

# Progress amid Imperfections: Race & Religious Relations in Singapore

*OnePeople.sg-IPS Community Leaders' Conference 2025*

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1	Real Progress amid Realities
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## Some recent 2025 findings (and ~870 pages of research) on diversity, race, and religion...

### IPS Working Papers

- Mathew, M., Lim, H. A., Teo, K. K., and Tay, M. (2025). Moral Attitudes in Flux: Comparing Trends across Religions in Singapore. *IPS Working Papers No. 66*.
- Mathew, M., Teo, K. K., Izzul, H. B. M., and Tay, M. (2025). Religious Identity and Practice among Singaporeans. *IPS Working Papers No. 65*.
- Mathew, M., Tay, M., and Teo, K. K. (2025). Prejudice, Attitudes and Critical Perspectives on Race in Singapore. *IPS Working Papers No. 64*.
- Mathew, M., Teo, K. K., and Tay, M. (2025). Friendships in Flux: Generational and Socio-Economic Divides in Singapore. *IPS Working Papers No. 62*.
- Mathew, M., Teo, K. K., Tay, M. and Poh, R. (2025). Faultlines in Singapore: Perceptions and Management with a Focus on Race and Religion. *IPS Working Papers No. 60*.
- Mathew, M., Teo, K. K., Poh, R. and Tay, M. (2025). Results from the IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony 2024. *IPS Working Papers No. 59*.



## ► About the RRL Study

### Study Context

- The IPS-OPSG Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony (RRH) draws from the broader IPS Race, Religion and Language (RRL) survey
- This latest edition marks the third iteration of the RRL study, building on findings from the previous waves conducted in 2013 and 2018-19
- The 2024 wave surveyed a representative sample of Singaporean Citizens and Permanent Residents aged 18 and above
- Minority races oversampled to ensure representativeness of views vis-à-vis their communities and facilitate finer-grain analyses of racial minorities
- Survey brought to respondent by interviewer; but respondent completes on his/her own via tablet
- In total, 4,000 respondents provided inputs on their experiences and perceptions of RRL
- Data was weighted by age, race and gender to mirror the Singapore resident population

# RACE RELIGION LANGUAGE

a five-yearly study by  social lab  
INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

## ► IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony



### 1 **LEVELS OF RACIAL & RELIGIOUS HARMONY**

- Refers to general / overall perceptions of racial and religious harmony in Singapore

### 2 **INTER-RACIAL & -RELIGIOUS SOCIAL TRUST**

- Levels of trust within and among racial and religious groups for help to be proffered in a crisis

### 3 **INTER-RACIAL & -RELIGIOUS ACCEPTANCE**

- Attitudes and acceptance of people of different races, countries of origins, and religions across personal, professional, and community settings

### 4 **SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS**

- Nature and extent of relationships (e.g., close friendships, inclination towards cross-cultural interactions) across race and religion

### 5 **PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION**

- Perceptions of differences in lived experiences when accessing public services or at the workplace, due to race and others' actions

### 6 **PERCEPTIONS OF EXCLUSION**

- Perceptions of one being denied or restricted from access, participation, or belonging to individuals, groups, or opportunities based on one's race

### 7 **INTER-RACIAL & -RELIGIOUS TENSIONS**

- Conflicts, disagreements, or friction arising between people or groups due to racial or religious differences

### 8 **ATTITUDES TOWARDS DIVERSITY**

- Views on accommodation extended to customs and practices associated with different races and religions, and on the value of diversity

### 9 **COLOUR-BLIND IDEOLOGY**

- Beliefs that race and religion are important determinants of behaviour or suitability for certain work roles (stereotypes)

### 10 **INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING & COMMUNICATIONS**

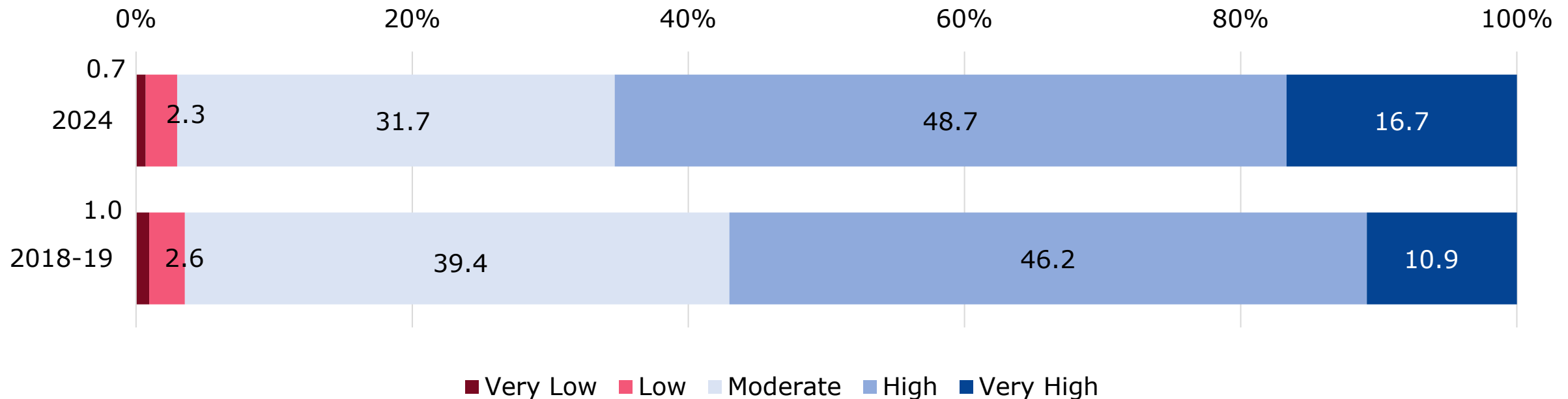
- Ability to respect and appreciate differences and similarities across race and religion, and opportunities for cross-racial and -religious interaction

# 1 Real Progress Amid Realities

While Not Yet a Multicultural Paradise,  
There Are Steady Positive Changes

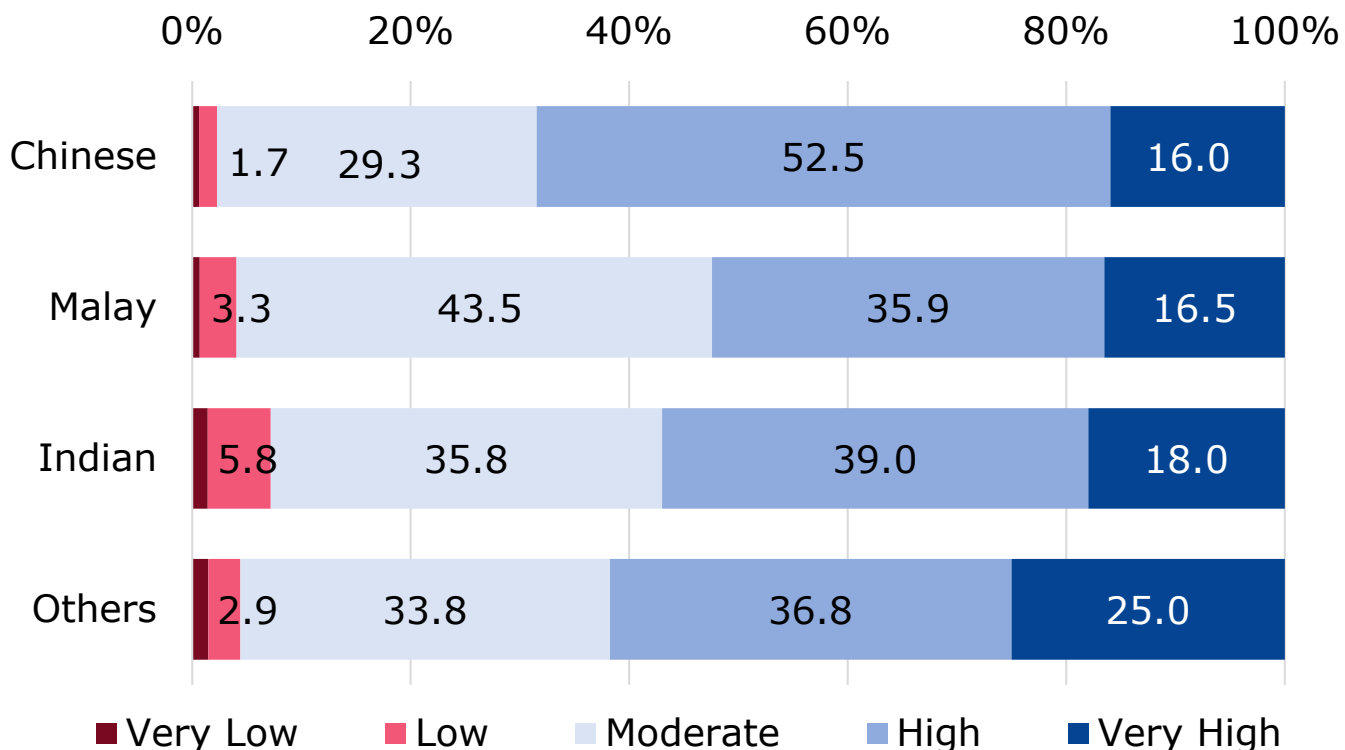
- ▶ **More Singapore residents acknowledge high levels of harmony here; about two-thirds felt that RRH was high or very high in 2024, as compared to under six in 10 in 2018**

**What would you say is the level of racial and religious harmony in Singapore currently, responses by wave**



- ▶ **While over half of minorities say that the level of harmony is high or very high, a larger share of minorities compared to majority Chinese say that levels of harmony are moderate or lower**

