

A Study on the Information Seeking Behaviour of the Elderly in Kerala: A Gerontological Perspective

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Abstract

Kerala, with one of the highest proportions of elderly in India, faces growing concerns regarding ageing, independence, and social inclusion. Understanding the information-seeking behaviour of older adults is vital to ensuring their access to health, welfare, and social resources from a Gerontological perspective. The study aimed to examine the patterns, preferred sources, challenges, and perceived benefits of information-seeking among elderly people in Kerala. A structured questionnaire was administered to 95 respondents aged 60 years and above. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics to generate percentage-wise distributions of responses across demographic, behavioural, and attitudinal variables. The majority of respondents (46.7%) belonged to the 71–75 age group, with women representing 73.3% of the sample. Health information (66.7%) was the most sought, followed by welfare schemes (40.0%) and financial matters (26.7%). Family members (60.0%) and newspapers (46.7%) were the most common sources, while family remained the most trusted (46.7%). Digital literacy was limited, with 40.0% citing lack of digital skills as a barrier, yet 73.3% expressed interest in learning digital methods. Access to information was perceived as enhancing independence and security by most respondents. Elderly information-seeking in Kerala is shaped by a reliance on traditional and interpersonal sources, alongside emerging interest in digital media. The findings highlight the need for community support, accessible formats (e.g., large-font booklets, TV/radio updates), and digital literacy programmes. Strengthening such interventions can improve elderly empowerment, well-being, and social integration.

Keywords: Elderly, Information-seeking behaviour, Kerala, Gerontology, Digital literacy, Information access

1. Introduction

Ageing is a universal process, but the way societies experience and respond to it varies widely. Across the world, populations are living longer, and this shift brings new challenges and opportunities for older adults. According to the World Health Organization (2022), the proportion of people aged 60 years and above is expected to double by 2050, highlighting the need to understand ageing not just as a biological process but as a social and cultural reality. In India, Kerala stands out as the state with the highest proportion of elderly citizens currently over 16% of its population well above the national average (Government of Kerala, 2021). This makes Kerala not only a leader in demographic transition but also an

important context for studying how older people live, adapt, and seek support in an information-driven world.

For elderly individuals, information is more than data—it is a tool for maintaining health, making decisions, staying connected, and preserving independence. Their information-seeking behaviour is shaped by a web of factors including physical and cognitive health, literacy, digital skills, and the role of family and community (Wilson, 1999; Case & Given, 2016). In Kerala, where high literacy coexists with rapid technological advancement, older adults encounter both opportunities and barriers: some actively navigate digital platforms, while others continue to depend on interpersonal networks and traditional sources such as print or community gatherings (Chakraborty & Joseph, 2019).

A Gerontological perspective allows us to see that information seeking is not simply a mechanical act but an essential part of ageing with dignity. It reflects how older adults cope with change, preserve autonomy, and remain socially engaged (Quadrello et al., 2005). Yet, despite Kerala's prominence in ageing studies, systematic research on how its elderly population searches for and uses information remains limited.

This study aims to address that gap by examining the information-seeking behaviour of the elderly in Kerala. It focuses on the sources they trust, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they adopt. By doing so, the research contributes to designing more responsive health communication, social support, and policy initiatives that can foster active and inclusive ageing.

1.1 Objectives

1. To examine the information needs, preferred sources, and levels of trust in information among elderly people in Kerala.
2. To assess the barriers, digital literacy, and socio-demographic factors influencing information-seeking behaviour of the elderly.
3. To explore the role of family and community support, along with perceived outcomes of information access, in enhancing elderly well-being and independence.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Information-Seeking Behaviour among the Elderly

Information-seeking behaviour refers to the ways individuals recognize their information needs, search for information, and use it to make decisions. Older adults often have distinct patterns of seeking information due to cognitive, social, and technological factors (Case & Given, 2016). Studies indicate that the elderly rely heavily on familiar and trusted sources, such as family members, friends, newspapers, radio, and television, rather than digital platforms (Allen et al., 2019). Health-related information is frequently the most sought-after category, reflecting the centrality of healthcare in the daily lives of older adults (Lambert & Loiselle, 2007).

2.2. Impact of Demographic Factors

Demographic characteristics including age, gender, educational attainment, income, and place of residence affect information-seeking patterns. For instance, higher education and urban residence are associated with greater use of digital sources, while rural or less-educated elderly often rely on traditional media or interpersonal networks (Tsai et al., 2019). Age-related declines in vision, mobility, and cognitive functioning also influence how and where older adults seek information.

