

Fraternity and the Social Fabric in the Digital Age

Mathew Mathews, Clara Lee, Isabelle Tan, Lim Xiao Pei Elizabeth, Tan Lyn Cai

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National University of Singapore



Institute of
Policy Studies

Overview

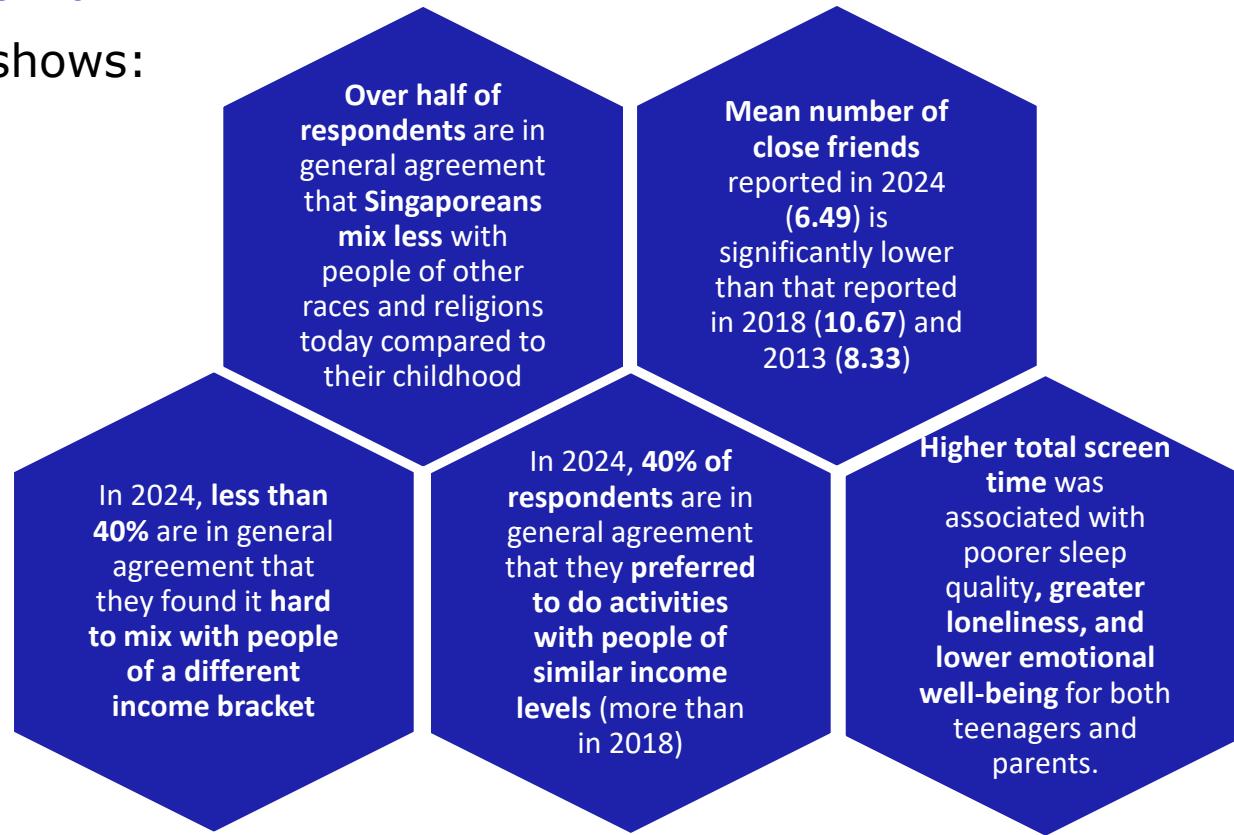
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Survey Background

Purpose and Methodology

Study Background

Our prior research shows:



The present study to understand how friendships are formed and maintained today, whether there is diversity in friendships, and how online and offline networks (including AI chatbots) relate to broader social outcomes such as trust, cohesion, belonging, and civic engagement.

¹ *Friendships in flux: Generational and socio-economic divides in Singapore (IPS Working Papers No. 62)*. Institute of Policy Studies.

² *Connected yet conflicted: Exploring the effects of screen use on well-being and relationships (IPS Working Papers No. 67)*. Institute of Policy Studies.

Survey Purpose

This study investigates friendships and digitally mediated interactions in Singapore, examining social networks in online and offline spaces and links to broader social outcomes like trust, cohesion, and civic engagement. It also examines usage and perceptions of AI chatbots as emotional support and companionship, given their prevalence in everyday life, particularly in the mental health space.

Survey Methodology

Respondents

- Singapore Citizens or Permanent Residents
- Aged 21 and above
- Able to complete the online survey independently in English

Data Collection

To access harder-to-reach populations and a larger overall sample, data collection consisted of 3 modalities:

- Main Sample (n=1,879)
 - Survey Fieldwork conducted Face-to-Face by IPS
 - IPS Online Panel
- Supplementary Sample (n=1,834)
 - External Online Panel

Full Survey Sample = 3,713 respondents

Fieldwork was conducted between Oct - Nov 2025

*Unless otherwise specified, the figures presented in this deck are based on the main sample

Overall Survey Findings

Overall Survey Findings

Greater diversity in close friendship networks was associated with greater trust in society and prosocial behaviour. Despite digital advancements, in-person friendships remain strong, with many respondents first meeting all their close friends face-to-face. Meanwhile, AI chatbots like ChatGPT and Gemini are used for information, tasks, and social support, yet most respondents remain cautious due to worries about misinformation.

- A. In-person ties are most prevalent, though online friendships can fulfill meaningful friendship roles
- B. Diverse friendships foster positive social outcomes
- C. Half of respondents had at least one close friend who differed from them in age, housing type and education but their close friendships were more similar in gender, nationality and ethnicity
- D. AI chatbots are used primarily for practical and informational purposes though a small proportion use them for support
- E. Overall, respondents remain cautious about AI



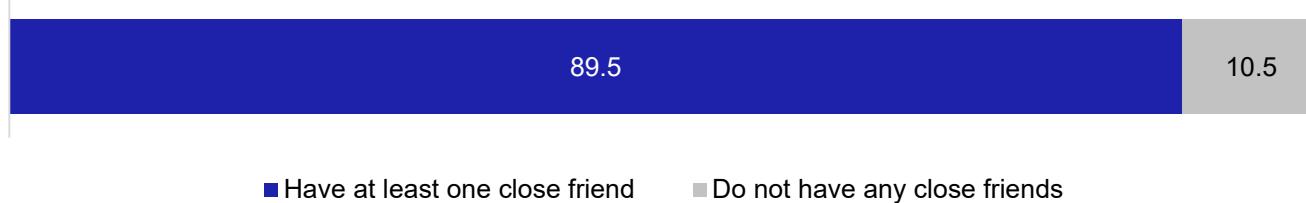
Forming and Sustaining Friendships

Forming and Sustaining Friendships

Persistence of In-person Connections

Despite digital advancements, only 23.2% of respondents reported having online friends.

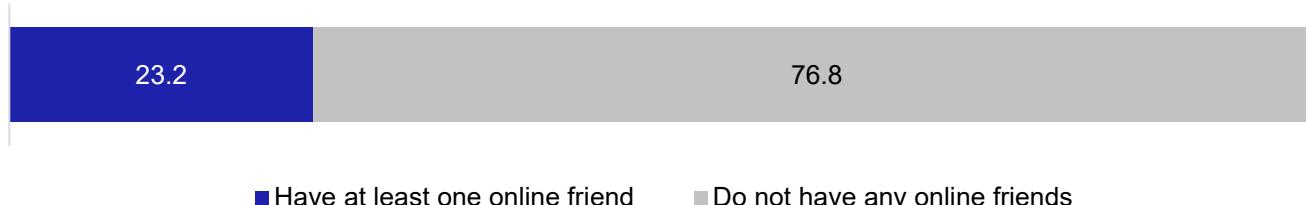
How many close friends do you have? (%)



Among those with close friends

- Mean: 4.05
- Median: 3.00

How many online friends do you have? (%)



Among those with online friends

- Mean: 6.67
- Median: 2.00

Definition of close friends and online friends in the survey:

Close friends were defined as people respondents feel at ease with, can talk to about private matters, or call on for help. Respondents were instructed to exclude family members (e.g., spouse, parents, children, siblings) and romantic partners (e.g., boyfriend, girlfriend) in their count.