**What would you say is the level of racial and religious harmony in Singapore currently, 2024 responses by race**



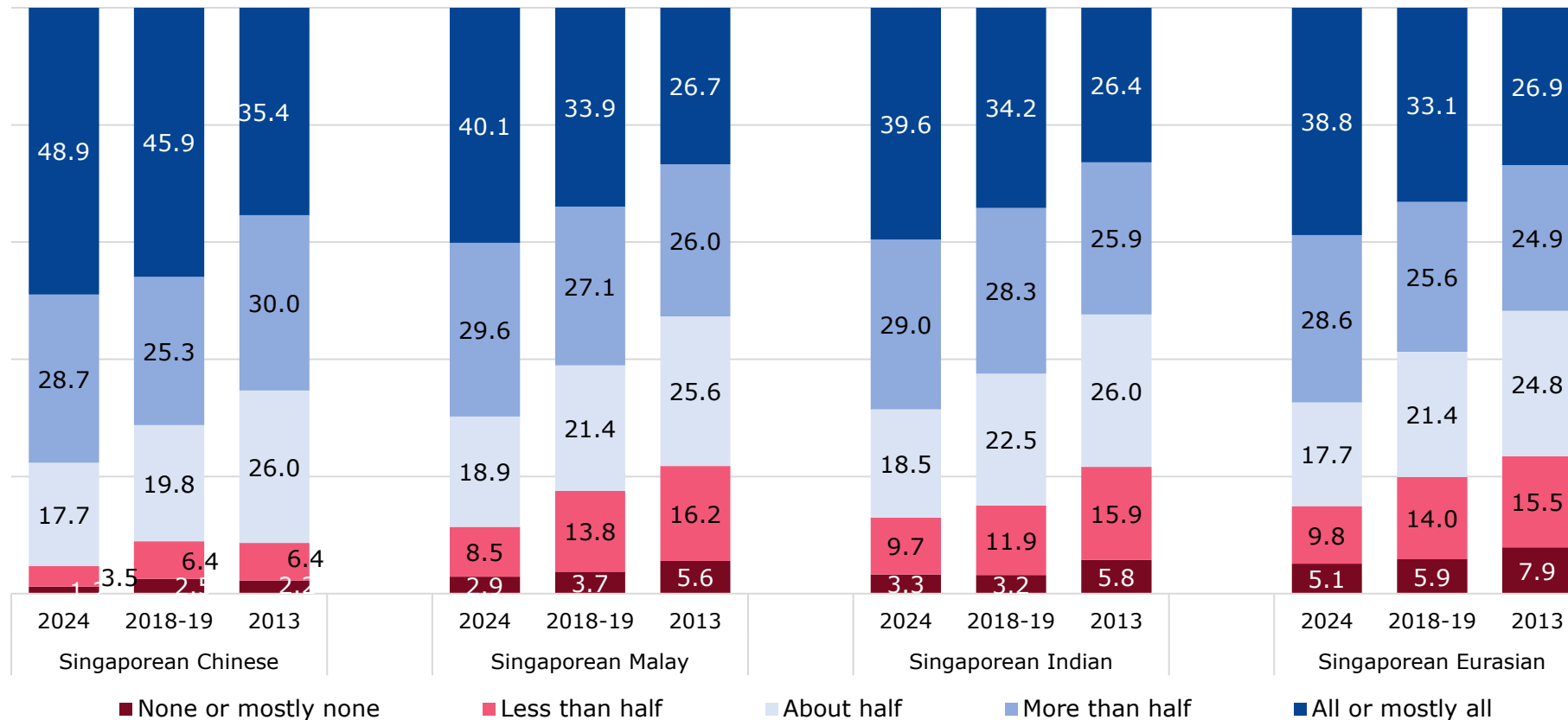
**Other Salient Findings**

- Older respondents were more likely to indicate high or very high levels of harmony compared to their younger counterparts
- Respondents who reported feeling discriminated against less frequently on the basis of their race were more likely to indicate high or very high levels of harmony



▶ **While trust in different races has increased since 2013, there is still a trust gap; nearly 10 percentage point difference in trust levels in favour of majority race**

**What proportion of people from the following races do you think can be trusted to help you if Singapore faced a national crisis (e.g., Covid-19), responses by wave\***



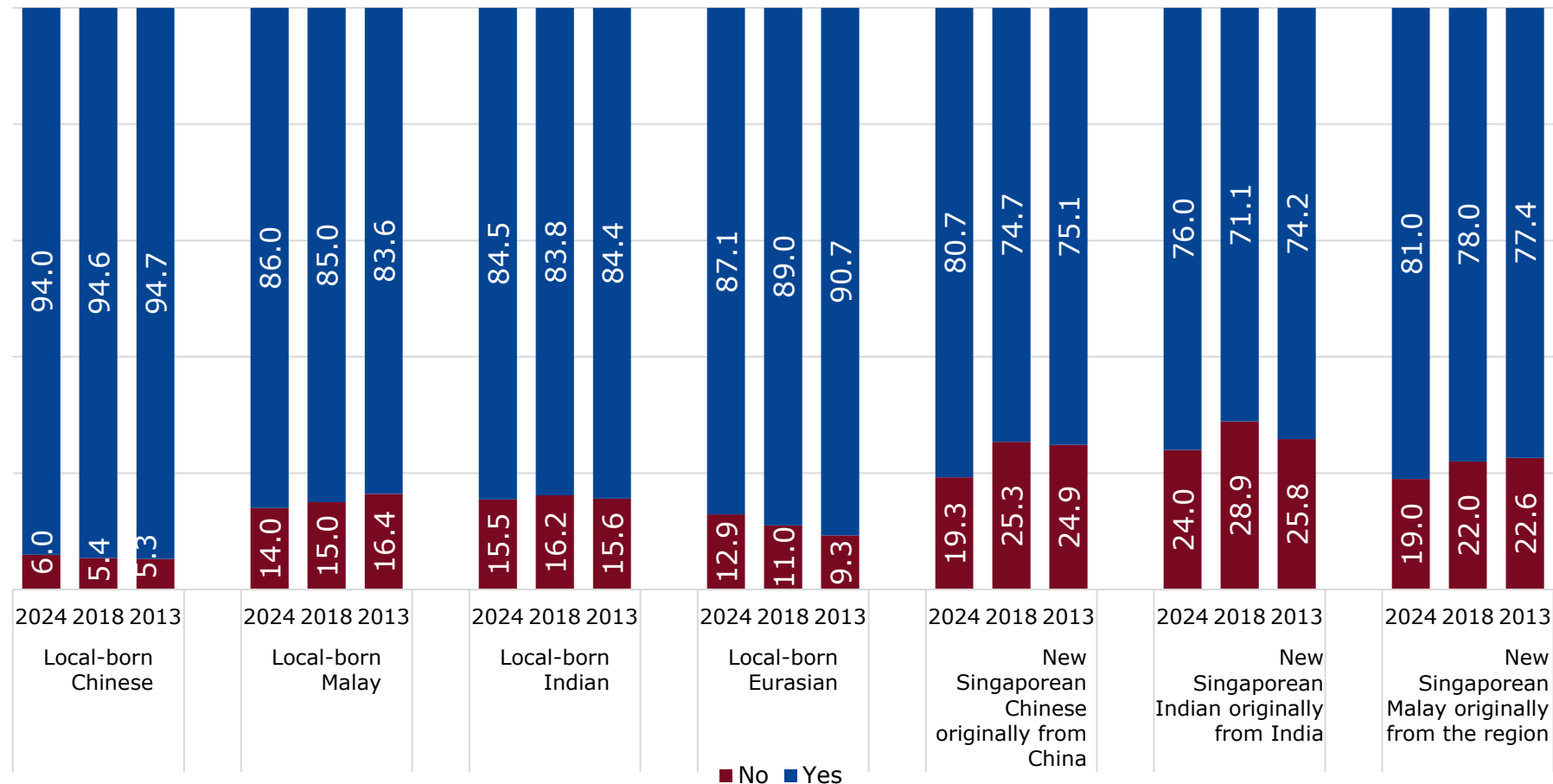
**Other Salient Findings**

- Race, age, affluence, education levels, other-race close friend proportions, and lived experiences pertaining to discrimination were significantly correlated with responses on trust

*\*Proportions of responses for trust in a particular racial group reflected exclude responses of members of that particular racial group*

- Majority of Singapore residents are comfortable with individuals of each racial group as their colleagues, bosses, and employees, but less comfort with new Singaporeans; Chinese respondents indicate a slight preference for colleagues, bosses, and employees of the same race

Are you comfortable with members of each racial group as your boss,  
responses by wave\*



## Other Salient Findings

- While nearly all Chinese respondents indicated comfort with local-born Chinese in various work settings, nine in 10 or lower indicated likewise for local-born minorities

*\*Proportions of responses for comfort with a particular local-born racial group reflected exclude responses of members of that particular racial group;*

*\*Trends for question items for colleagues and employees mirror responses for the question item on bosses shown on this slide*

▶ **In the neighbourhood, upsetness and tensions over ethnic and religious practices have improved from 2018 to 2024 but still remain significant**

In the past year, how often have you encountered and gotten upset by the following in your estate? (Sometimes, Often, Very often or always)	2018 (%)	2024 (%)
Burning of incense, joss sticks and other religious items	41.7%	34.9%
Religious chanting, singing, or praying	28.7%	26.5%
Neighbours cooking ethnic food	19.3%	19.9%
Common corridors being blocked by neighbour's religious items	19.4%	15.5%

### Other Salient Findings

- Younger respondents were in general more likely to report more frequent encounters
- Respondents residing in smaller public housing units were in general also more likely to report more frequent encounters

▶ **Despite broad success, we are still concerned about race and religious issues; most see these as the faultlines with most dire consequences if not managed well**

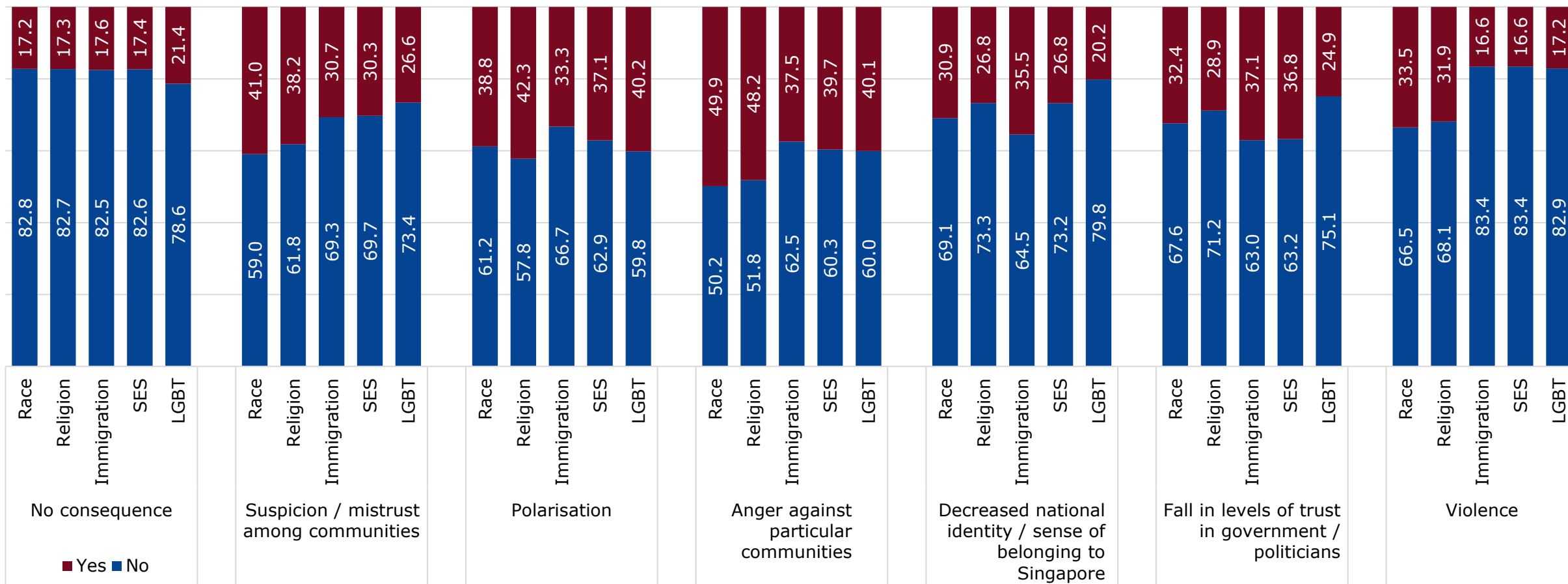
- In tandem with prevailing literature on personal and political conflict, the potential consequences from mismanaging social divides can be understood to lie along a **continuum**, reflecting escalating severity:



- Against this backdrop, RRL respondents were asked the following question in relation to five faultlines (race, religion, SES differences, immigration, and LGBT issues): "There are certain issues in society which may have an impact on social cohesion. If not managed well, in your opinion, what are the likely consequences to Singapore of each of these issues?"

