**IPS** Institute of Policy Studies

Singapore Perspectives 2026: "Fraternity"
Tech and Ties: The Impact of Emerging Technologies on Social Cohesion

By Isabella Quah

Background

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held its annual flagship Singapore Perspectives conference in January 2026, focusing on the theme of "Fraternity". The conference took place over two days, opening with two online panel discussions on 20 January 2026, followed by a full-day, in-person programme on 26 January 2026 at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre.

The first session of the online conference, titled "Tech and Ties: The Impact of Emerging Technologies on Social Cohesion", featured Dr Mathew Mathews, Principal Research Fellow & Head of Social Lab at IPS; Associate Professor Kokil Jaidka, Department of Communications and New Media, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore; and Ms Grace Ann Chua, Co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of Friendzone. The session was moderated by Dr Clara Lee, Research Fellow at the Social Lab, IPS.
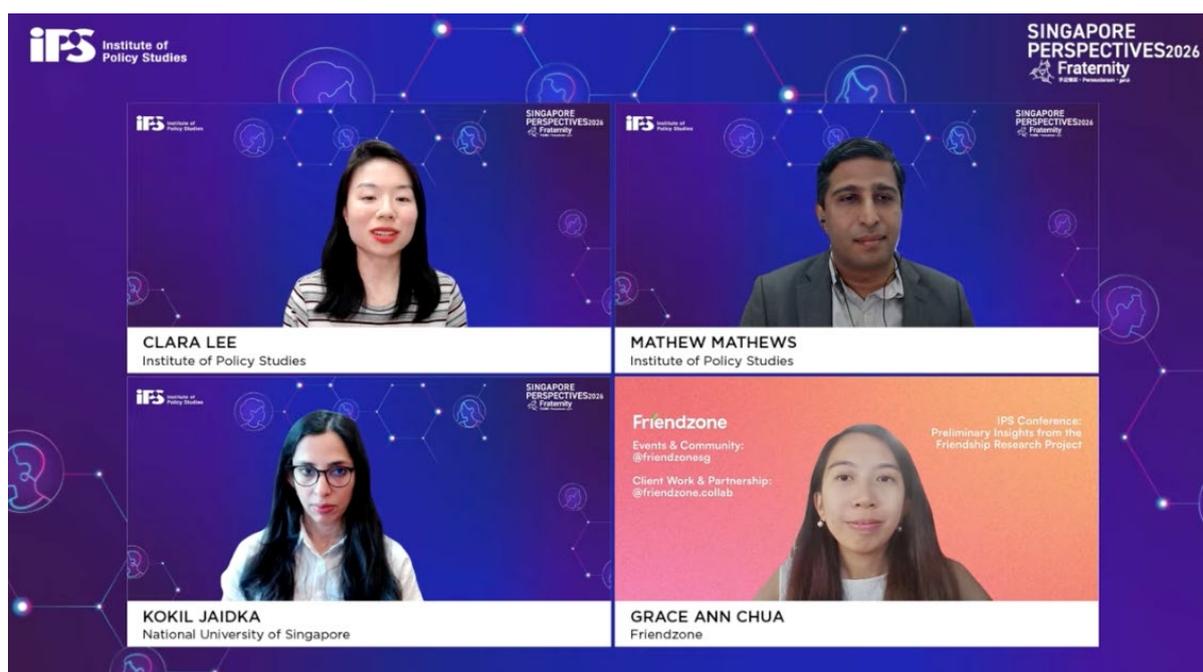
Caption for photo: Discussion among Dr Clara Lee (top, left), Dr Mathew Mathews (top, right), Professor Kokil Jaidka (bottom, left), and Ms Grace Ann Chua (bottom, right), during Panel 1 of the IPS Singapore Perspectives 2026 Conference (Online Session).

Key Research Findings on Online and Offline Friendships in Singapore

Dr Mathews presented the findings of a recent survey conducted by IPS Social Lab titled "Fraternity and the Social Fabric in the Digital Age". The study sought to understand the state of friendships in Singapore and how it has been affected by digitalisation, as well as the diversity of friendships and how that relates to various social outcomes such as cohesion and civic behaviour.

The survey found that despite Singapore's highly digitalised society, in-person ties remain the backbone of friendships. Dr Mathews highlighted that 93.8% of respondents indicated having close friends whom they meet in person, with schools and workplaces remaining as the primary starting points for said friendships. In contrast, only 23% reported having online friends, defined as those known online and mostly kept in touch with online.