Online friends were defined as any other friend(s) whom respondents first got to know online and whom they primarily keep in touch with online (i.e., chat and interact with each other on the Internet, social media, messaging apps, and/or other online platforms most of the time). Respondents were instructed to exclude the friend(s) that they had already indicated in the question about close friends.

Forming and Sustaining Friendships

Persistence of In-person Connections Among Close Friends

93.0% of respondents first met all their close friends in person.

For each close friend listed, how did you first meet them in person? (respondent level, %)

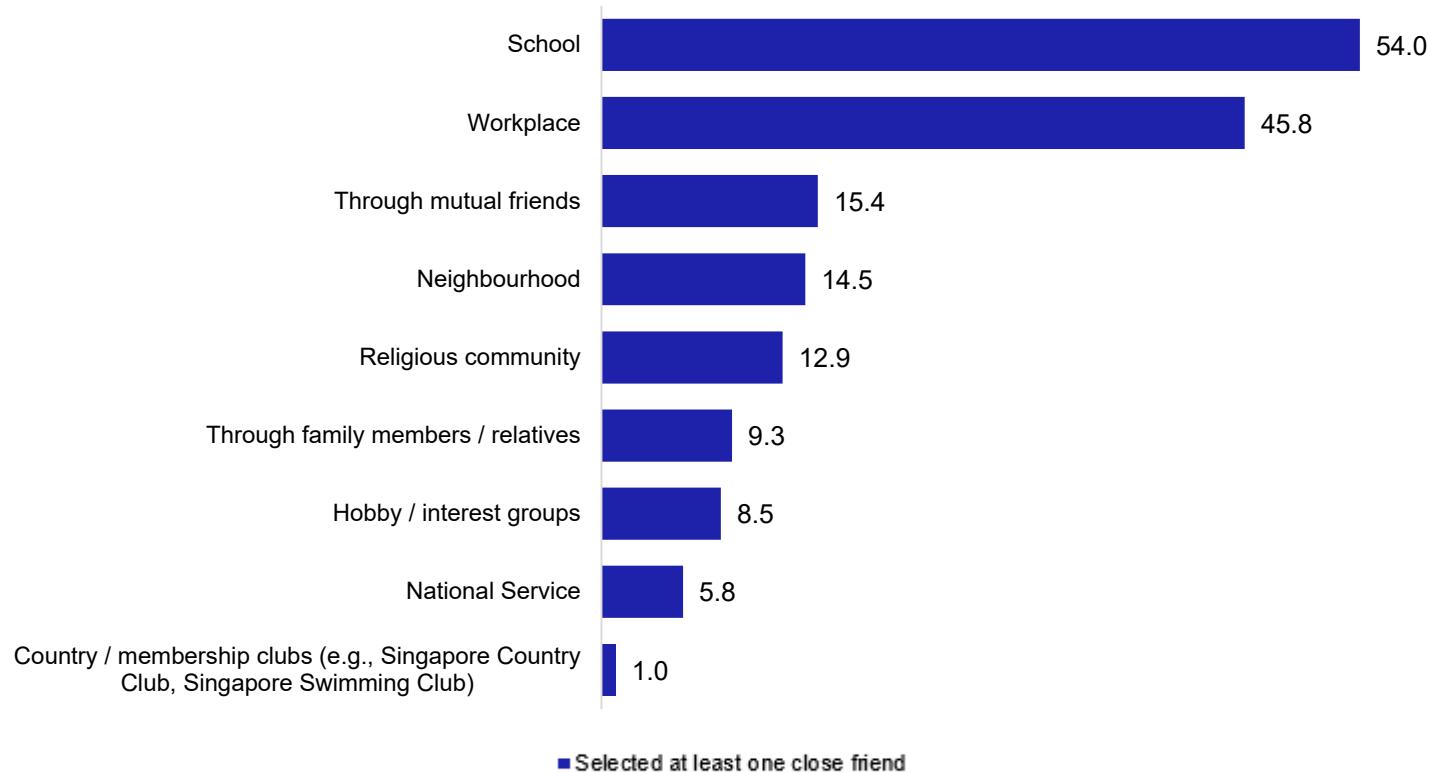


Forming and Sustaining Friendships

Persistence of In-person Connections Among Close Friends

Schools and workplaces remained the primary starting points for these vital connections.

**For each close friend listed, how did you first meet them?
(Respondent level, %)**



Among respondents who reported having at least one close friend that they first met in person (n=1,660):

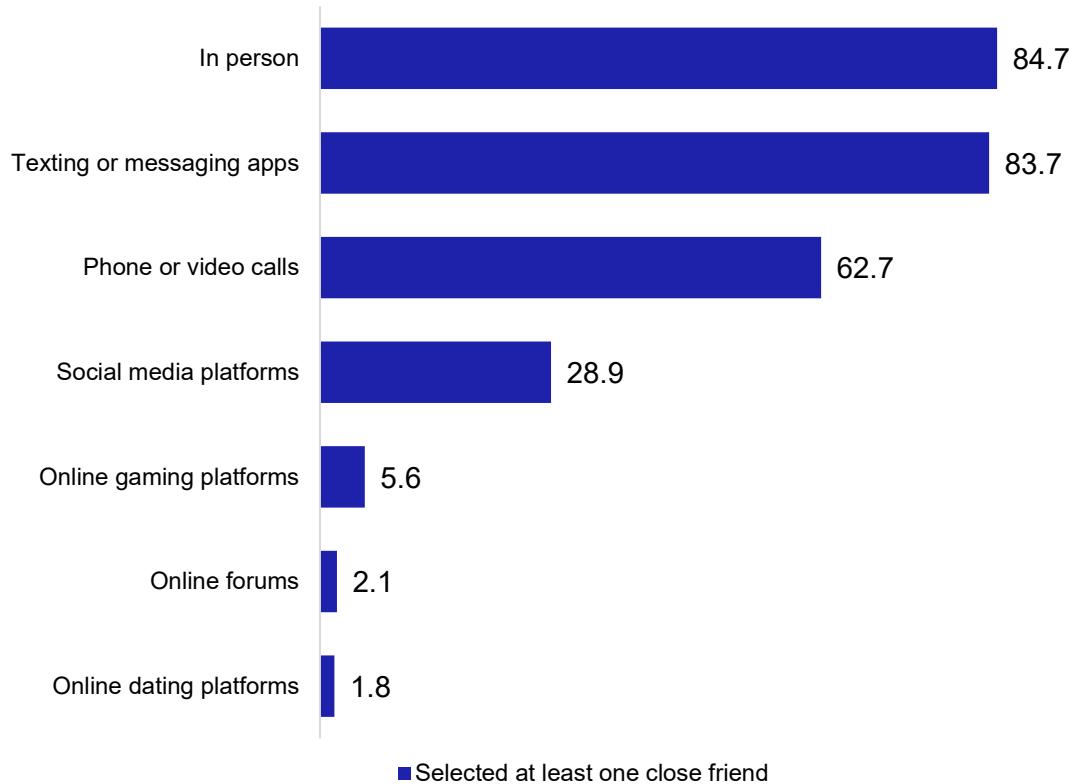
- 54.0% met at least one of their close friends in school
- 45.8% met at work

Forming and Sustaining Friendships

Persistence of In-person Connections Among Close Friends

More than 8 in 10 respondents also typically communicated with at least one friend in person (84.7%) and via texting or messaging apps (83.7%).