- ▶ **One-third of respondents indicated that mismanaging race or religion in Singapore would likely result in violence; four in 10 indicated likewise in relation to suspicion or mistrust among communities; about half indicated likewise vis-à-vis anger against particular communities**

**Consequences of not managing faultlines well, 2024 responses by selected consequences**

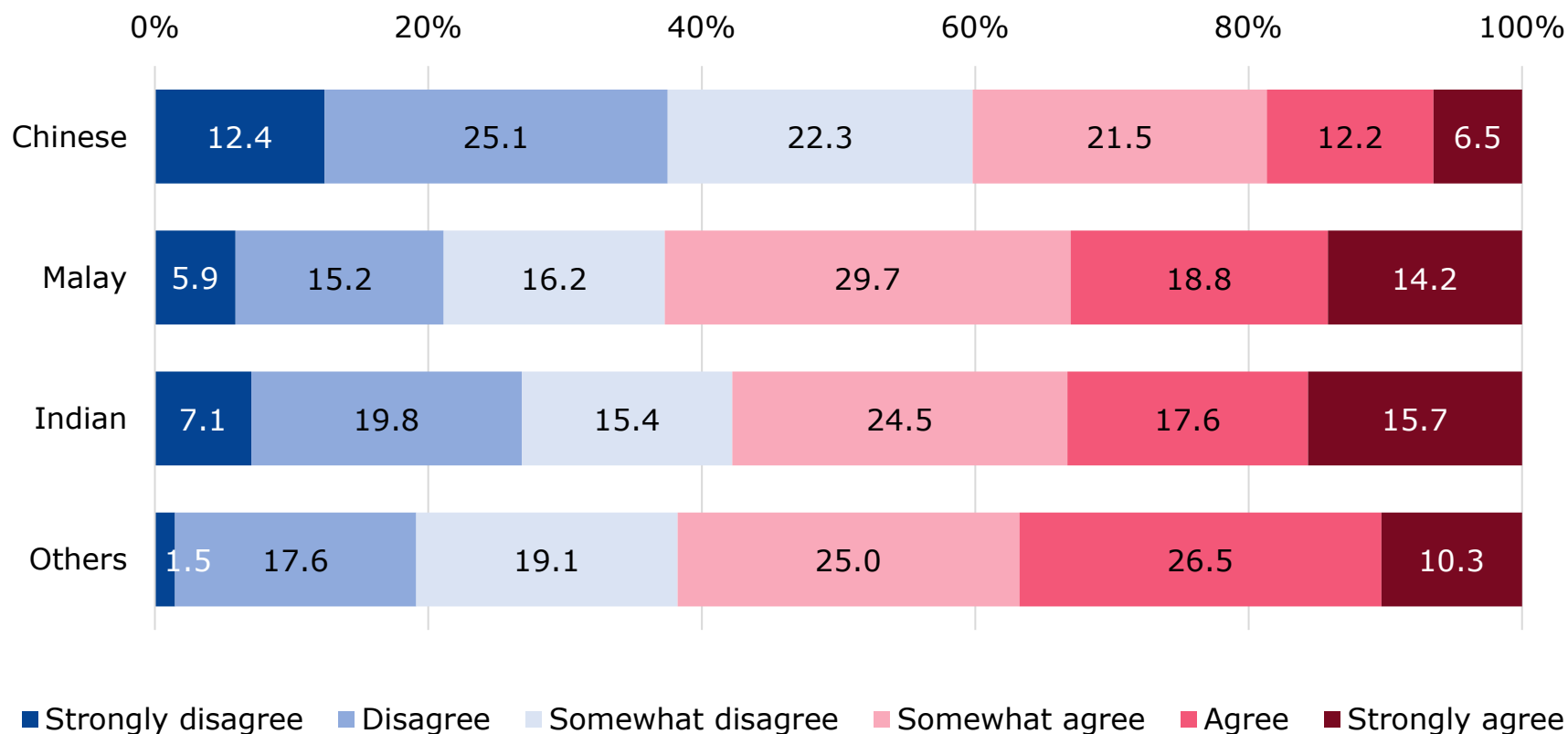


## 2 Differential Experiences

Our Experiences may Not be the Same

## ▶ Minority-race respondents see majority Chinese as privileged, though fewer Chinese feel so

**I believe that there is Chinese privilege in Singapore, 2024  
responses by race**

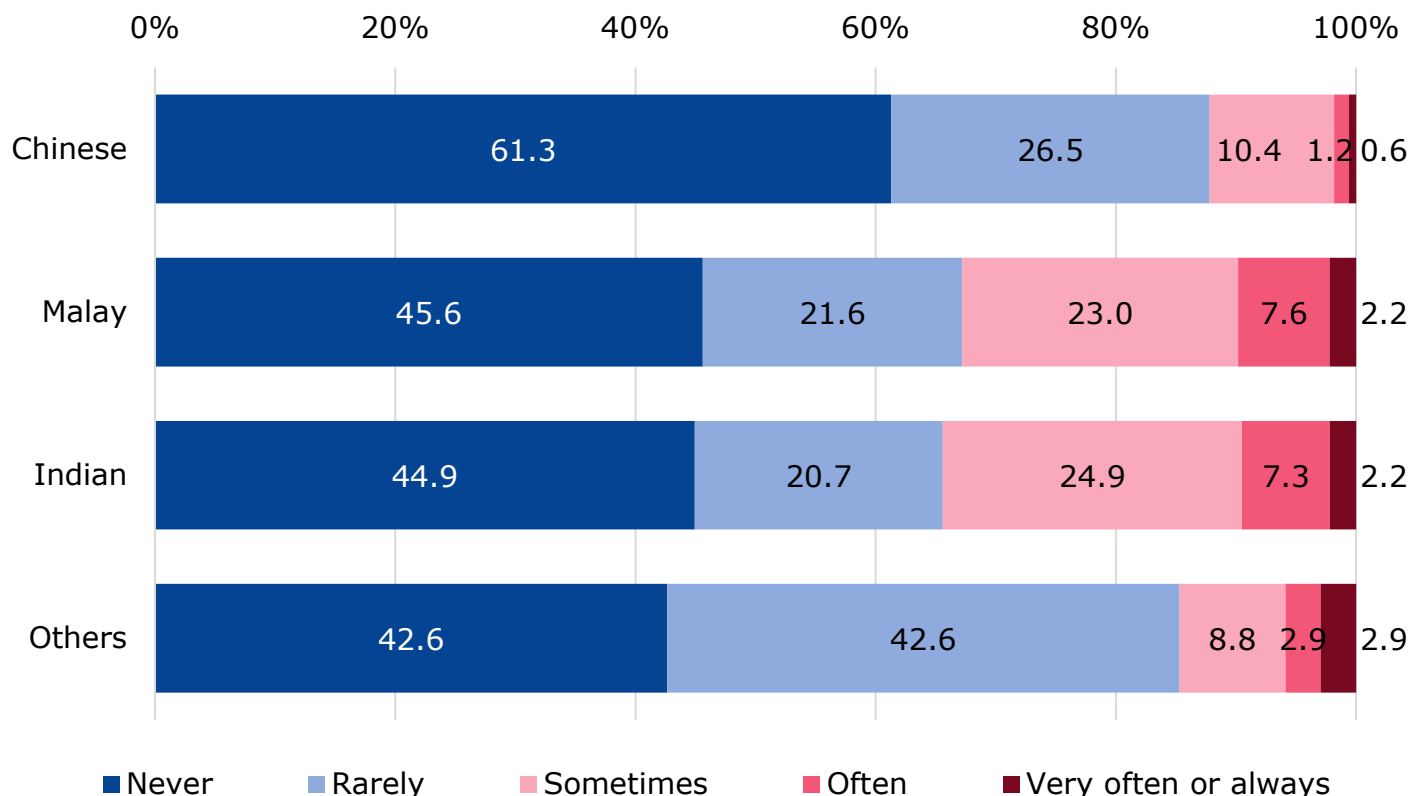


### Salient Findings

- 59.6% overall say it is easier to be Chinese in Singapore;
  - 75.5% among ages 18–35;
  - ~63% among Malays and Indians
- Agreement with 'Chinese privilege' (overall): 44.7%; by age:
  - 18–35: 71.2%
  - 65+: 28.9%

► **Significantly larger proportions of racial minorities report experiencing discriminatory or racist incidents at least sometimes; in some cases 3 times more than majority race**

**Receive remarks that people of your race and/or religion typically have negative qualities (e.g., bigoted, money-minded), 2024 responses by race**



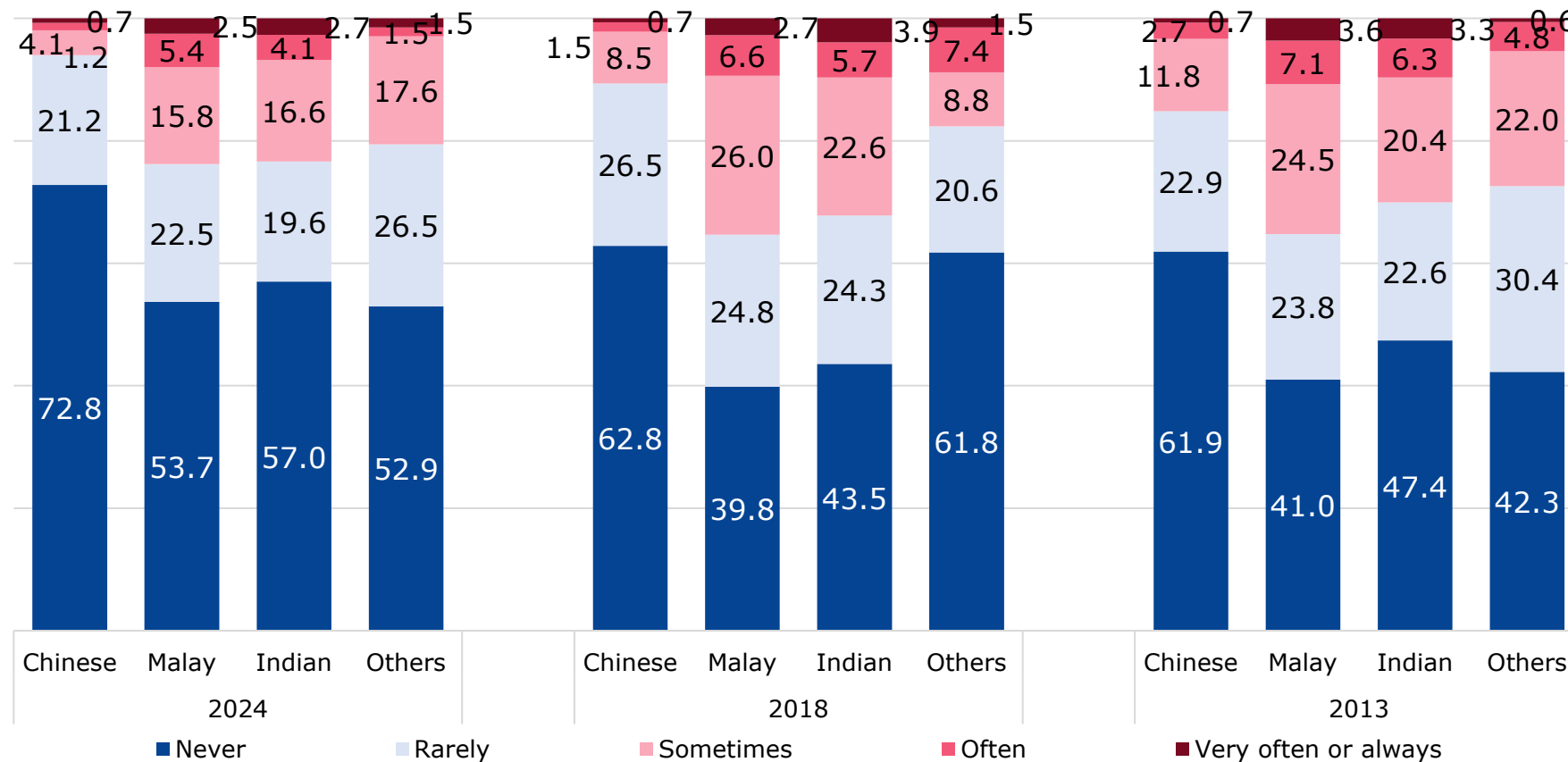
Experience	Sometimes + Often + Very often / always		
	<i>M</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>Non-C</i>
Made fun of because of one's race/religion	23.1%	30.2%	26.2%
Hearing jokes about one's race / religion	37.2%	39.3%	37.8%
Comments that one's +ve behaviour is an exception to one's race/religion	34.7%	35.7%	35.0%
Being left out of conversations because of one's race/religion	27.1%	31.7%	29.0%