Another key finding of the survey was that close friends show some diversity. In particular, approximately half of respondents have at least one close friend of different backgrounds in terms of age, housing type and education. At the same time, close friends tended to be more similar in areas of gender, nationality and ethnicity.

Dr Mathews highlighted that online friendships tended to show greater heterogeneity compared to in-person close friendships. Heterogeneity was also higher among respondents who lived in private housing, in the same way that who are on the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder indicated having friends in the same lower socioeconomic region.

The study also found that diverse friendships correlate with better social outcomes, in terms of trust, cohesion and pro-social behaviour. Specifically, higher friendship diversity is associated with increased sense of inclusion, increased social cohesion, greater trust in community and increased civic involvement.

On the topic of Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots and whether people see them as potential social substitutes, Dr Mathews noted that among respondents — particularly those who are younger — AI chatbots are widely used but mainly for practical and informational needs. Only a small portion of respondents used AI chatbots for social and emotional support, with the majority remaining cautious, citing that that chatbots could share misleading information and create unrealistic expectations about relationships that make it harder to form connections and reduces the likelihood of seeking help from real people. Dr Mathews also noted that most respondents did not view AI as a satisfying substitute for real-life interactions.

Digital Communication Patterns: Examining Friendships in Everyday Life

Associate Professor Kokil presented the findings of her research titled "Disentangling Code-mixing in Chats", which examines how friendships are maintained, how closeness is signalled, how effort is distributed across styles, especially online, and how everyday messaging quietly shapes what friendships look like on the ground.

Associate Professor Kokil shared that digital tools now carry much of the work of everyday friendships, in the form of checking in, reacting, and sharing small moments. While these interactions are often brief and low-effort, they are crucial because they allow friendships to persist across distance, time pressure and changing life stages. Associate Professor Kokil clarified that technology has not replaced face-to-face friendships; rather, it has reshaped how people maintain friendships.

She also shared that her findings concur with the IPS survey showing a strong association between friendship diversity and positive outcomes, and provide additional information on effort. Specifically, diverse friendships require more work because they require greater explanation, more emotional calibration and more effort to avoid misunderstanding.

Associate Professor Kokil stated that diverse friendships rarely emerge spontaneously because they are more likely to form and survive within structured settings like schools, workplaces and organised groups. This suggests that friendship diversity is not just about individual openness; rather, it depends heavily on whether institutions are creating sustained opportunities for interaction. Associate Professor Kokil emphasised the point that "when those structures weaken, diverse ties are the first to fade."

On the topic of digital communication, Associate Professor Kokil highlighted that the online friendships or the way people communicate online is meaningful, but the strongest signal of closeness remains concentrated in a subset of ties rather than spread evenly across digital relationship. According to her, this aligns with the IPS findings that online friendships can be meaningful but tend to complement rather than replace close friendships.

She also stated that social cohesion depends on infrastructure, as her findings demonstrated that it is technology like social media platforms that shapes who stays connected, who drifts

apart and who has access to support. In concluding her presentation, Associate Professor Kokil summarised that friendship is not just a private relationship, but a social infrastructure that is unevenly distributed. As lives become more pressured, friendships increasingly consolidate with familial ties and class boundaries because it becomes easier to communicate with people that we are in the habit of talking to.

Community Building in Practice

The third panellist, Ms Grace Ann Chua, presented practical insights from Friendzone's eight years of community-building work and their ongoing Friendship Research Project, a series of focus group discussions seeking to understand how young people form and sustain friendships. Ms Chua introduced Friendzone's work in building friendships and social capital in different zones of life.

She observed that from her experience conducting Friendzone events, some participants would experience challenges in social interaction, such as having difficulties initiating or sustaining a conversation, challenges interpreting non-verbal cues such as tone and body language, and skipping expected steps in social skills. As a result, Friendzone launched an initiative "Friendship School", which focuses on creating workshops and content to equip young people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to navigate friendships in different stages and different areas of their lives.

Ms Chua highlighted three key findings from the ongoing Friendship Research Project. First, technology forms acquaintances, not friendships. Digital platforms make it easier to go from strangers to acquaintances, but progressing beyond that often involves barriers. People rely heavily on small digital signals (e.g., reply speed, tone, messaging style) to assess sincerity and trust, and asynchronous communication is prone is misinterpretation and can encourage overthinking.