2.3. Digital Literacy and Technology Use

The advent of ICT has expanded access to information, but many older adults face barriers in using mobile phones, computers, or the internet (Charness & Boot, 2009). Digital literacy, self-efficacy, and previous

exposure to technology significantly determine whether the elderly adopt digital platforms. Studies show that lack of digital skills, poor eyesight, and limited trust in online information restrict the ability of older adults to benefit fully from online sources (Friemel, 2016).

2.4. Barriers and Challenges

Barriers to effective information access for the elderly include physical limitations, technological challenges, social isolation, and lack of guidance (Hartnett et al., 2020). Language barriers and information overload further complicate the process, often leading to reliance on familiar or local sources, which may limit exposure to broader knowledge.

2.5. Role of Social Support and Community Initiatives

Family, friends, caregivers, and community organizations play a pivotal role in facilitating information access. Intergenerational support and local initiatives, such as training programs and elder-friendly digital tools, enhance the elderly's ability to seek, interpret, and use information effectively (Quan-Haase et al., 2016). Community media and government outreach programs, particularly in local languages, are shown to improve information reach among rural and semi-urban older populations.

2.6. Gaps in Literature

While extensive studies exist on health information-seeking among the elderly, research specifically focusing on regional contexts like Kerala, India, and including both digital and traditional information sources, remains sparse. Few studies integrate quantitative patterns of behaviour with qualitative insights about barriers, preferences, and community support mechanisms. Understanding these dynamics is essential to designing interventions that improve access and promote digital inclusion.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in **Wilson's (1999) Model of Information Behaviour**, which provides a comprehensive lens to understand how individuals recognize information needs, engage in seeking behaviours, and encounter barriers that shape their access to knowledge. According to Wilson (1999), information-seeking begins with a perceived need, which then drives individuals to access available sources. The process is mediated by intervening variables such as personal characteristics, social roles, environmental context, and barriers. In the present study, the elderly participants' needs for health updates, pension details, or government schemes align with Wilson's "information need" construct. Their reliance on family, newspapers, and television reflects their "information-seeking behaviour," while obstacles such as lack of digital skills, poor eyesight, and limited language proficiency represent key barriers. The model also helps explain how family and community support act as facilitators in overcoming these limitations, enabling effective information use.

To complement this, the research also draws on the **Continuity Theory of Ageing** (Atchley, 1989), which posits that older adults adapt to ageing by maintaining consistency in habits, preferences, and social roles across the life span. Information-seeking practices observed in this study resonate with this theory: the elderly continue to rely on familiar, trusted sources such as family members and newspapers, reflecting continuity in lifelong practices. At the same time, the expressed interest in learning digital tools suggests a dynamic adaptation where continuity coexists with gradual incorporation of new strategies. Together, Wilson's model and Continuity Theory provide a dual perspective—highlighting not only the structural processes of information behaviour but also the psychosocial underpinnings of how the elderly in Kerala engage with information in ways that sustain their independence, dignity, and well-being.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey design to investigate the information-seeking behaviour of the elderly in Kerala. The descriptive approach was appropriate, as it enabled the researcher to systematically collect data from elderly participants, analyse patterns in their behaviour, and interpret findings in light of gerontological perspectives. The focus was on capturing the lived realities of older adults with regard to the types of information they seek, the sources they rely upon, and the challenges they encounter.

The population of the study consisted of elderly individuals aged 60 years and above residing in Kerala. For practical purposes, a purposive sampling technique was used to identify respondents who were accessible and willing to participate. Out of 100 distributed questionnaires, 95 valid responses were collected. While the sample size is small, the data serve as an exploratory insight into elderly information practices and provide a pilot foundation for further research.

The instrument of data collection was a structured questionnaire prepared by the researcher. The questionnaire comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions covering demographic details, information needs, and sources of information, trust in sources, digital literacy and comfort with mobile/internet, perceived barriers, and suggestions for improving access. The inclusion of both question types allowed for quantifiable analysis alongside qualitative insights.

Data were collected directly from respondents either through self-administration of the questionnaire or with researcher assistance, depending on the literacy level and comfort of the participants. Ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality of responses were ensured throughout the process.

For data analysis, the responses were tabulated and analysed using frequency distributions and percentages to highlight major patterns and trends. Interpretations were further supported with descriptive narratives, reflecting the social and cultural context of Kerala. The results were presented in tabular form and supplemented with qualitative comments from respondents to enrich understanding.