*\*Trends for question items on 'being made fun of because of your race/religion', 'hearing jokes about your race or religion', 'receive comments that your positive behaviour is an exception which other members of your race/religion do not exhibit', and 'being left out of conversations because of your race/religion' mirror responses for the question item on negative qualities shown on this slide. Proportions shown are non-weighted.*



- ▶ **Larger proportions of minority-race respondents indicate feeling racially discriminated when at work, although these proportions have gone down over the past decade**

**How often do you feel racially discriminated when at work,  
responses by wave and race**



## Salient Findings

- Under one-quarter of Malays and Indians felt racially discriminated when at work sometimes, often, or very often / always, as compared to approx. one in 20 Chinese in 2024
- The corresponding proportions for minority races indicating likewise in 2013 is three in 10 or more

- ▶ **Among non-Chinese respondents experiencing racial discrimination at work, three in 10 or more indicated being left out of conversations spoken in another language at work, given fewer opportunities because of their race, given backhanded compliments, and receiving jokes about their race**

Which of the following options describes your experience being racially discriminated against <b>at work?</b>	%	Which of the following options describes your experience of being racially discriminated against <b>when applying for a job?</b>	%	Which of the following options describes your experience being racially discriminated against <b>for a job promotion?</b>	%
I was left out of conversations spoken in another language at work.	62.9	The job interviewer asked me questions which suggested that someone from my race was not suited for the job.	39.9	I was told by my employer that it will be difficult for people from my race to be promoted.	19.8
I was left out of social activities at work because of my race.	24.9	I was told informally by other sources that the company rarely hires someone from my racial background.	37.0	I was told informally by other sources that people from my racial background find it especially challenging to get promoted in my company.	30.4
I was given backhanded compliments that implied something negative about my race (e.g., you are hardworking for your race).	35.6	I was asked questions about my racial background which I thought were not relevant in assessing my suitability for the job.	26.1	I observed that people from other races have been promoted because of their race, and not their qualifications.	52.8
My colleagues made jokes about my race.	30.6	I fit specific language requirements on the job advertisement, but was not considered for the job.	43.1	I observed that colleagues in senior positions are usually from other racial groups that I am not part of.	49.6
My colleagues used derogatory terms related to my race.	21.1	I was explicitly told that I was rejected because of my race.	16.8	I was explicitly told that I was not promoted because of my race.	8.3
I was given fewer opportunities at work because of my racial background, as compared to colleagues from other racial backgrounds.	46.8				
I received insulting comments relating to my race at work.	23.6				

- ▶ **While minorities disproportionately report work-related discrimination, there is relatively little difference between majority and minority-race perceptions of discrimination when it comes to public services**

How well do you think you are treated when using these public services in comparison with other races? <i>(Much worse than other races + worse than other races)</i>	Chinese (%)	Malay (%)	Indian (%)	Others (%)
Hospital services	0.9	2.1	4.4	1.5
At school or an educational institution	1.1	6.1	8.3	5.9
At a social service agency	1.6	5.2	6.0	4.4
At the courts	1.1	3.8	4.5	1.5
By the police if you reported a crime or were suspected to having committed an offence	1.4	5.9	7.7	1.5

### Salient Findings

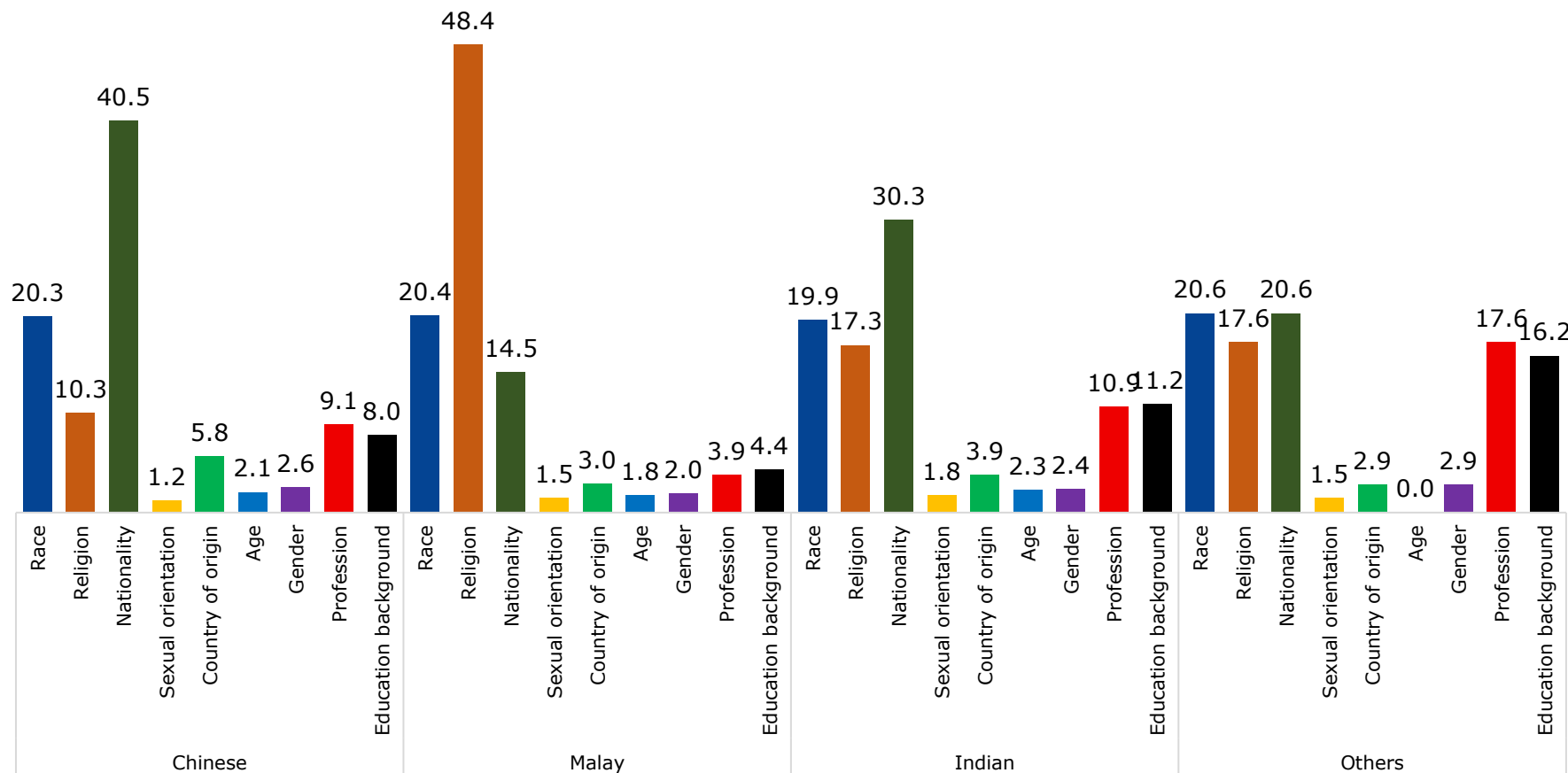
- Minorities' perceived discriminatory treatment when using public services is significantly less disjunct from the majority Chinese as compared to discrimination at work
  - 6.0% C indicate feeling racially discriminated at work sometimes, often, or very often / always as compared to 23.8% of M, 23.4% of I, and 20.6% of O

# 3 National Identity as Anchor

Both National Identity and National Policies  
Can Anchor Social Cohesion

# ► There are different identities which are important to us; overall, race and religion are most prominent after nationality

Most important part of respondents' identity, 2024 responses by race

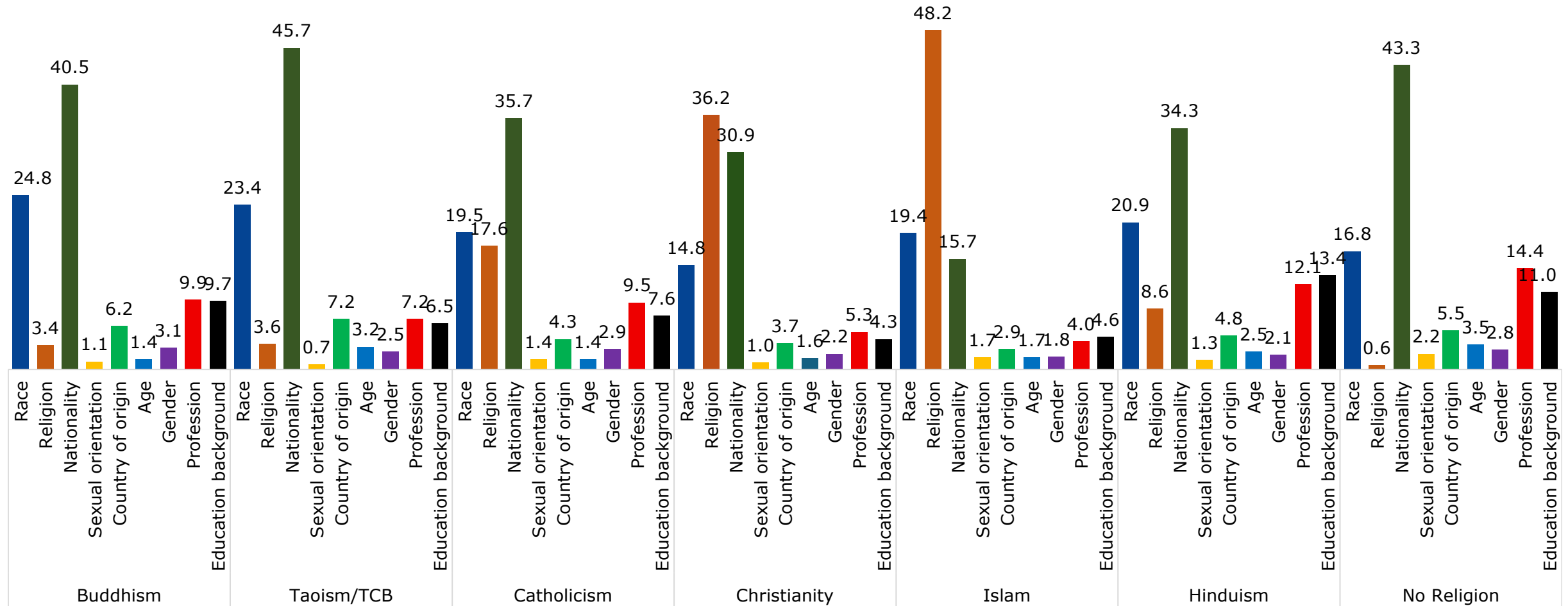


## Salient Findings

- Overall, 35.9% of respondents chose nationality as the most important part of their identity
- 20.6% chose race as the most important part of their identity
- 16.1% chose religion as the most important part of their identity
- Breakdowns by respondents' race shown on the left

# ► Muslims and Christians were more likely to indicate religion as the most important part of their identity relative to their peers