Second, digital tools have increased the emotional labour of friendships. According to Ms Chua, digital tools have made friendships more tiring by creating unspoken expectations to always be available. Micro-actions like replying, reacting and acknowledging messages have become expected and require constant time and energy. This has created new sources of tension in friendships with a pressure to stay responsive.

Lastly, Ms Chua shared an insight on how social media shapes and at times distorts the perception of friendship quality. Online activity is increasingly becoming a proxy for closeness, whereby small cues such as how quickly someone replies may be interpreted as indicators of care, effort or priority. Some people feel closer simply by frequently seeing updates, suggesting that visibility may be increasingly mistaken for intimacy and friendship, which can blur expectations and create confusion about where friendships truly stand.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q: Certain types of schools hinder friendship diversity, where the occasional partnership with a more heterogeneous school also fails to bring about deeper connections. These schools may contribute to a sizeable group of students who feel uncomfortable with diversity. What is your take?

A: Dr Mathews highlighted that the IPS study found over 50% of respondents' current friendships stem from school, which raises concerns as these same social circles are likely to follow individuals through key life milestones and translate into stronger associations later in life. He pointed out that this stratification can also be linked to housing types and socioeconomic status, where students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may attend more renowned schools, resulting in fewer diverse connections. While he acknowledged that this presents an issue, he also highlighted possible efforts to mitigate this, such as Outward Bound Singapore and co-curricular activities conducted at cluster or regional levels, which can bring students from different schools together.

Associate Professor Kokil added on that it is important to create more events that require or involve inter-school and inter-zonal activities, whether in sports, drama or other domains. She noted that while people are unlikely to change the schools their children attend, increasing opportunities for interaction outside the formal curriculum can help create more mixing and serve as a meaningful step forward.

Ms Chua acknowledged that while institutional opportunities are important, there is also the role of personal agency, such as the choices parents make about schools or how children spend time outside of school. She cautioned against blaming individuals who lack exposure to diversity due to their educational pathways, noting that such exposure is often beyond their control. She emphasised the importance of showing grace and engaging in conversations that highlight the value of building friendships across diverse backgrounds and understanding different profiles.

Q: If early school environments limit friendship diversity to some extent, are there any adult-stage institutions or community mechanisms that would be the most effective in rebuilding social capital later in life?

A: Dr Mathews shared that many respondents in the survey reported forming friendships in the workplace. However, he cautioned that some workplaces can also be stratified, as individuals may enter them shaped by earlier socialisation experiences. While workplaces may not be the perfect place for all kinds of social mixing, Dr Mathews noted that it does provide some amount of opportunity, considering the mix of nationalities and age groups in the workplace. In terms of mixing across income differences, he emphasised the importance of community and neighbourhood-level efforts in Singapore, noting that the country's interspersed housing landscape, which includes private housing alongside various HDB types, presents opportunities for social mixing. He suggested that more community events centred on neighbourliness, civic activity and shared responsibility could help bring people together and enable friendships that cut across class lines.

Ms Chua added that it is important to intentionally design experiences that facilitate the bridging of diverse people, and that effective outreach and marketing depicting diversity plays a key role in ensuring such events attract a broad cross-section of the community. She also noted that people often seek new connections as they transition into a different life stage, such as becoming a parent, to connect with others navigating the same stage of life. She highlighted the importance of self-awareness and intentionality in recognising when one's social network

lacks diversity, and encouraged individuals to step out of their comfort zones by trying new activities or attending events as a way to diversify their social circles.

Q: While there are many benefits of having greater social diversity being highlighted, social media algorithms tend to reduce that diversity by pushing content with values/views that are similar. Is there anything that can be done to counter that?

A: Associate Professor Kokil shared that the onus is on individuals to create different avenues for themselves and consciously curate the diverse kinds of role and friendships that they want in their lives. She explained that stepping slightly outside one's comfort zone, even without deliberate efforts to cross social boundaries, can naturally lead to greater diversity. She noted that algorithms reinforce echo chambers because users tend to engage most with familiar content, and urged people to actively curate what appears on their feed. She concluded by encouraging people to tune more deeply into their real friendships rather than relying heavily on influencer-driven content.

Q: While we have discussed the benefits of diversity, homophily (i.e., having friends and close ties that are similar to oneself) is still happening because people do find some value in having friends that are very similar to them. Why do people find value in such friends who are similar, and how easy will it be for the average person to get out of their comfort zone and meet someone who is different from them?