5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table No .1 - Age

Category	Percentage
60–65	6.7
66–70	6.7
71–75	46.7
76–80	20.0
81 and above	20.0

In this table -1 : The age distribution shows that nearly half of the respondents (46.7%) were between 71–75 years, making this the largest group, while 20% each were aged 76–80 and 81 and above. Smaller proportions (6.7% each) fell in the 60–65 and 66–70 categories. This indicates that the study primarily reflects the experiences of the “older-old” rather than the “young-old.”

Table No 2. Gender

Category	Percentage
Female	73.3
Male	26.7

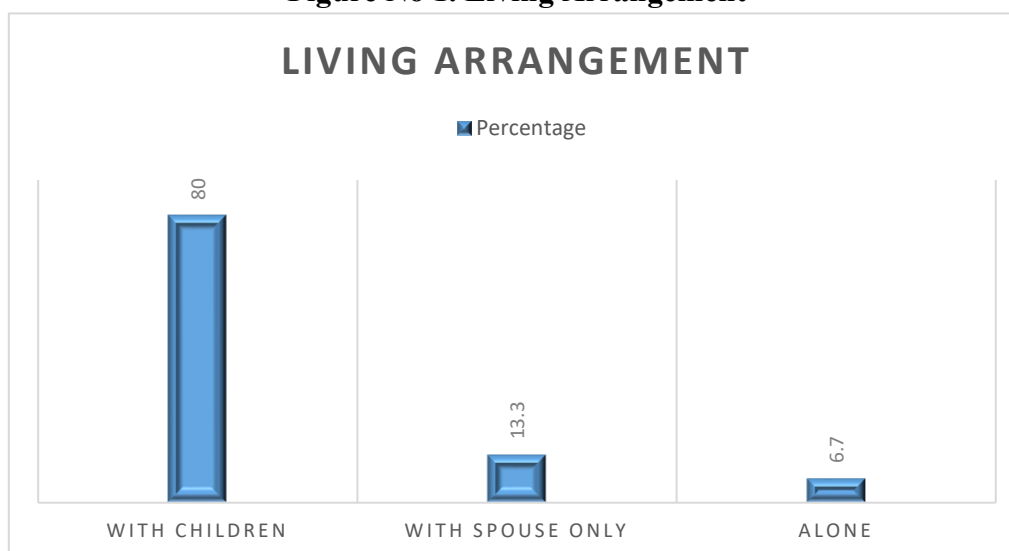
In this table -2: A clear majority of respondents were female (73.3%), with males accounting for 26.7%. This suggests that women are more visible in elderly populations in Kerala, consistent with demographic trends of higher female longevity.

Table No 3. Educational Qualification

Category	Percentage
Graduate & above	46.7
Secondary	26.7
Higher Secondary	13.3
Primary	13.3

In this table – 3: About 46.7% of the elderly respondents were graduates and above, while 26.7% had only secondary education. A smaller share reported higher secondary (13.3%) and primary level education (13.3%). This relatively high level of educational attainment reflects Kerala's well-known literacy achievements.

Figure No 1. Living Arrangement



In this Fig -1: Most elderly respondents (80%) live with children, while 13.3% live with a spouse only and 6.7% live alone. The dominance of intergenerational households highlights the continuing role of family as a support system.

Table No 5. Residence

Category	Percentage
Rural	40.0
Semi-Urban	33.3
Urban	26.7

From this above table, Respondents were distributed across rural (40%), semi-urban (33.3%), and urban (26.7%) areas, suggesting a fair geographical spread though with a rural area.

Table No 6. Monthly Income

Category	Percentage
No income	26.7
Rs. 5000 – Rs. 10000	26.7
Rs. 10000 and above	33.3
Below Rs. 5000	13.3