Most important part of respondents' identity, 2024 responses by religion



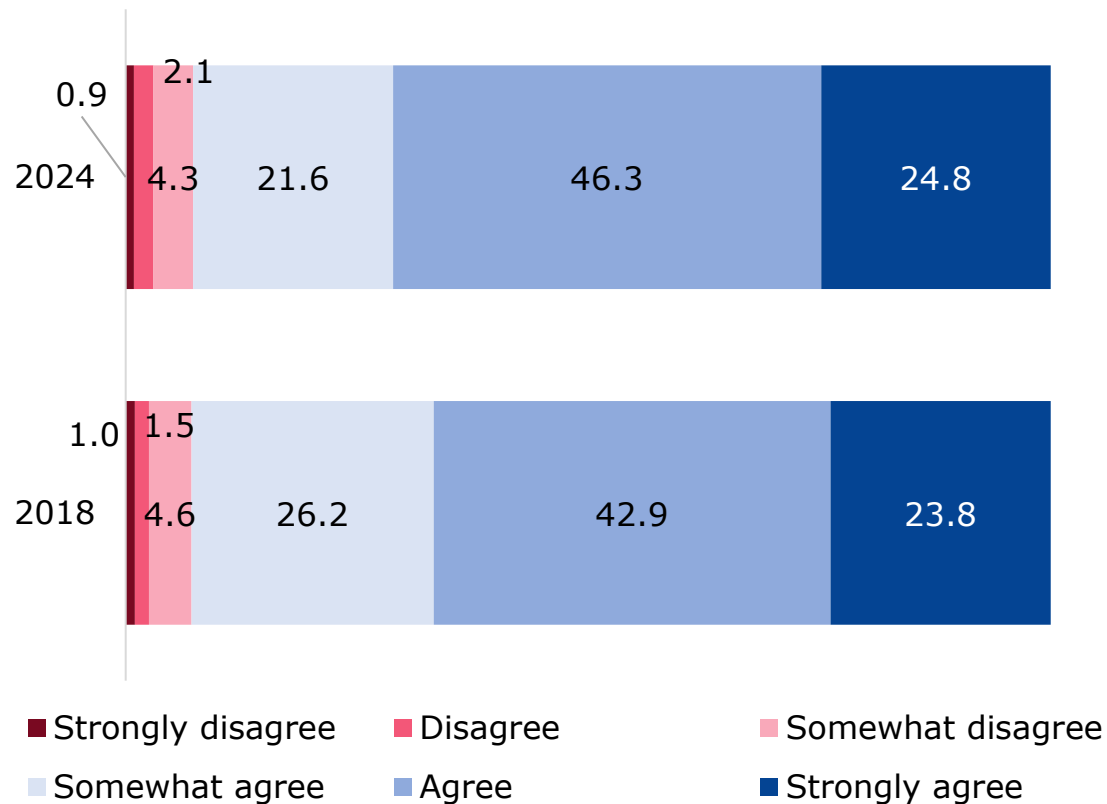
- ▶ **While being Singaporean is an anchor for all communities, cultural identities matter more for ethnic minorities**

*How important are each of the items below to your overall sense of identity (i.e., who you are)?*

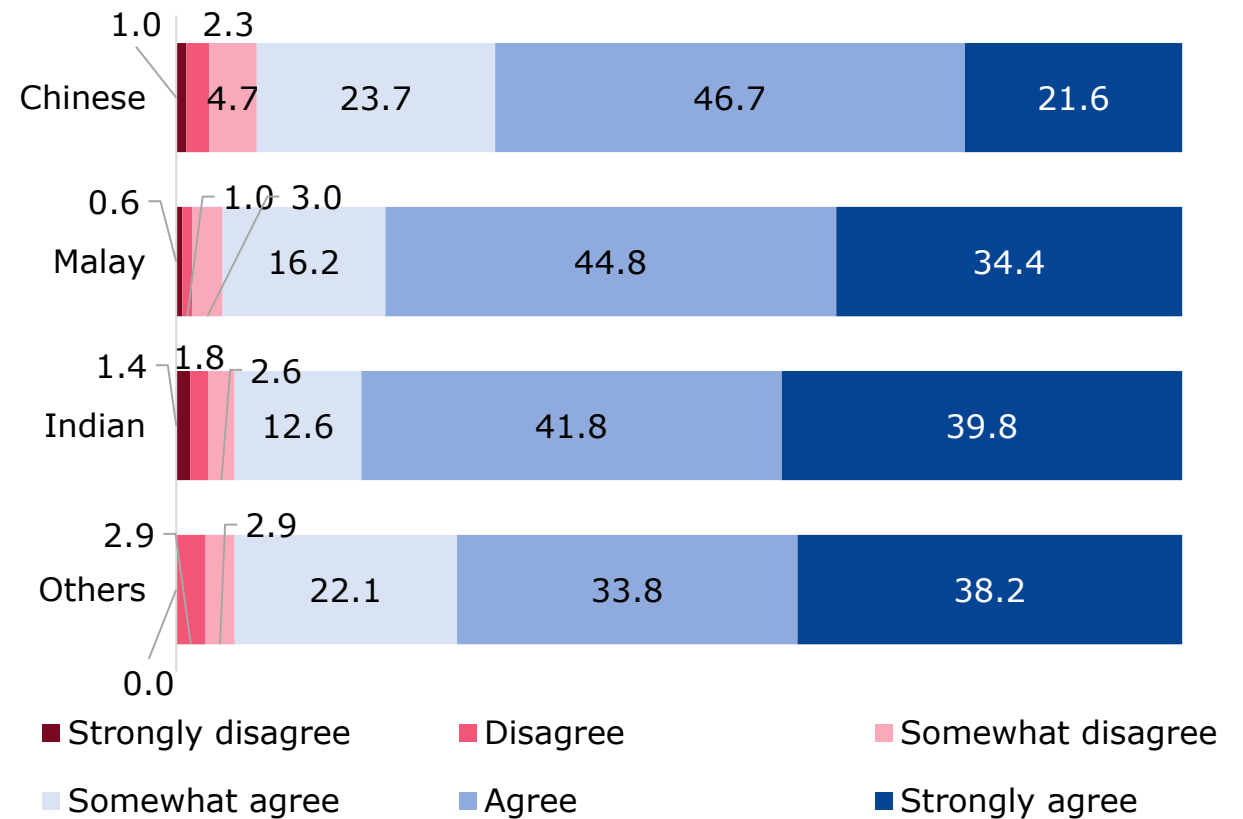
Identity component ( <u>Very important</u> )	Chinese	Malay	Indian
<b>Race</b>	<b>19.1%</b>	<b>37.6%</b>	<b>30.4%</b>
<b>Religion</b>	<b>16.5%</b>	<b>59.2%</b>	<b>35.8%</b>
<b>Language (most frequently used)</b>	<b>22.2%</b>	<b>37.9%</b>	<b>40.9%</b>
<b>Official mother tongue</b>	<b>18.7%</b>	<b>34.9%</b>	<b>36.3%</b>
<b>Singapore (national identity)</b>	<b>37.8%</b>	<b>47.9%</b>	<b>50.1%</b>

► **Multicultural beliefs or the value of diversity continue to be entrenched in our national identity, with most majority race members endorsing this**

**It is a good thing for Singapore to be made up of people from different racial groups, responses by wave**



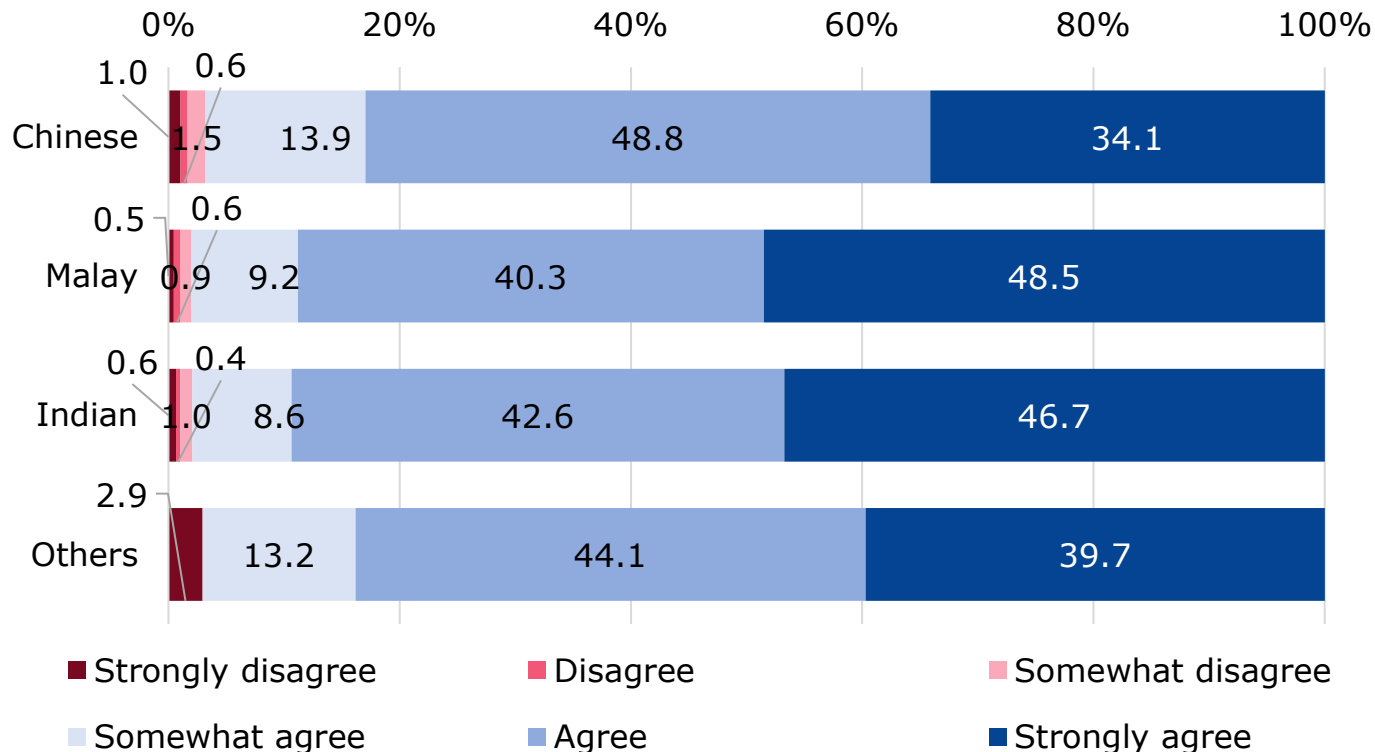
**It is a good thing for Singapore to be made up of people from different racial groups, 2024 responses by race**





- ▶ **Being Singaporean also does not mean giving up unique cultures; over nine in 10 respondents agree to varying extents that different racial and religious groups should be allowed to maintain their customs and traditions, and that the government should help them do so**

**Different racial and religious groups should be allowed to maintain their customs and traditions, 2024 responses by race**