For each close friend listed, how do you typically communicate with them? (Respondent level, %)

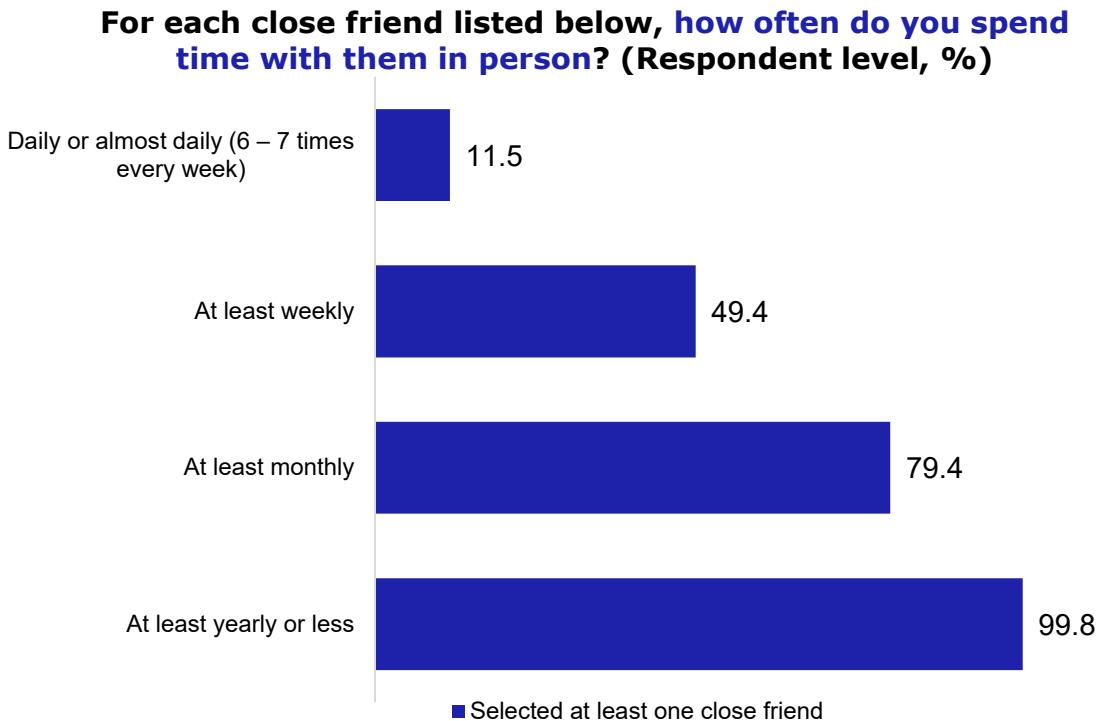


Forming and Sustaining Friendships

Persistence of In-person Connections Among Close Friends

Almost half reported spending in-person time with at least one close friend at least weekly (49.4%), while close to 8 in 10 reported doing so at least monthly (79.4%).

Nearly all respondents had in-person time with their close friends at least yearly or less. Most had contact much more frequently.

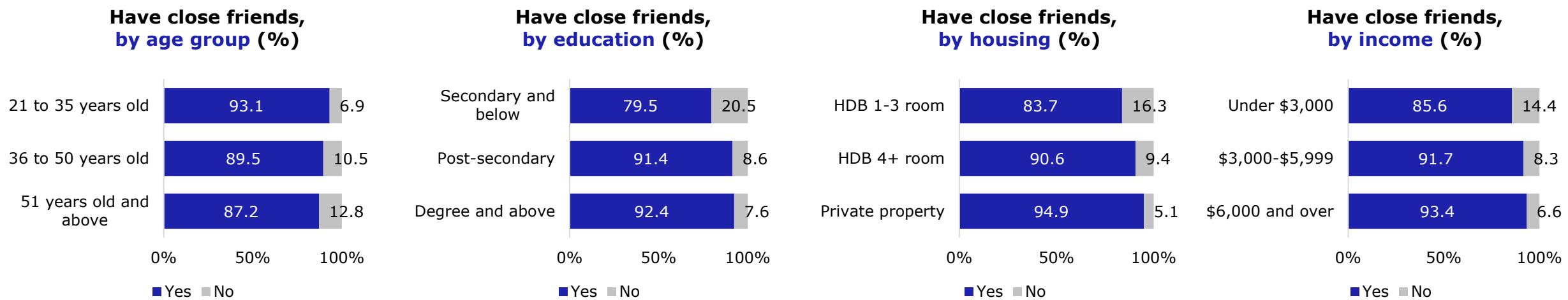


Who has Close or Online Friendships

Close Friendships

Who Has Close Friends

Younger and higher-SES respondents (based on reported education, housing, income) were more likely to report having close friends. Conversely, those that reported having no close friends tended to be older and lower-SES.

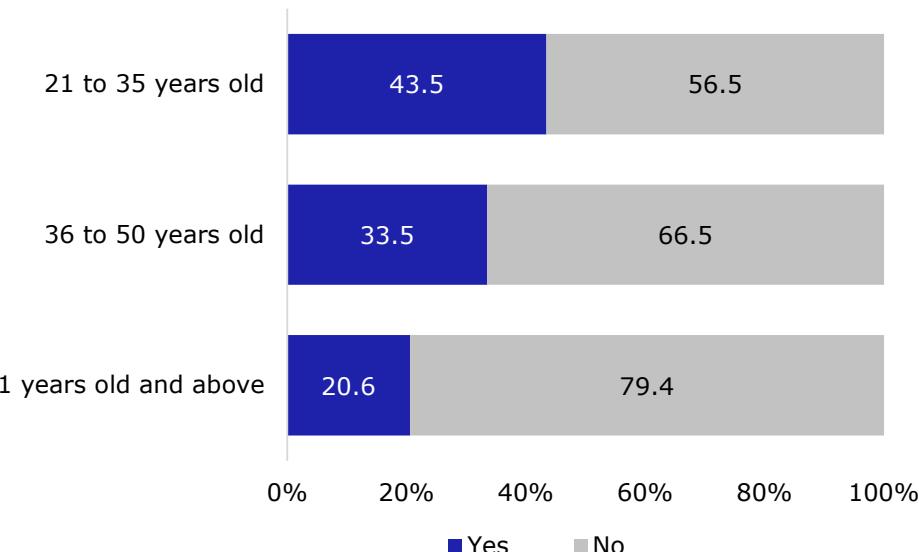


Online Friendships

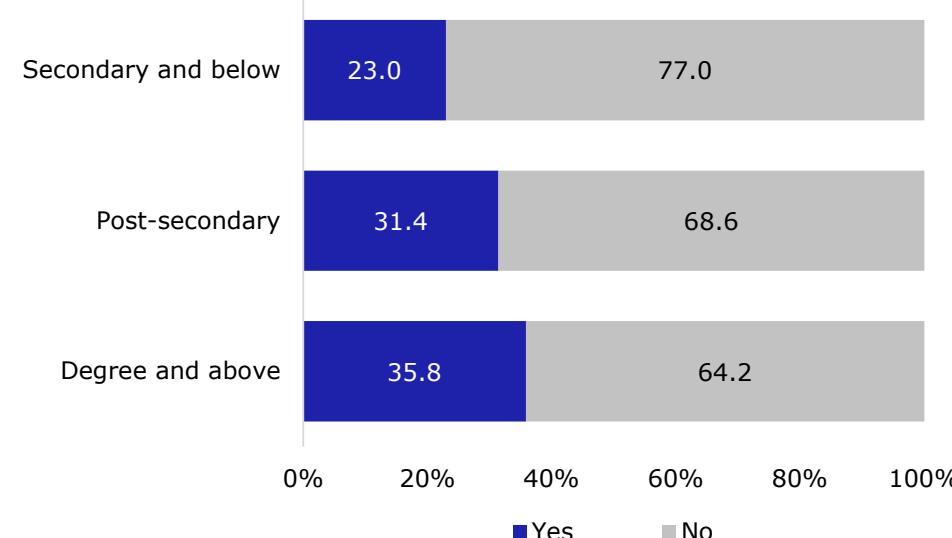
Who Has Online Friends

Younger and higher-educated respondents were more likely to have online friends

Have online friends, by age group (%)