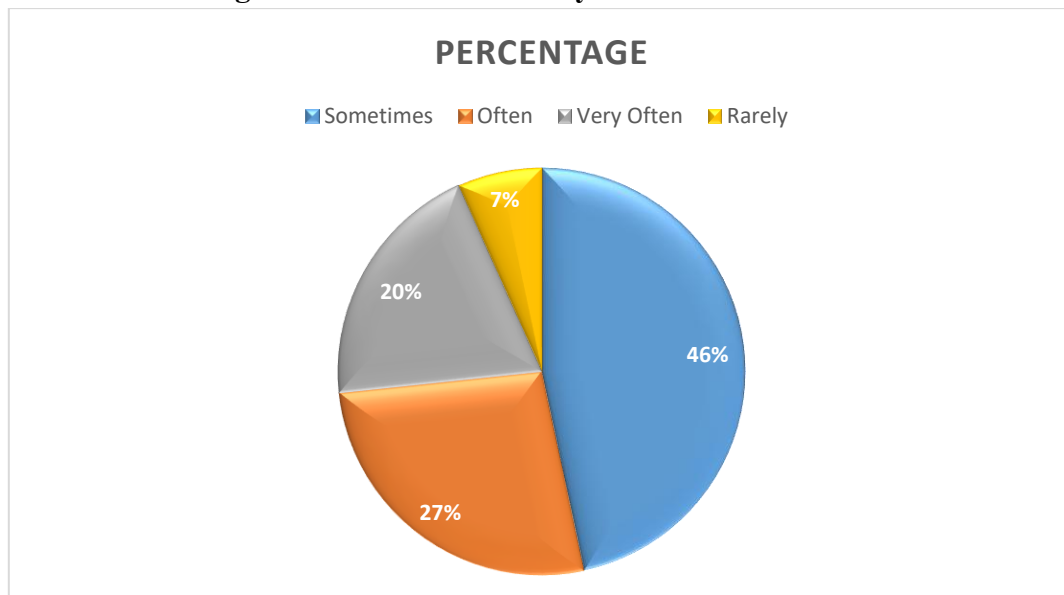
From this above table no.6, Income patterns revealed that 33.3% earned Rs. 10,000 and above, while 26.7% each reported no income or income between Rs. 5,000–10,000. Only 13.3% earned below Rs. 5,000. The significant proportion without income underscores the economic vulnerability of some elderly

Table No 7. Health Status

Category	Percentage
Moderate	40.0
Good	33.3
Poor	26.7

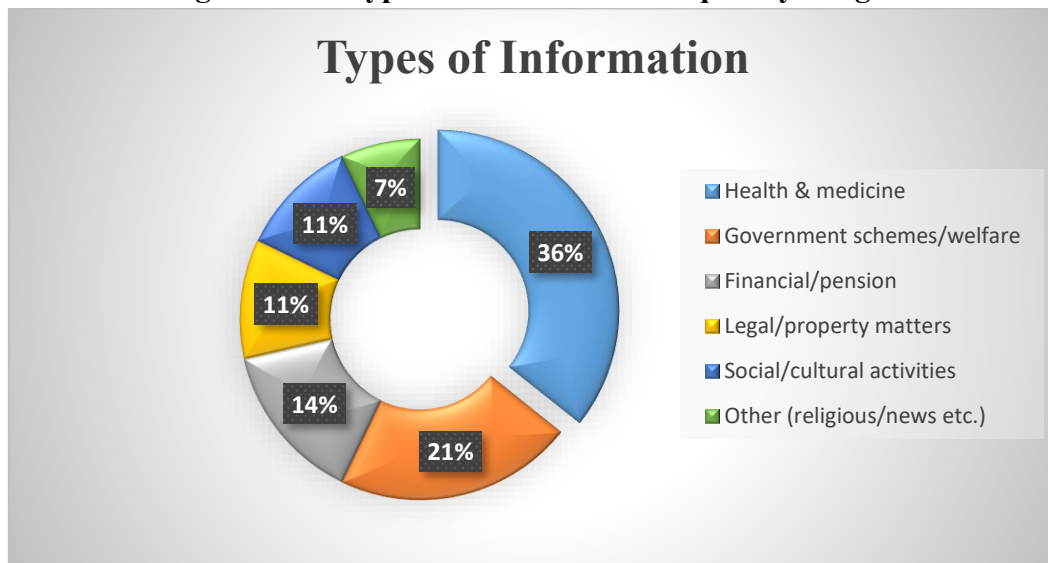
From this above table, Health was reported as moderate by 40%, good by 33.3%, and poor by 26.7%, showing that health concerns remain prevalent, with one-fourth of respondents rating themselves in poor health.

Figure No 2. How often do you seek information?



From this Fig No.2, Nearly half (46.7%) of the elderly seek information sometimes, while 26.7% seek it often, and 20% very often. Only 6.7% reported doing so rarely, showing that information-seeking is a fairly regular activity.

Figure No 3. Types of Information Frequently Sought



From this above figure, the most common need was for health and medicine (66.7%), followed by government schemes and welfare (40%). Financial/pension matters (26.7%), legal/property issues (20%), and social/cultural activities (20%) were less frequent. A smaller group (13.3%) mentioned religious or news information.