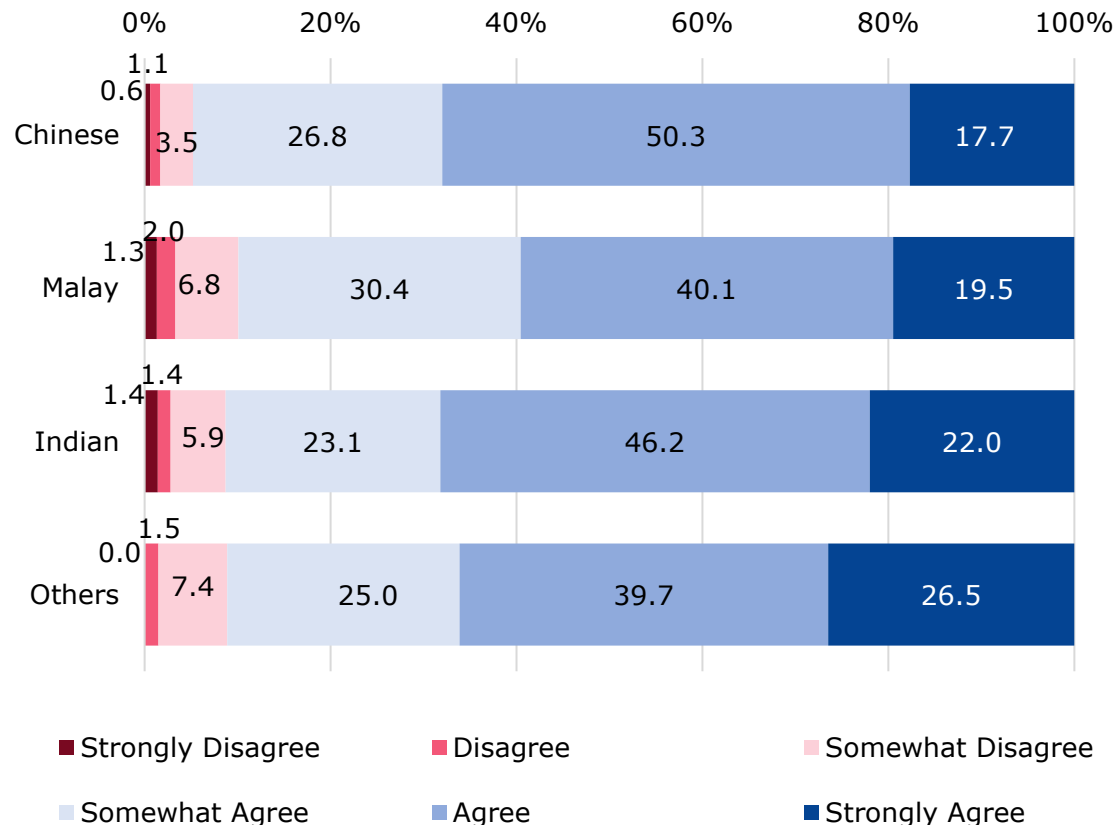
*The government should help all religious and racial groups preserve and maintain their traditions and customs.*

In 2018, **92.7%**  
agreed to varying extents  
with the above statement

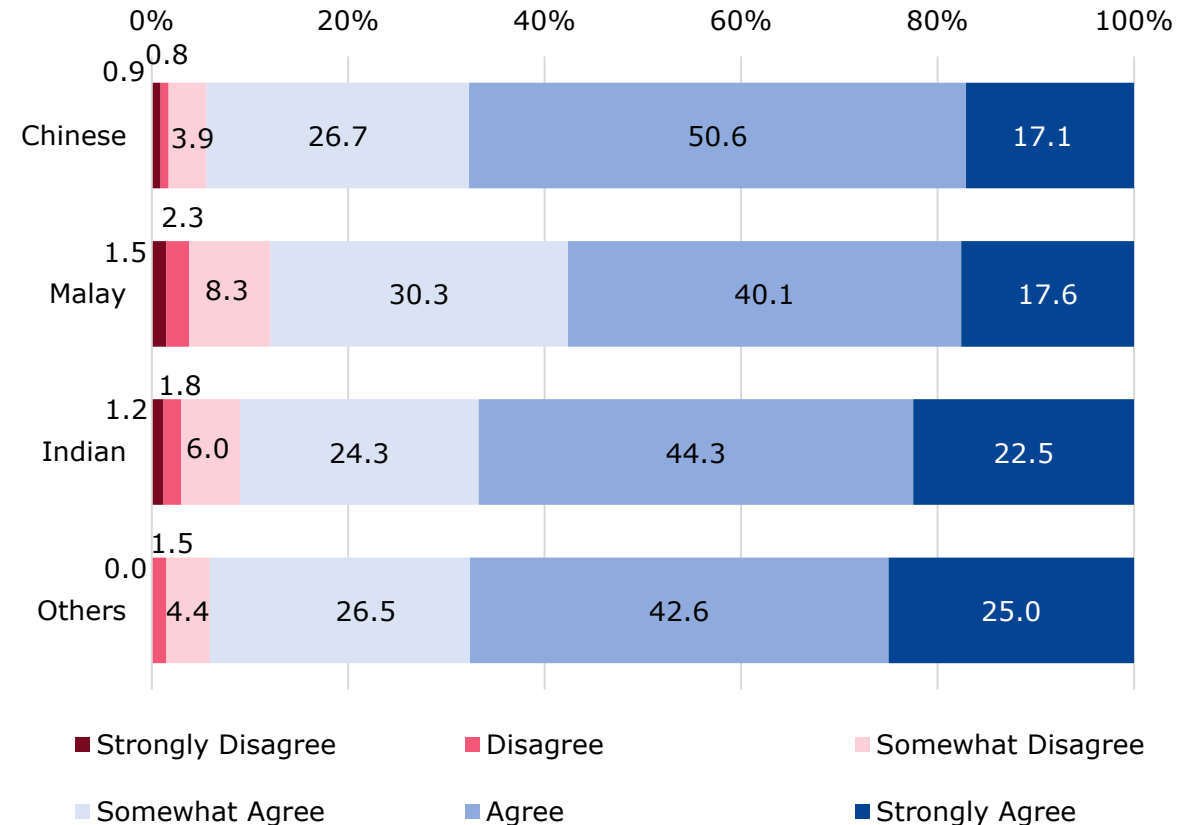
In 2024, **93.7%**  
agreed to varying extents  
with the above statement

- ▶ **We are united in our consideration of the government's role in managing R&R issues; approx. nine in 10 or more respondents across racial groups agree that the government has done well to improve R&R harmony, and that it has maintained a fair system for all in Singapore**

**The government has done well to improve racial and religious harmony, 2024 responses by race**



**The government has maintained a fair system/policy for everyone in Singapore, 2024 responses by race**

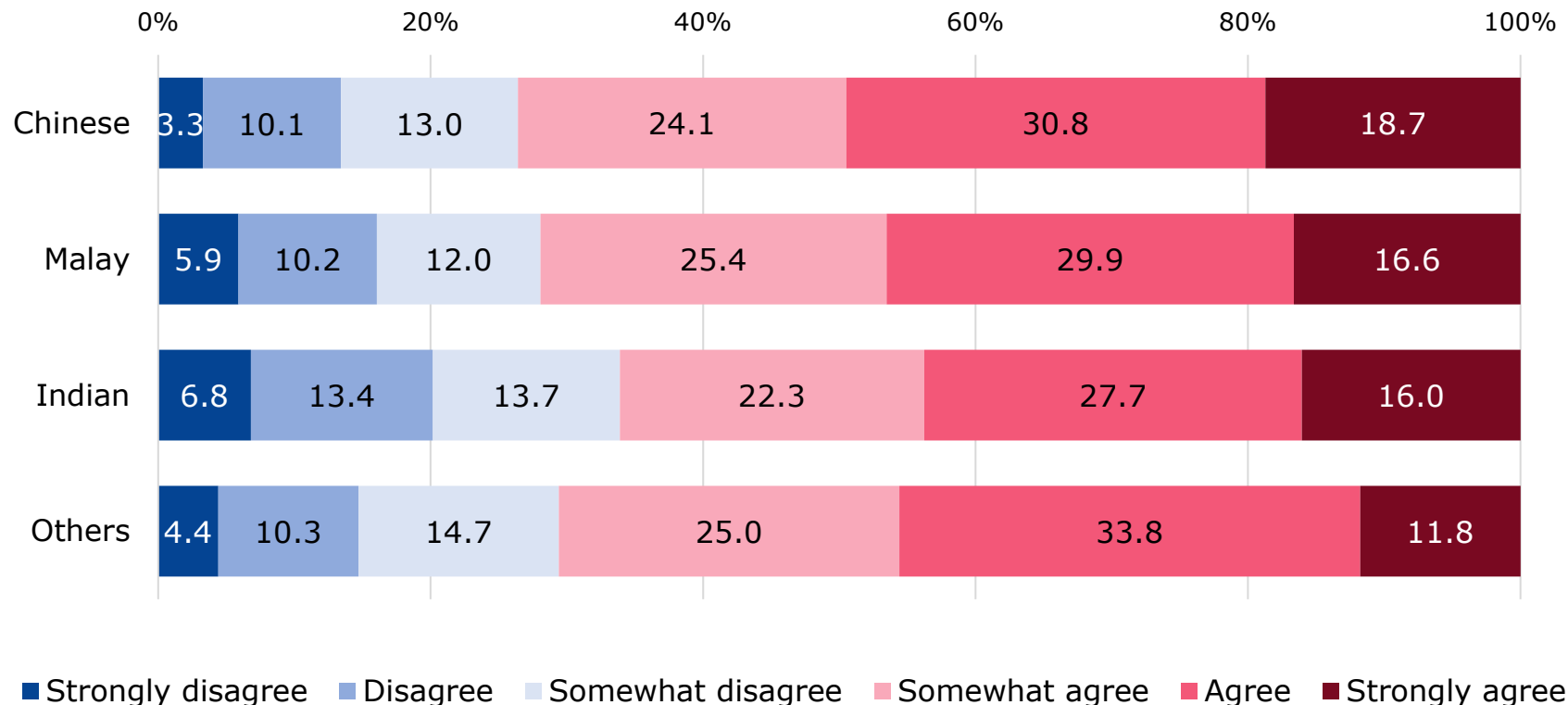


- ▶ **Most in Singapore prioritise integration, fair representation, and cultural sensitivity; this is reflected in support for outcomes linked to various race-based policies like CMIO, GRCs, EIP, and the self-help groups**

How much do you agree with the following statements? (Somewhat agree + agree + strongly agree)	2018 (%)	2024 (%)
It is important to know how many people of each race live in Singapore	75.3%	76.4%
It is important in immigration policy that the racial make-up of the population is maintained	83.3%	83.8%
It is important that there is a mix of people from different races in each housing estate	92.0%	93.2%
It is important that minorities are proportionally represented in Parliament at a level similar to their proportions in the population	78.0%	84.8%
It is important to provide culturally-sensitive help to the less well-off in different communities	91.6%	93.7%
It is useful to provide data on how different racial groups are progressing, through indicators such as performance in national examinations	66.9%	73.3%

► **Keeping harmony between groups is an important national value, and this is evident by general discomfort with importation of foreign concepts like critical race theory to talk about race issues in Singapore**

**I feel uncomfortable if people use concepts from overseas (such as CRT, white privilege) to talk about issues pertaining to race in Singapore, 2024 responses by race**