Have online friends, by education (%)



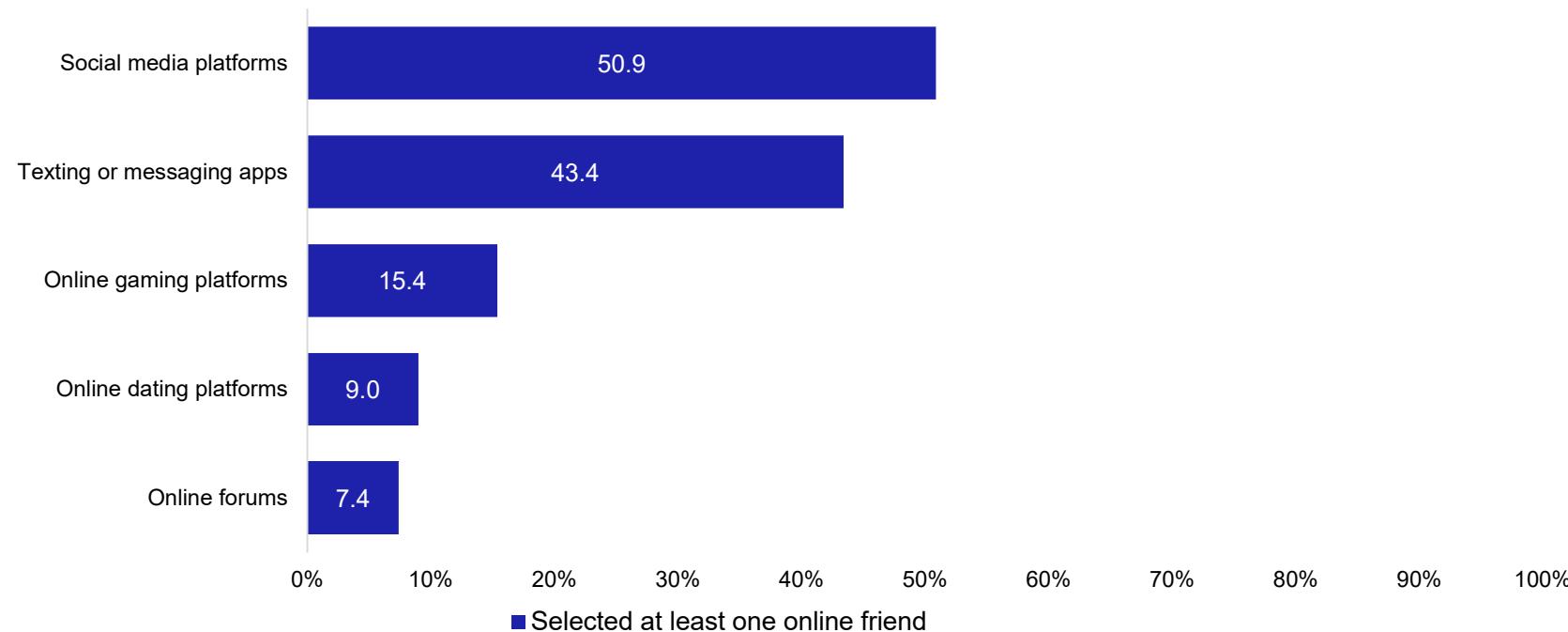
*The analyses presented in this slide, which are specific to online friendships, are based on all respondents in the main + supplementary samples (n=3,713)

Online Friendships

Who Has Online Friends

Half of those with online friends met at least one online friend via social media platforms, and 4 in 10 via texting or messaging apps

For each online friend listed, on which online platform did you first meet them? (respondent level, %)



*The analyses presented in this slide, which are specific to online friendships, are based on respondents who reported having online friends in the main + supplementary samples (n=1,084)

Diversity in Friendships

Prevalence of Heterogeneity

Diversity in Friendships

Dimensions of Diversity

Respondents were asked to provide the demographic attributes of up to five of their close and online friends.

These self-reported **demographic attributes** included their friend's:



A3b. Age of **Close Friend 1**

Under 15 years old
 15 – 19 years old

A3c. Sex of **Close Friend 1**

Male
 Female
 Don't know

A3d. Ethnicity of **Close Friend 1**

Chinese
 Malay
 Indian
 Others, please specify:
 Don't know

A3e. Nationality of **Close Friend 1**

Singapore
 Australia
 Britain

A3f. Highest education level attained by **Close Friend 1**

University-educated
 Not university-educated
 Don't know

A3g. Housing type of **Close Friend 1**

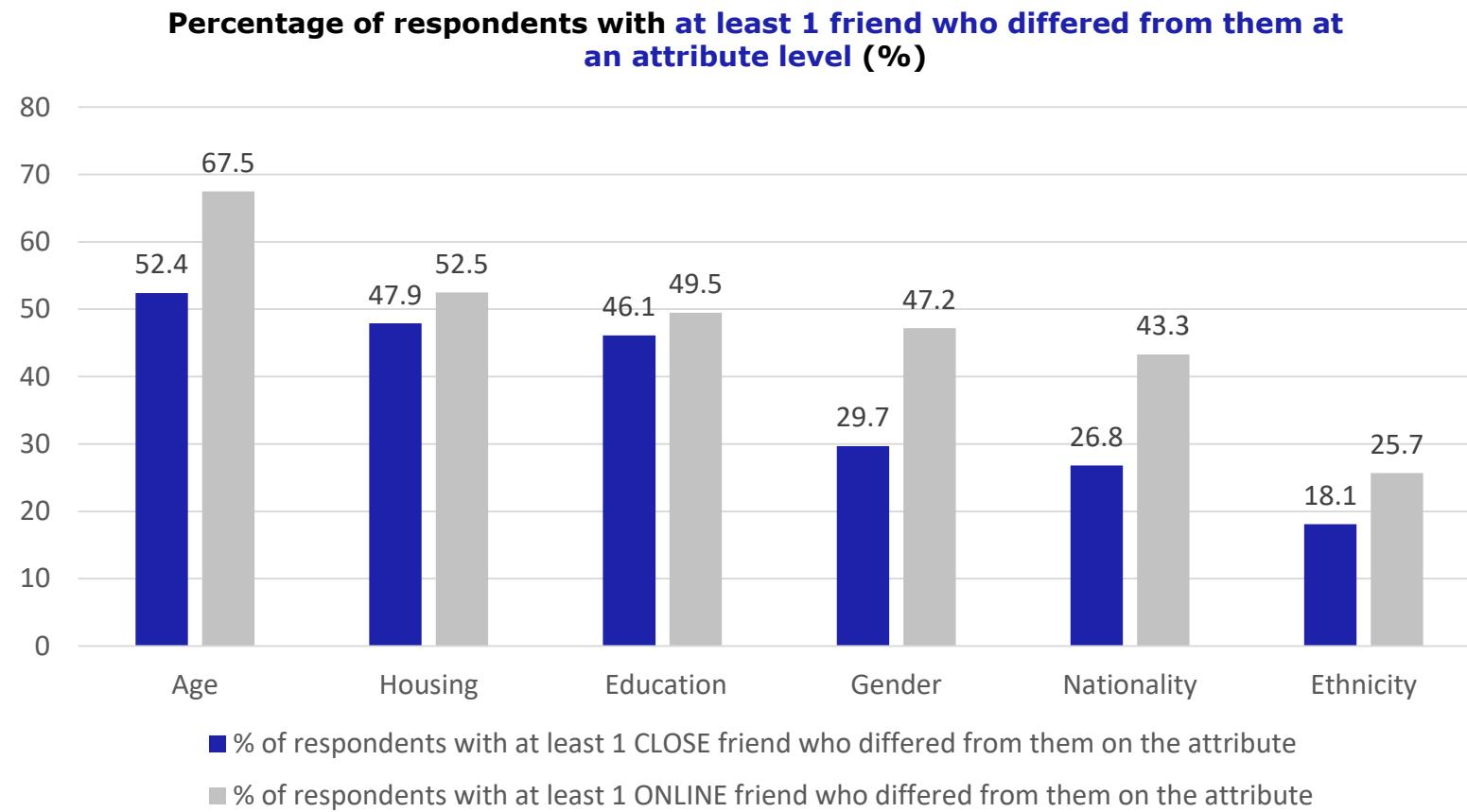
HDB 1-room
 HDB 2-room
 HDB 3-room

To explore heterogeneity, we examined the proportions of respondents who *had at least 1 friend who differed from them on each of the attributes above* (e.g., being of different genders or residing in different housing types), relative to those whose friends were all reported to share the same attribute as themselves.