A: Dr Mathews explained this tendency through the similarity-attraction paradigm in social psychology, the notion that "birds of a feather flock together". He noted that similarity makes interactions easier, as individuals assume shared values, beliefs and experiences, reducing the need to navigate uncertainty regarding how the other person responds. While acknowledging that similarity offers short-term comfort for people, Dr Mathews emphasised that research shows building connections with others who are different leads to better outcomes for individuals in the long term.

Ms Chua added that no single person can meet all of an individual's social and emotional needs, as people hold multiple social identities, and it is therefore unrealistic that one person will completely align with someone on all different dimensions of their life. She encouraged people to take stock of their social identities and recognise where there are areas or avenues that they may want to develop more close friendships or acquaintances in. She added that a healthy social circle should have both close friends and acquaintances, as they serve different functions: close friends share core values and provide deep emotional support, while acquaintances expose individuals to new perspectives and a different view of the world beyond their immediate circles. She emphasised that while opportunities for diverse connections exist, individuals must actively seek them out. At the institutional level, she stressed the responsibility of organisations, schools and non-profits to consciously create an environment that attract and support diversity.

Q: Are any of the survey findings surprising to IPS? How should the observations influence policy decisions? For example, the use of AI chatbots for public/government services; workplace policies; development of physical shared spaces in neighbourhoods; use of digital

tools in schools; and design of our National Service as a platform for in-person shared experiences.

A: Dr Mathews acknowledged the importance of physical spaces in facilitating social mixing, highlighting the need to preserve such "nodes" across Singapore that allow people from different backgrounds to come together. He expressed support for efforts to maintain inclusive spaces such as hawker centres, which continue to serve diverse communities.

Associate Professor Kokil echoed the importance of public civic spaces and suggested that while Singapore already has many places where people gather, there needs to be more opportunities for younger people in particular to interact and mingle.

Ms Chua added that beyond physical spaces, programming is crucial. She emphasised the role of hosts and space managers in activating the space to be hospitable, facilitate interaction and bridge diverse groups.

Q: Only a small proportion use AI for emotional support, but younger respondents are more open to it. Do you see this as a generational shift, and what risks (e.g., misinformation or reduced human interaction) should we monitor as AI evolves?

A: Dr Mathews noted that extant literature suggests higher AI usage among adolescents, which raises concerns as these are formative years for relationship-building. He cautioned that AI tends to mirror users' views, which may not be good for young people in their formative years. Nonetheless, Dr Mathews clarified that current findings suggest AI use is largely complementary to existing social support systems rather than a replacement, suggesting that it may not be problematic as a lot of people are still cautious of AI. However, he noted that individuals with only online friendships tend to score lower on social outcomes, reinforcing the value of in-person connections.

Associate Professor Kokil said that digitally mediated communication has made it easier for young people to maintain and deepen close friendships. She explained that digital platforms allow richer and more frequent communication while reducing some social pressures associated with face-to-face interactions. Therefore, technology ultimately plays a key role in sustaining close relationships, though it poses a separate challenge of people needing to learn how to be present with each other face-to-face. She also expressed scepticism about reports suggesting emotional support was not a major use case for chatbots, noting that this contradicts observed behaviour and warrants further research, particularly in the Singapore context.

Ms Chua added that caution is needed regarding misinformation and over-reliance on AI chatbots, particularly among young people. She explained how Friendzone's upcoming focus groups would further explore how AI shapes friendships.

Q: How do you see friendships in Singapore changing in the near future, and what might this mean for individuals as well as for society?

A: Dr Mathews observed that the trend for online and AI-mediated friendships are likely to continue increasing, and cautioned that this may result in the erosion of certain social skills, particularly among younger generations.

Associate Professor Kokil added that recent research points to the limitations and harms of AI use, including her own findings that AI gives people false confidence about knowledge. She also highlighted the finding that women are more likely to engage in intimate disclosures with chatbots, and there is a gap on how women perceive the response and how it affects their own self-perceptions. She stressed the need for deeper understanding of these dynamics which may inadvertently be creating digital divides.

Ms Chua added that technology is here to stay and will continue to shape how friendships are formed and maintained. Therefore, it is especially important to prioritise in-person interactions. She encouraged individuals to stay connected with close friends through regular face-to-face catch-ups and meaningful conversations.

AI Usage declaration

ChatGPT (GPT-5.2) was used to generate an initial summary of the Question-and-Answer section of this report. The author has reviewed and edited all generated content and takes full responsibility for its accuracy.

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