**Salient Findings**

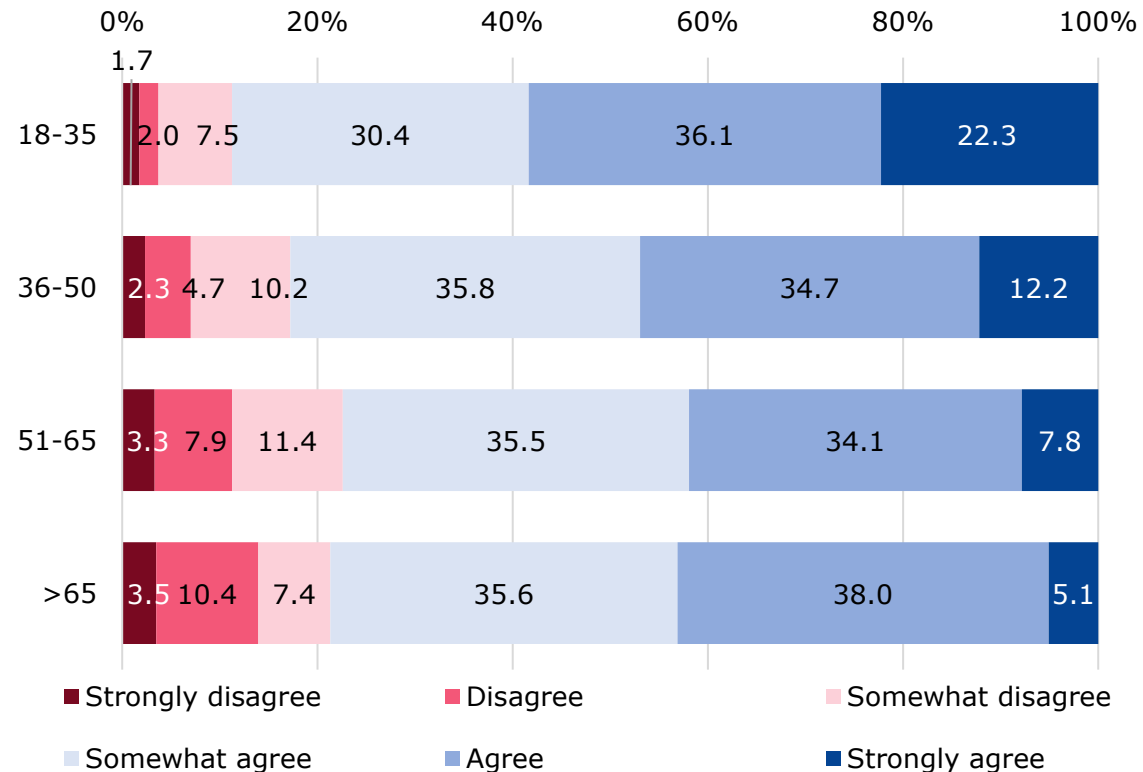
- The majority of respondents agreed to varying extents (73.0 per cent) that they would feel uncomfortable if concepts from abroad (such as CRT and white privilege) were used in discussions pertaining to race in Singapore
- Two-thirds or more across various races indicated agreement to varying extents
- Younger respondents aged 18–35 were less likely to indicate discomfort with the use of concepts from abroad in race-based discussions as compared to older peers

# 4 Prospects for the Future

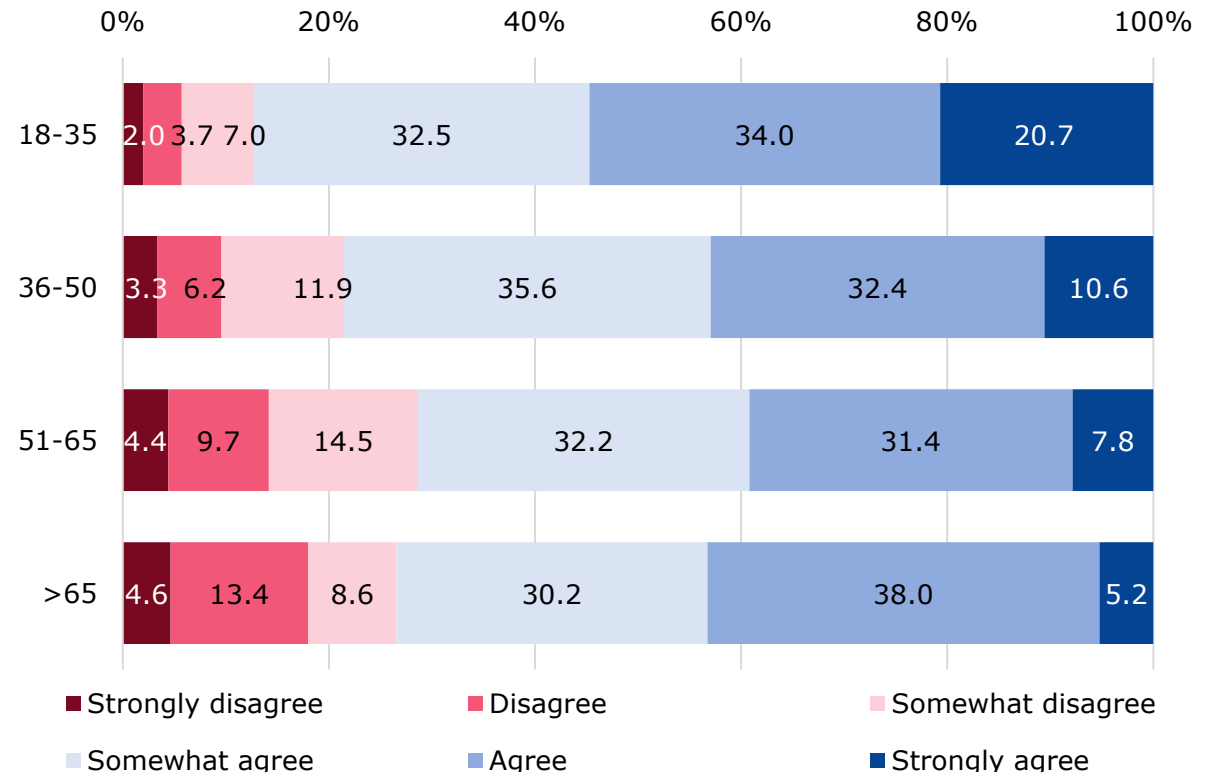
Younger Generations Embrace and Stand up for Diversity  
& have More Opportunities for Social Mixing

► **Younger respondents are more open to and curious about diversity relative to those who are older**

**I like meeting and getting to know people from racial groups other than my own, 2024 responses by age**

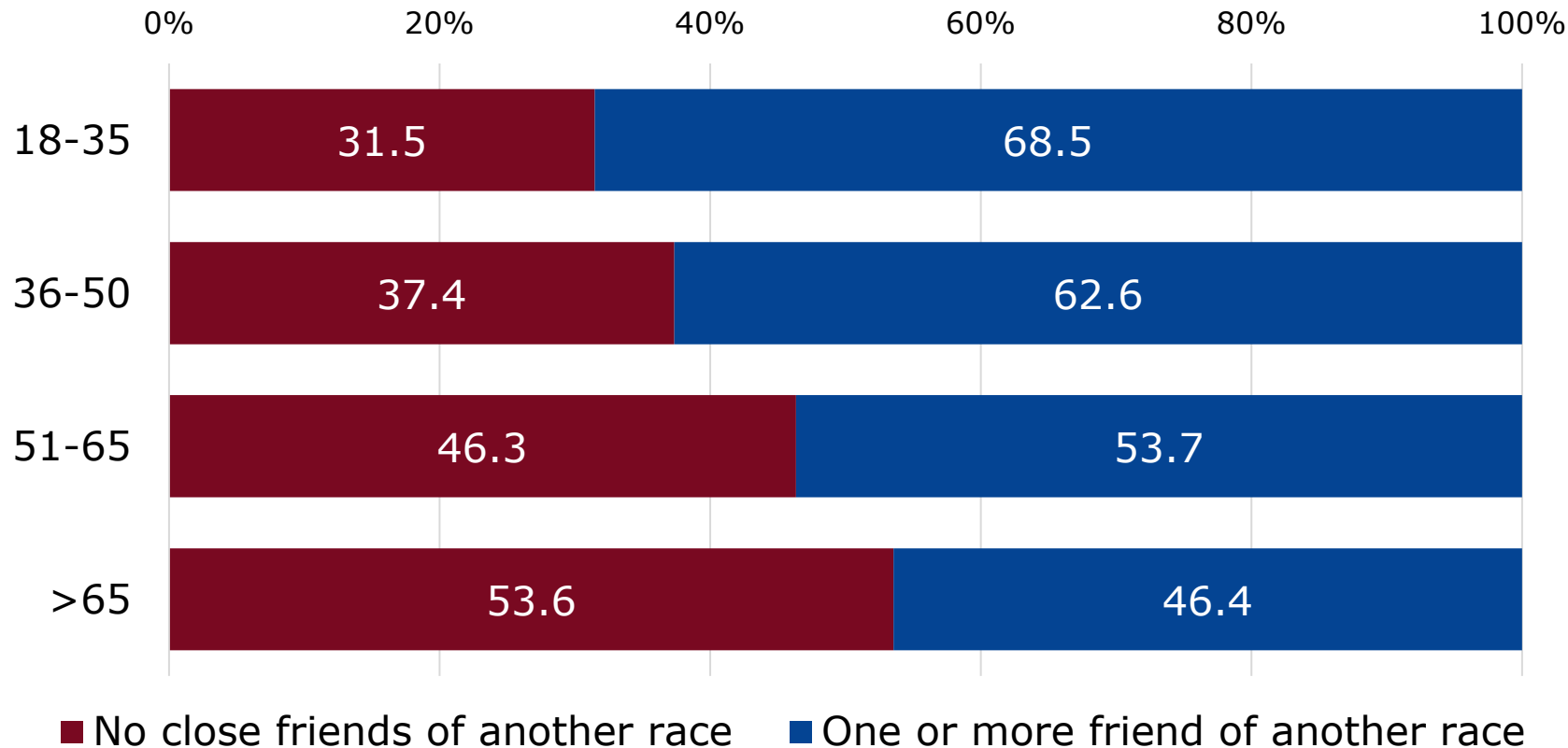


**I like meeting and getting to know people from religious groups other than my own, 2024 responses by age**



## ▶ Younger respondents are also more likely to have close friends of other races compared to those who are older

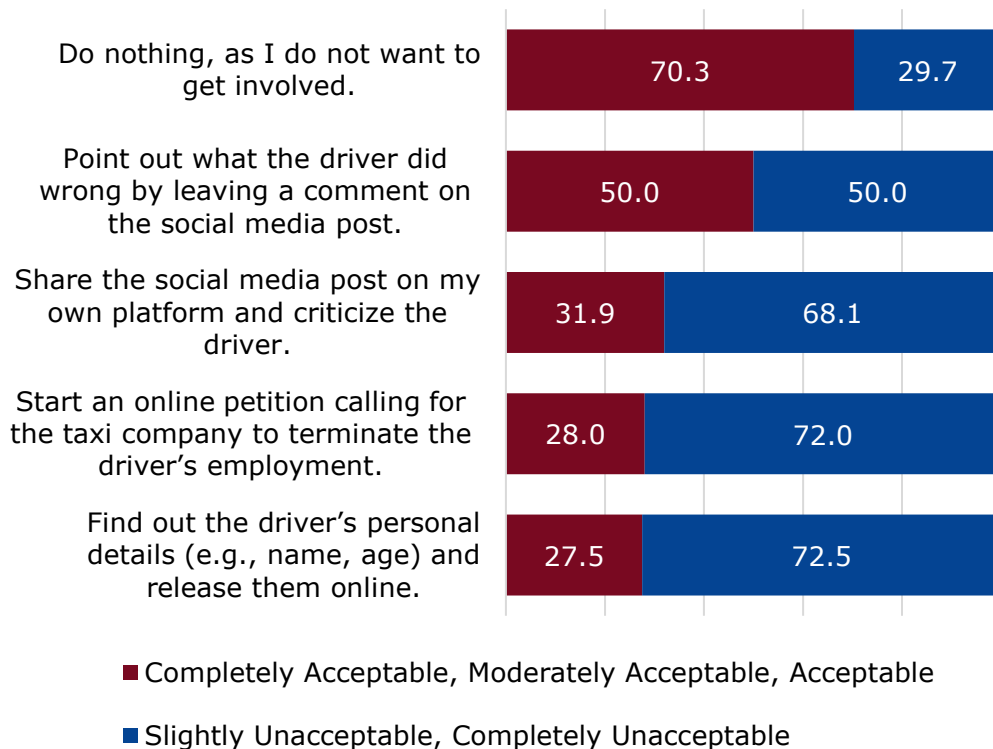
**Proportions of respondents with at least one close friend of another race, 2024 responses by age\***