Diversity in Friendships

Prevalence of Heterogeneity

Online friendships displayed greater heterogeneity than close friendships across five of the six attributes examined

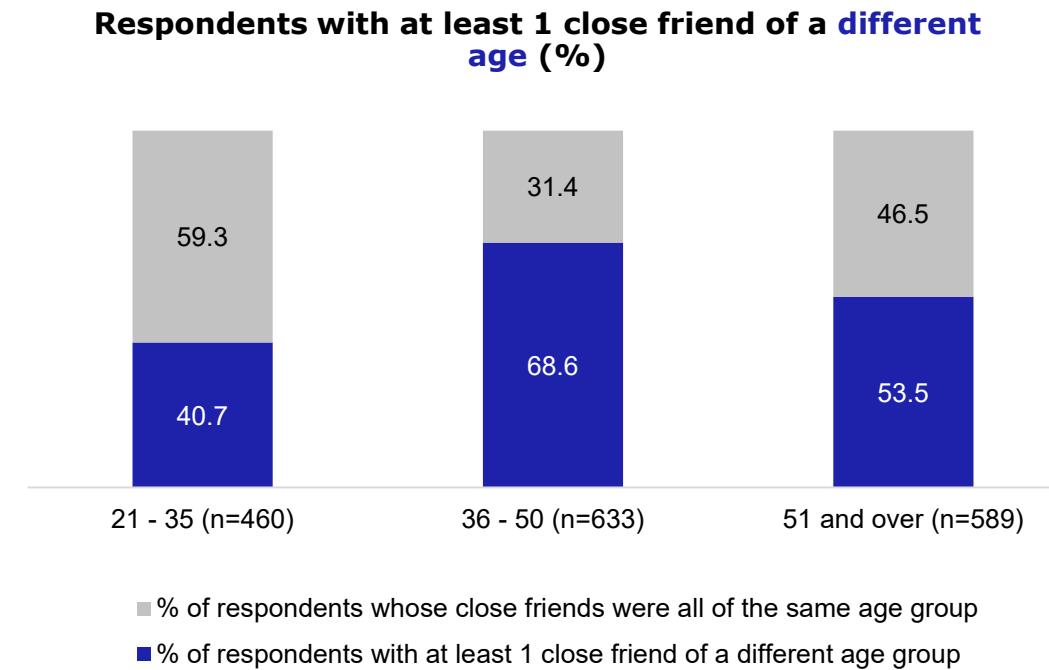


Diversity in Friendships

Prevalence of Heterogeneity

Heterogeneity in close friend networks likewise differed **across age groups**

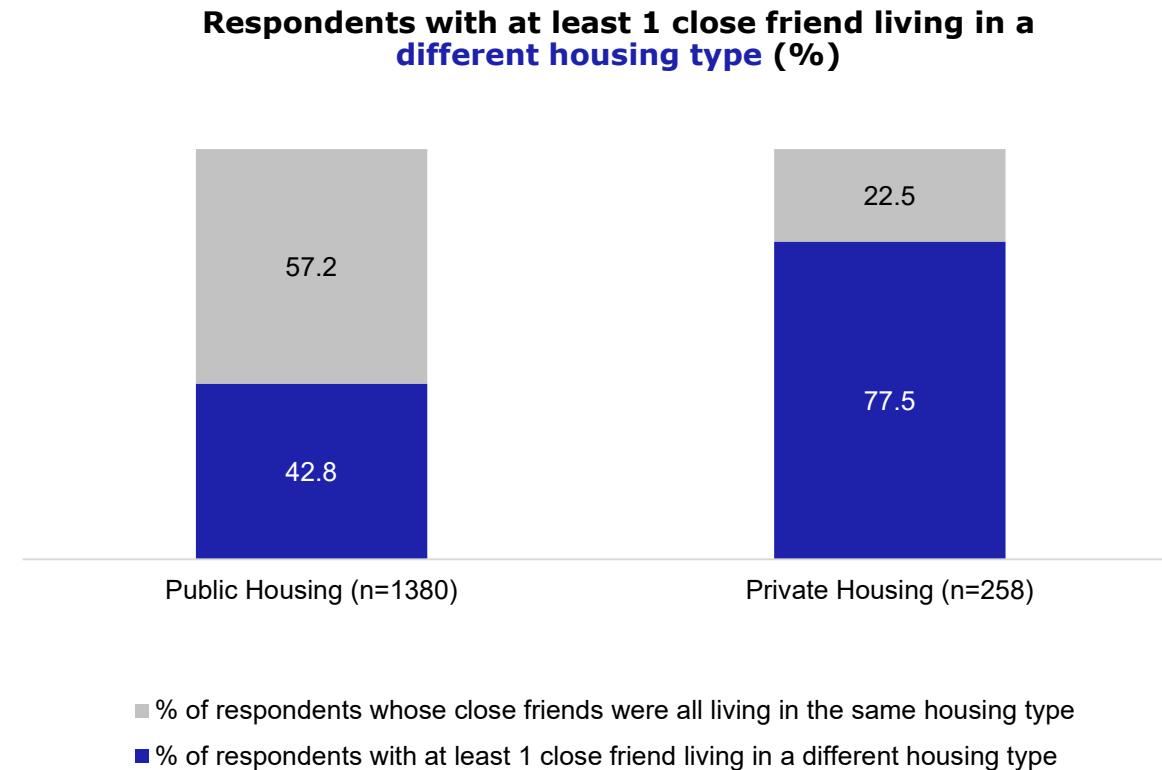
Middle-aged respondents were likelier to report age heterogeneity; 68.6% respondents aged 36-50 indicated that they have at least one close friend of a different age band, compared to their older and younger counterparts



Diversity in Friendships

Prevalence of Heterogeneity

Housing type heterogeneity was higher among private housing residents (77.5%) than public housing residents (42.8%); though over a fifth of private housing residents have no close friends among public housing residents

