programmes. This will empower employees to critically evaluate information encountered in professional settings, reducing the risk of misinformation influencing decision-making processes.

Establish mechanisms for continuous monitoring and evaluation of digital literacy initiatives. Regularly assess the impact of programs to ensure their effectiveness in addressing evolving challenges in the digital landscape. Adapt strategies based on feedback and emerging trends to stay relevant and impactful.

By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can contribute to building a digitally literate society that engages with online information critically, responsibly, and effectively. This multifaceted approach addresses various aspects of digital literacy and empowers individuals to navigate the digital landscape with confidence and resilience against misinformation.

Conclusion

This micro-level study conducted in a rural area in the state of Kerala has yielded compelling insights into the digital media usage patterns of the local population. The findings underscore a robust penetration of digital media, revealing a high level of connectivity even in traditionally underserved rural regions. Despite this, the study highlights a critical gap in digital media literacy, with a substantial portion of the population lacking awareness of effective and responsible use of digital media, particularly in the context of combating the proliferation of fake news. The prevalence of digital media usage in rural Kerala indicates a remarkable shift in the information landscape, with technology reaching even the remote corners of the state. The high connectivity observed underscores the transformative power of digital media in bridging geographical gaps and bringing information to previously isolated communities. This aspect is particularly noteworthy as it challenges preconceived notions about the limited reach of digital technology in rural settings.

However, the study reveals a significant gap in digital media literacy, pointing to a lack of awareness and understanding among the rural population about the appropriate use of digital media. This deficiency extends to measures and mechanisms for fact-checking and discerning the credibility of information, especially in the context of the escalating issue of fake news. The findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive digital media literacy initiatives tailored to the specific needs and challenges faced by the rural population.

The prevalence of misinformation and the limited awareness of fact-checking processes among the rural population emphasise the urgent need to address the menace of fake news. In this context, the "Sathyameva Jayathe" program initiated by the government of Kerala stands as a crucial step towards promoting truth and accuracy in the media. However, the study suggests that there is a pressing need to extend this program to the grassroots level. Collaborative efforts involving various stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), are essential to ensure the effective dissemination of digital media literacy programmes.

In light of the study's findings, it becomes imperative to disseminate digital media literacy programs widely across all parts of the state. These programs should not only focus on the basic use of digital media but also emphasise critical aspects such as verifying information sources, recognizing misinformation, and employing fact-checking measures. The dissemination process should leverage various means, including community workshops, educational institutions, and awareness campaigns in collaboration with local NGOs.

The "Sathyameva Jayathe" program, with its emphasis on truth and accuracy in media, can play a pivotal role in addressing the existing digital literacy gap. However, for its impact to be maximised, it is crucial to extend its reach to the grassroots level. This requires concerted efforts from governmental bodies, NGOs, and local community leaders to ensure that the benefits of the program reach every segment of the rural population.

Governmental bodies, NGOs, and other stakeholders must collaborate to create a comprehensive and sustainable framework for digital media literacy. By working together, they can leverage their unique strengths to design and implement initiatives that resonate with the diverse rural communities in Kerala. This collaborative approach is essential for building a digitally literate society that can navigate the complexities of the digital landscape with confidence and resilience.

Therefore, the study calls for the transformative potential of digital media in rural Kerala while underscoring the urgent need for digital media literacy initiatives. The Sathyameva Jayathe program, as a symbol of the government's commitment to truth in media, needs to be extended to the grassroots level through collaborative efforts. The future of a well-informed and digitally literate society in Kerala hinges on the proactive and inclusive implementation of digital media literacy programs tailored to the unique needs of the rural populace.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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