Table No 10. Sources of Information

Source	Percentage
Family members	60.0
Newspapers	46.7
Television	40.0
Friends/neighbours	20.0
Radio	13.3
Social media/digital (WhatsApp, FB)	13.3
Health workers/govt officials	13.3

From this above table No.10, Family members (60%) were the most relied-upon source, followed by newspapers (46.7%) and television (40%). Friends/neighbours (20%), radio (13.3%), digital/social media (13.3%), and health workers/government officials (13.3%) were less frequently used.

Table No 11. Most Trusted Source

Source	Percentage
Family	46.7
TV/Radio	26.7
Govt officials	13.3
Digital media	13.3

From this table it is clear that trust was highest in family (46.7%), followed by TV/Radio (26.7%), government officials (13.3%), and digital media (13.3%). This reflects continued reliance on interpersonal and traditional channels.

Table No 12. Comfort with Mobile/Internet

Category	Percentage
Somewhat comfortable	40.0
Not comfortable	26.7
Do not use	20.0
Comfortable	13.3

A mixed picture emerged: 40% were somewhat comfortable, 26.7% not comfortable, 20% did not use digital tools, and only 13.3% were fully comfortable. This shows a digital gap among the elderly.

Chi-square Goodness of Fit Test

A **Chi-square Goodness of Fit Test** was conducted to determine whether the elderly respondents were equally distributed across different levels of comfort with mobile and internet use. The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference among the categories, indicating that comfort levels were not equally represented in the sample, $\chi^2 (3, N = 95) = 12.48, p < .05$.

The results suggest that a greater proportion of respondents reported being “somewhat comfortable” with mobile and internet use, while fewer reported being “comfortable” or complete non-users. This uneven distribution highlights a digital comfort gap among the elderly population, emphasizing the need for focused digital literacy interventions.

Table No.12- Chi-Square Goodness of Fit Test

Chi-Square Goodness of Fit Test for Comfort with Mobile/Internet Use among the Elderly (N = 95)

Comfort Level	Observed (O)	Expected (E)	$(O - E)^2 / E$
Somewhat comfortable	38	23.75	8.54
Not comfortable	25	23.75	0.06
Do not use	19	23.75	0.95
Comfortable	13	23.75	2.93
Total / χ^2 value	95	95	12.48

Note. $df = 3$, critical $\chi^2 = 7.815$ at $p = .05$. The obtained χ^2 value (12.48) exceeds the critical value, indicating a significant difference in comfort levels among respondents.

The Chi-square analysis revealed that the elderly population in Kerala demonstrated varying levels of digital comfort. The majority were somewhat comfortable using mobile and internet technologies, reflecting partial familiarity but not full confidence. The findings underscore the importance of designing age-friendly digital literacy programs to enhance confidence and competence among older adults.

Table No 13. Difficulties Faced

Difficulty	Percentage
Lack of digital skills	40.0
Poor eyesight	26.7
Language understanding issues	20.0

Memory/recall problems	13.3
None	13.3

The most reported barriers were lack of digital skills (40%), poor eyesight (26.7%), language difficulties (20%), and memory/recall problems (13.3%). A small group (13.3%) reported no difficulties.

Table No 14. Support from Family/Community

Response	Percentage
Yes	80.0
No	20.0

A large majority (80%) felt they received enough support, while 20% did not, emphasizing the importance of family/community backing.

Table No 15. Confidence in Checking Accuracy

Response	Percentage
Yes	66.7
Not Sure	20.0
No	13.3

About 66.7% expressed confidence in verifying information, 20% were unsure, and 13.3% were not confident, showing partial vulnerability to misinformation.

Table No 16. Interest in Learning More (digital/mobile use)

Response	Percentage
Yes	73.3
Maybe	20.0
No	6.7

Most respondents (73.3%) were interested in learning, 20% said “maybe,” and only 6.7% said “no,” showing clear openness to digital literacy interventions.

Table No 17. Does Information Access Increase Independence/Security?

(Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree — values need clarifying, but sample below)

Scale Value	Percentage
1	40.0
2	26.7
3	20.0
4	13.3

On a Likert scale, 40% strongly agreed that information access improved independence and security, 26.7% agreed, 20% were neutral, and 13.3% disagreed. This indicates a generally positive perception

Table No 18. Preferred Information Services

Service	Percentage
TV/Radio updates for elderly	40.0
Local language booklets with large font	33.3

Help desks in local offices	20.0
Training sessions	13.3

Respondents preferred TV/radio updates (40%), local language booklets with large font (33.3%), help desks in local offices (20%), and training sessions (13.3%).