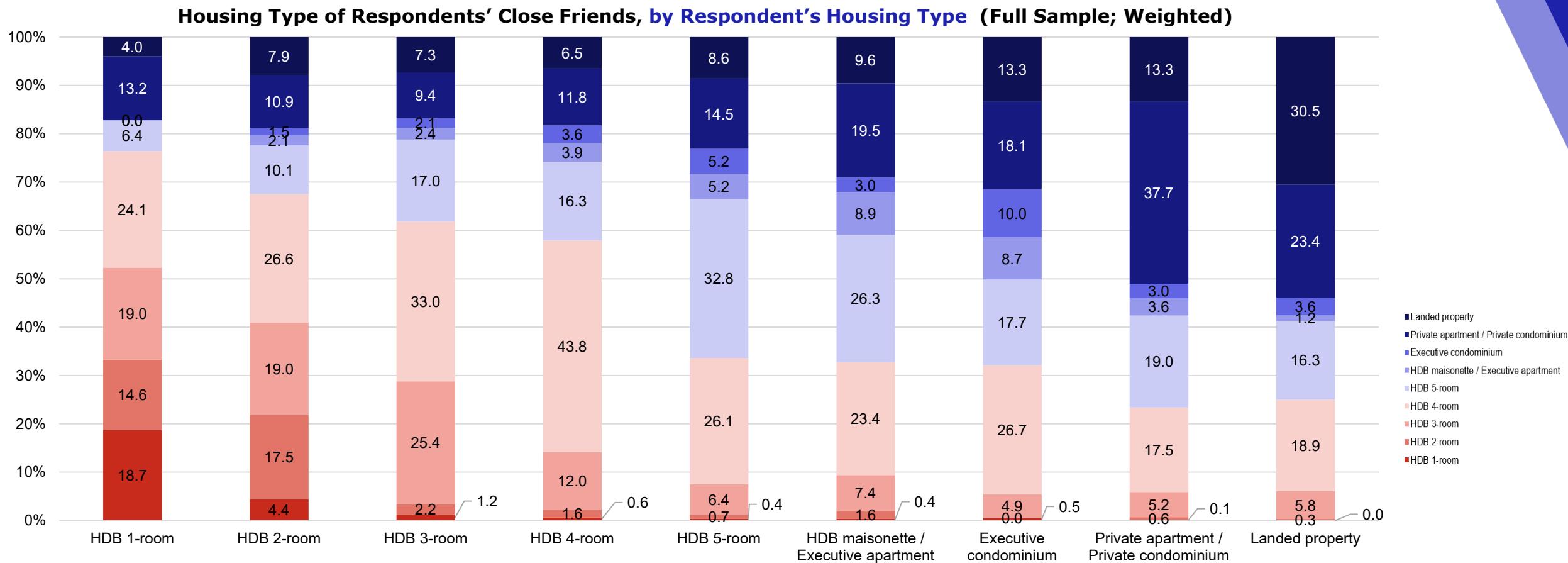


Diversity in Friendships

Prevalence of Heterogeneity

Those in lower income housing much less likely to have close friends living in private housing; similarly those in better income housing have few close friends in HDB 3 room and below

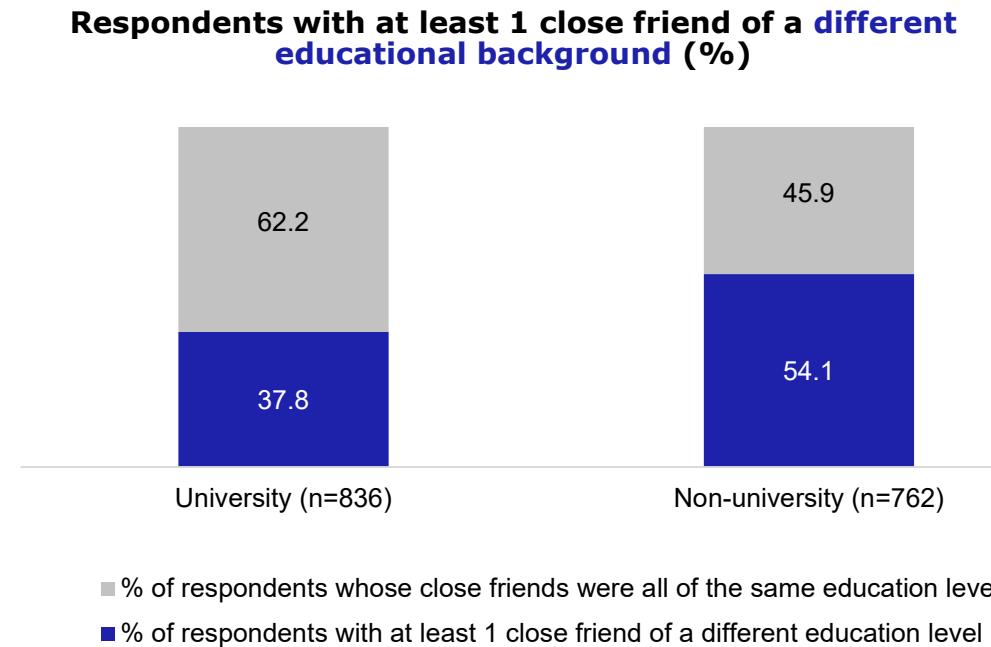
**This measure is an average computed across their up to 5 closest friends*



Diversity in Friendships

Prevalence of Heterogeneity

Non-degree holders reported greater heterogeneity, with 54.1% reporting having at least one close friend with a different educational attainment, compared with 37.8% of degree holders

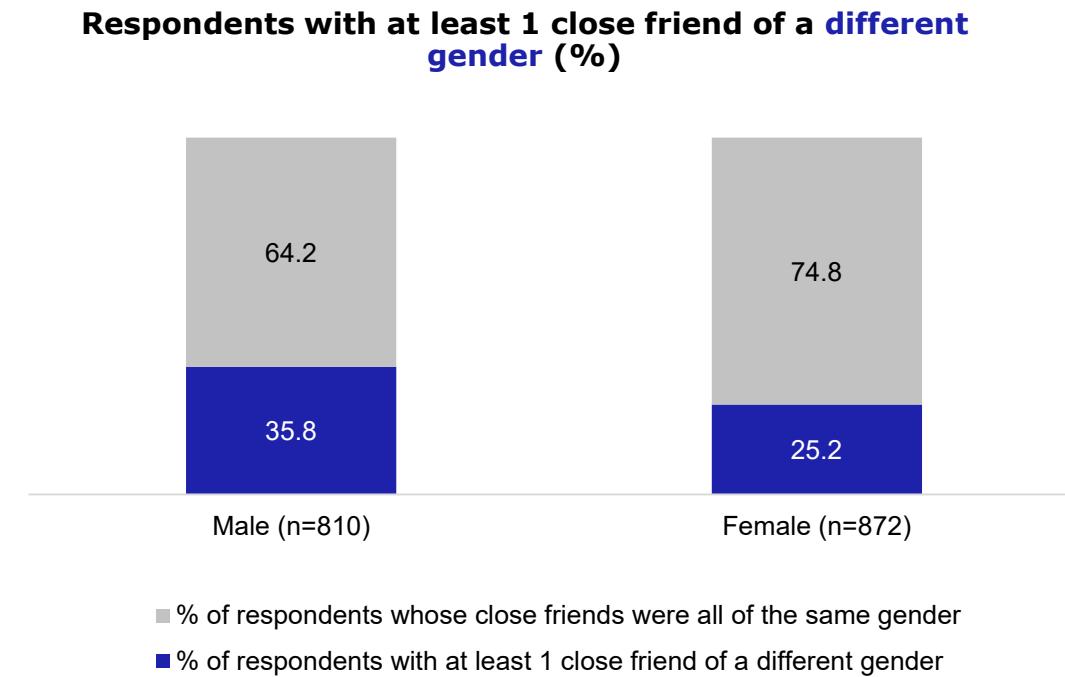


Diversity in Friendships

Prevalence of Heterogeneity

Heterogeneity in close friend networks likewise differed **across the sexes**

Male respondents reported higher gender heterogeneity; 35.8% men and 25.2% of women indicated that they have at least one close friend of a different gender