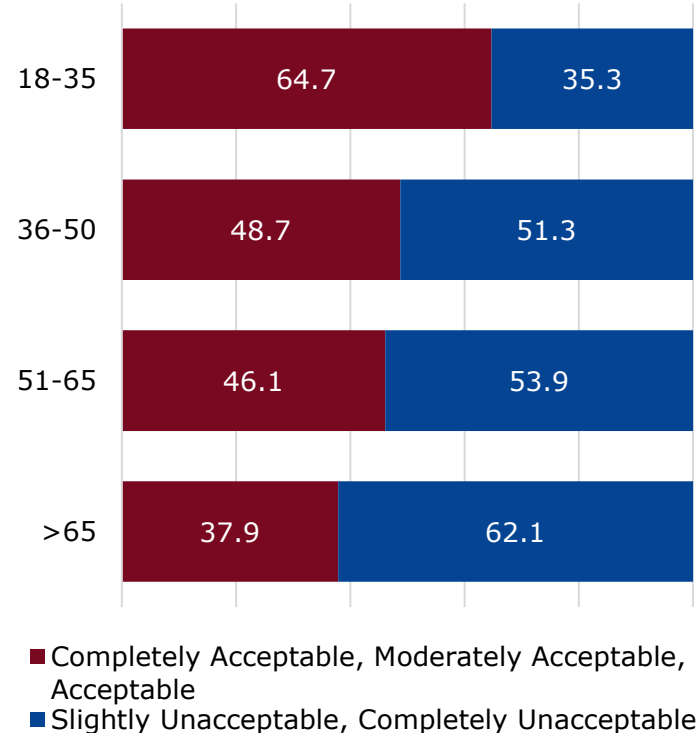
- Respondents were asked to report the number of close friends they had (people who were not their relatives, but who they felt at ease with, could talk to about what was on their minds, or call on for help).
- This number was then broken down into five categories: Singaporean Chinese, Singaporean Malay, Singaporean Indian, Singaporean Eurasian, and Others. Proportions reported above are derived from these responses.

▶ **While Singapore residents are in general less likely to take a proactive stance in response to a racist incident, younger respondents are more likely to indicate that doing nothing is unacceptable**

**Suppose you read a social media post about an incident regarding a taxi driver who made racist comments to a passenger. How acceptable do you think it is to respond in the following ways, 2024 responses**



**Point out what the driver did wrong by leaving a comment on the social media post, 2024 responses by age**



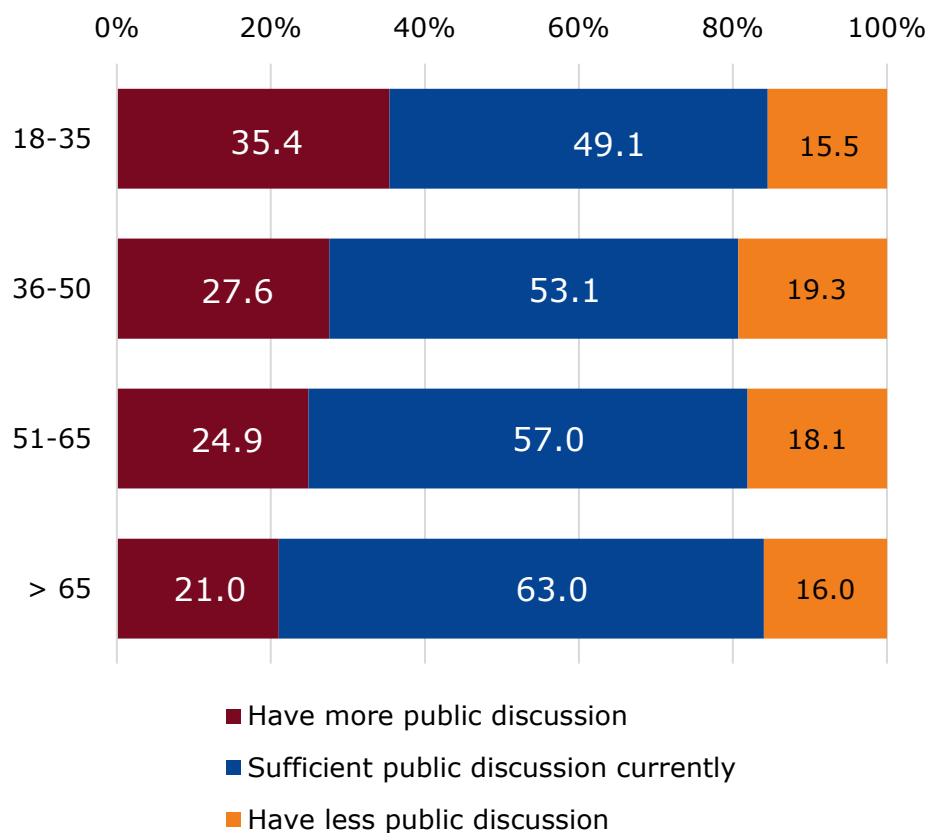
### Salient Findings

- 18–35s are most likely to call out wrongdoing (64.7% say it is acceptable) vs 37.9% for >65)
- Minorities more likely to find it acceptable to call out wrongdoing
- Similar trends noted for question items on appropriateness of sharing social media postings, starting online petitions, and doxxing

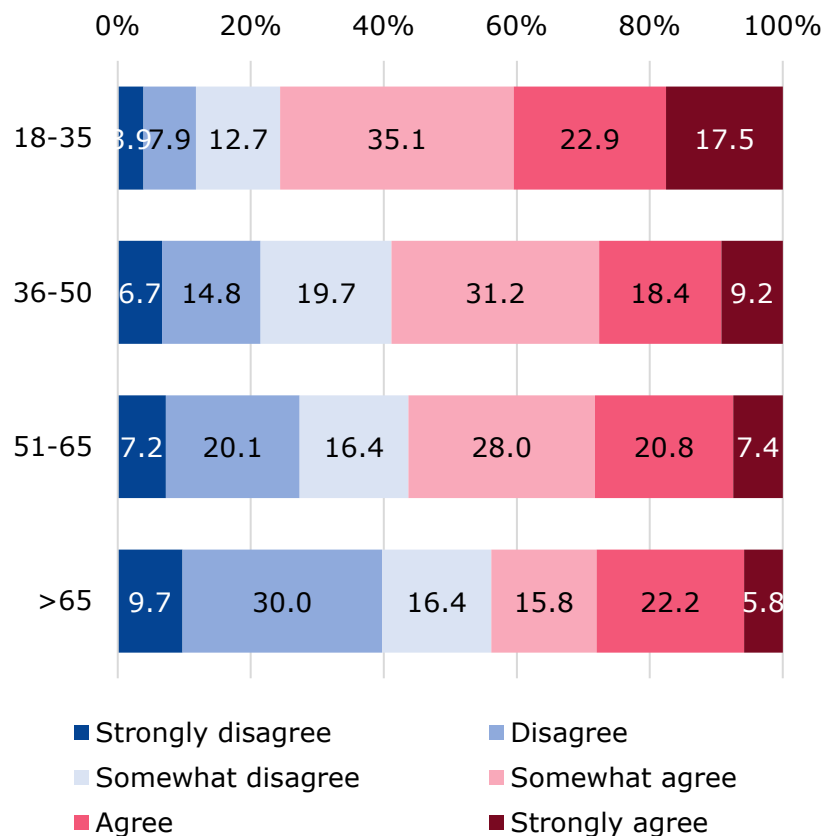


## ▶ Younger Singapore residents are in general more aware of R&R challenges and have more appetite to engage on race, religion, and other faultlines

**What are your opinions on the desired level of public discussion on race?, 2024 responses by age**



**I believe that it is easier to be a Chinese Singaporean in Singapore, 2024 responses by age**

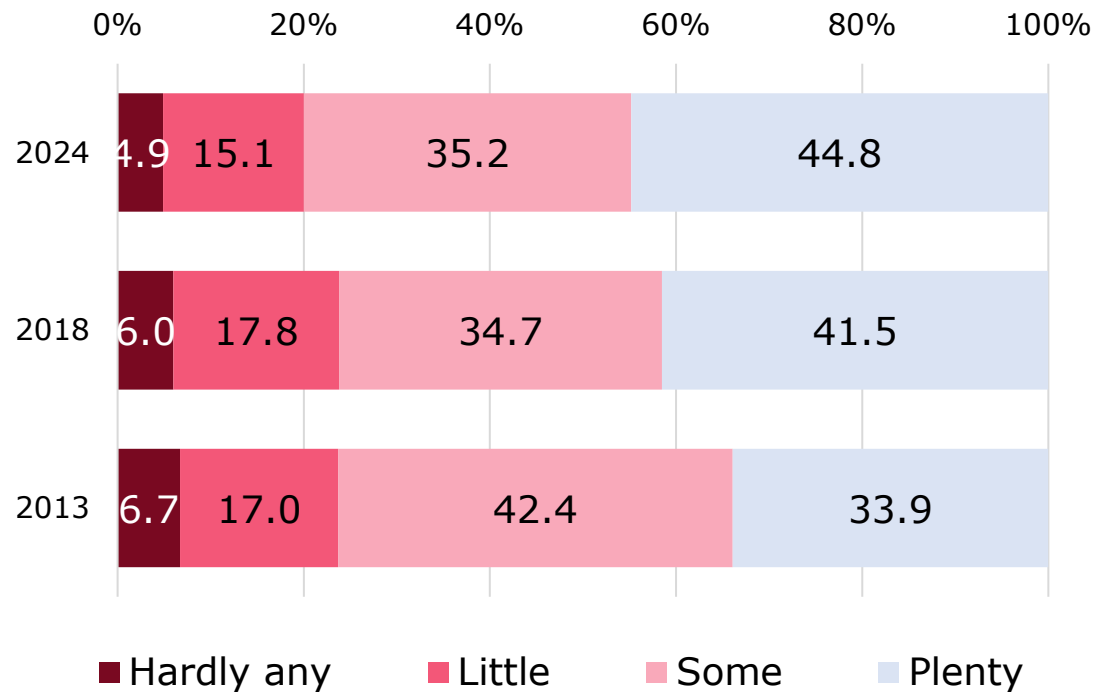


### Salient Findings

- Younger respondents are significantly more likely agree to varying extents vis-à-vis Chinese privilege and feel that there should be more public discussion on race and religion relative to older peers

- ▶ **The space for everyday inter-group interaction is expanding; compared with earlier waves, more people in 2024 report opportunities to get to know others at work or school, in their neighbourhoods, during leisure, and online**

**How much opportunity do you currently have to interact with people from other races and religions, responses by wave**



### Likelihood of getting to know someone of another race or religion



Workplace  
or school

**66.1 ↑**



Neighbourhoods

**50.6 ↑**



Leisure

**50.6 ↑**



Online space  
(e.g., social media)

**32.3%**

Increase in proportions from 2018 survey

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