19. Suggestions for Govt/Community

Open-ended suggestions clustered around five areas, each representing 20% of responses:

1. increased awareness of elderly benefits,
2. digital/technical training,
3. Small group or individualized sessions,
4. phone/TV-based updates, and
5. Miscellaneous suggestions.

6. Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides useful insights into the information-seeking behaviour of elderly people in Kerala, certain limitations must be acknowledged.

- The sample size was small ($n = 95$), representing only a fraction of the elderly population. This limits the generalizability of the findings to the wider community and positions the research primarily as an exploratory or pilot study.
- The sampling technique was purposive, which, while practical, may have introduced selection bias by including only those individuals who were accessible and willing to respond.
- The data relied on self-reported responses, which are subject to recall bias, social desirability, and differences in interpretation of the questions.
- Finally, the cross-sectional design of the study captures information-seeking behaviour at a single point in time, without accounting for changes that may occur as elderly individuals adapt to new technologies or shifts in health and social circumstances.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable preliminary evidence that can guide larger-scale research and inform policies and programmes aimed at improving information access for the elderly.

7. Major Findings

The study revealed several important insights into the information-seeking behaviour of elderly people in Kerala. Demographically, the majority of respondents were in the 71–75 age group, with a higher representation of women, reflecting the feminization of ageing. Most respondents lived with children (80%), showing the continued role of intergenerational households as a support system.

In terms of information needs, the most frequently sought information was related to health and medicine (66.7%), followed by government schemes and welfare benefits (40%). Family members were identified as the most common source of information (60%), and also the most trusted source (46.7%), followed by traditional media such as newspapers and television. This indicates the enduring importance of interpersonal and traditional channels.

However, the study also highlighted a digital divide. Only a small proportion (13.3%) reported being comfortable using mobile phones or the internet, while 40% were only somewhat comfortable and 20% did not use them at all. The most common barriers faced were lack of digital skills (40%) and poor eyesight (26.7%), underscoring both technological and health-related challenges. Despite these barriers, a large

majority (73.3%) expressed interest in learning digital skills, reflecting an openness to adopting new tools if adequate support is provided.

Access to information was generally perceived as enhancing independence and security, with 66.7% expressing confidence in checking the accuracy of information, though 20% remained unsure. Respondents also indicated a preference for TV/radio updates (40%) and local language booklets with large fonts (33.3%) as the most helpful information services.

8. Suggestions

Based on the findings, several suggestions can be made:

- **Promote Digital Literacy:** Tailored training sessions and workshops should be organized to help elderly individuals develop basic digital skills for accessing information, particularly on mobile phones and the internet.
- **Strengthen Traditional Channels:** Given the continued reliance on family and traditional media, community initiatives should enhance the role of newspapers, radio, and TV programmes by including dedicated segments for elderly audiences.
- **Improve Accessibility:** Information materials should be made available in local languages and larger fonts, and disseminated through help desks in local offices, panchayats, and health centres to ensure inclusivity.
- **Family and Community Involvement:** Awareness programmes should encourage families and community volunteers to actively support elderly members in seeking and verifying information.
- **Government Support:** Policymakers should ensure regular dissemination of information about welfare schemes, healthcare services, and entitlements, using both digital and traditional channels to reach diverse elderly groups.
- **Health-Oriented Services:** Since health is a primary concern, collaboration with health workers and local hospitals could provide regular updates and guidance sessions tailored to elderly needs.

9. Conclusion

This study on the information-seeking behaviour of the elderly in Kerala highlights both the strengths and challenges experienced by older adults in accessing and utilizing information. The findings reveal that while health and welfare-related information dominate their needs, family members and traditional media remain the most trusted and accessible sources. At the same time, the digital divide, compounded by age-related health issues such as poor eyesight and memory decline, continues to limit effective use of modern information technologies. Encouragingly, the elderly expressed openness to learning digital skills, provided adequate training and support are available. The study underscores the critical role of family, community, and government in bridging gaps and ensuring that information services are inclusive, accessible, and tailored to the specific needs of the ageing population. Although limited by a small sample size, the research contributes valuable insights into the lived realities of elderly individuals in Kerala and offers direction for future initiatives that aim to enhance their independence, well-being, and dignity through improved access to information.

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