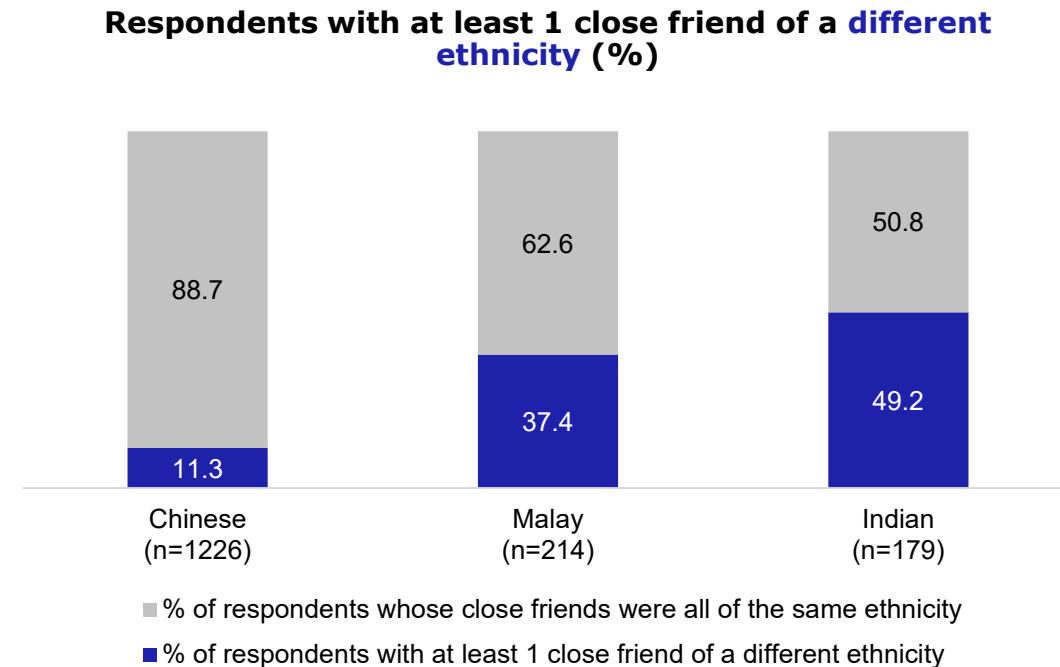


Diversity in Friendships

Prevalence of Heterogeneity

Heterogeneity in close friend networks likely reflects majority-minority dynamics and differing opportunities for intergroup contact

Minority respondents reported higher racial heterogeneity, where 49.2% of Indian respondents and 37.4% of Malay respondents indicated that they have at least one close friend from a different race, compared to 11.3% of Chinese respondents



Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes

Diversity in Friendships

Overview of Social Outcomes

**Higher
Friendship
Diversity is
Positively
Correlated
With...**

Increased Sense of Inclusion

- I don't really feel accepted
- I feel connected with others
- I feel so distant from others

Increased Social Cohesion

- People in Singapore do not share the same values

Trust in Community

- How much do you trust your neighbours and fellow Singaporeans?

Increased Civic Involvement

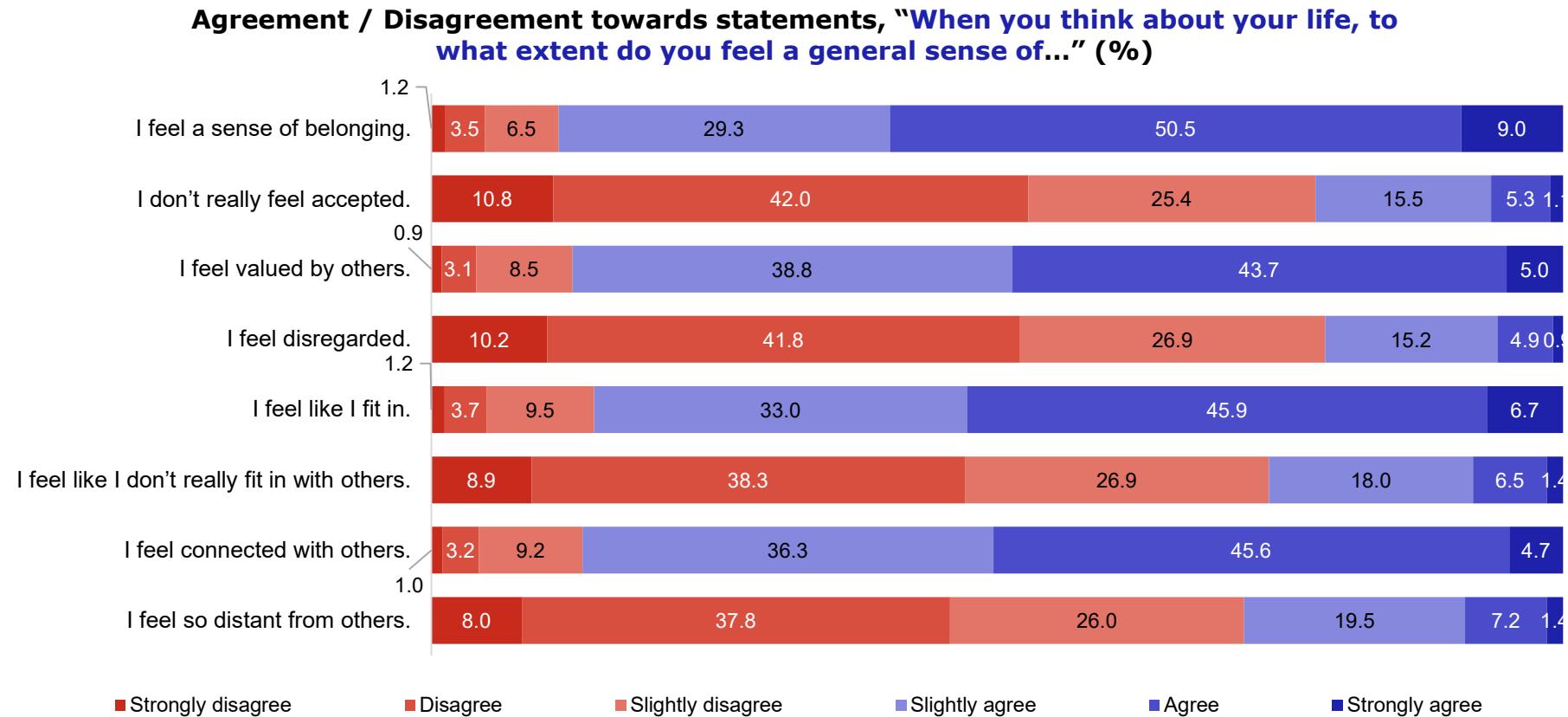
- Civic activities done
- Civic activities one would never do
- Donated money, food, or other resources to a group or cause
- Volunteering your time to help a group or cause
- Organising a community activity, event, or campaign

To assess the association of friendship diversity on social outcomes, we analysed each component / survey item listed above to understand the associated likelihoods.

Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Sense of Inclusion

Around 9 in 10 respondents agreed to some extent feeling a sense of belonging, valued by others, fitting in and connected to others

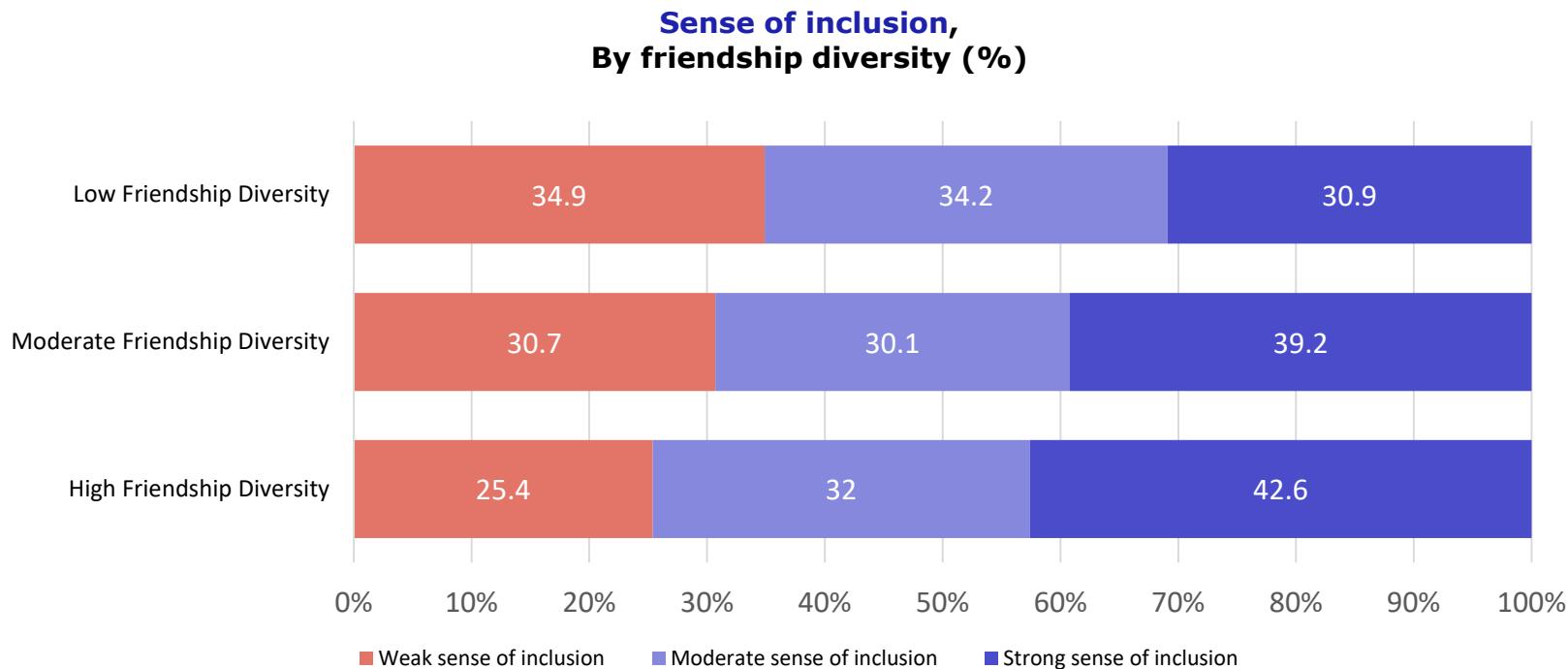


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Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Sense of Inclusion

A strong sense of inclusion was reported by 42.6% of those with high friendship diversity, versus 30.9% with low friendship diversity



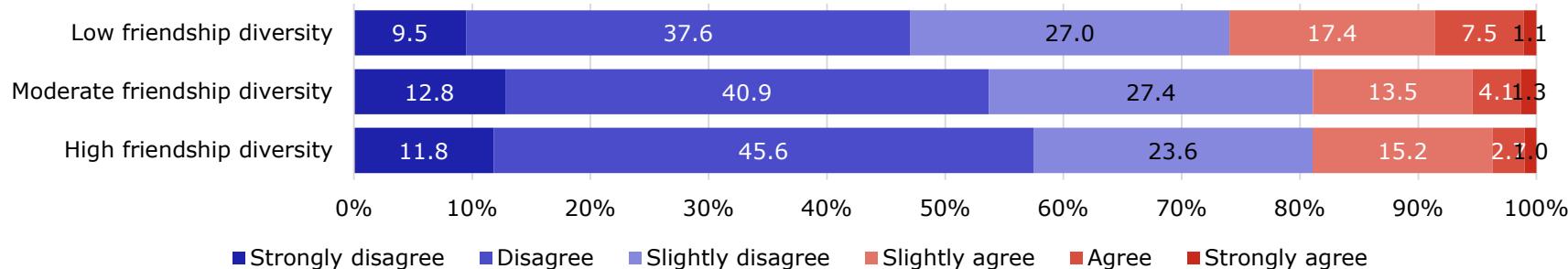
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Diversity in Friendships

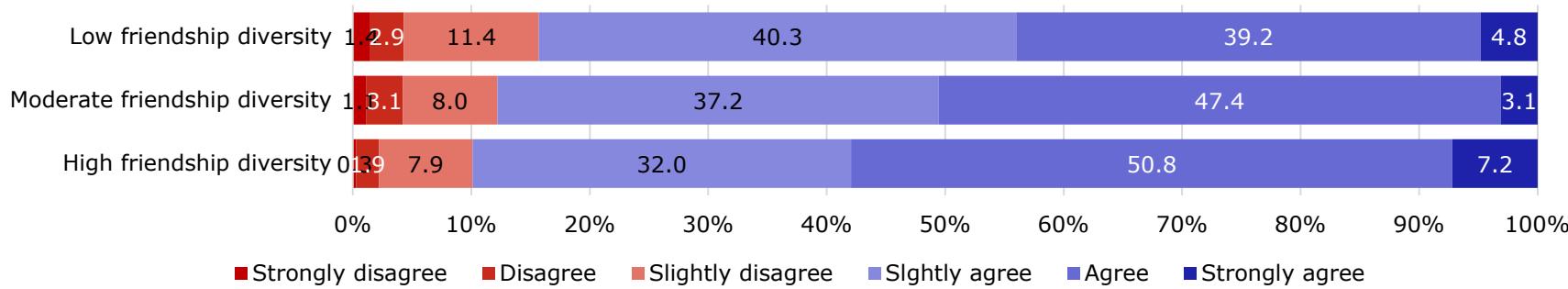
Social Outcomes – Sense of Inclusion

Individuals with more diverse friendships were more likely to feel accepted and connected with others

Agreement / Disagreement towards statement, "I don't really feel accepted", by friendship diversity (%)



Agreement / Disagreement towards statement, "I feel connected with others", by friendship diversity (%)

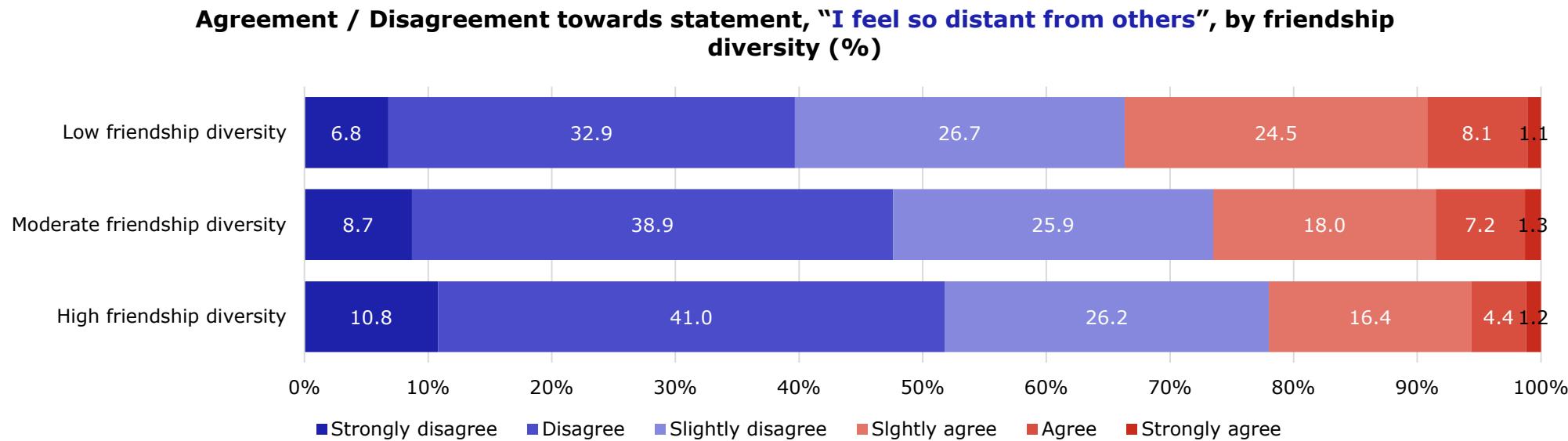


*demographic controls were added

Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Sense of Inclusion

Individuals with more diverse friendships were less likely to feel distant from others



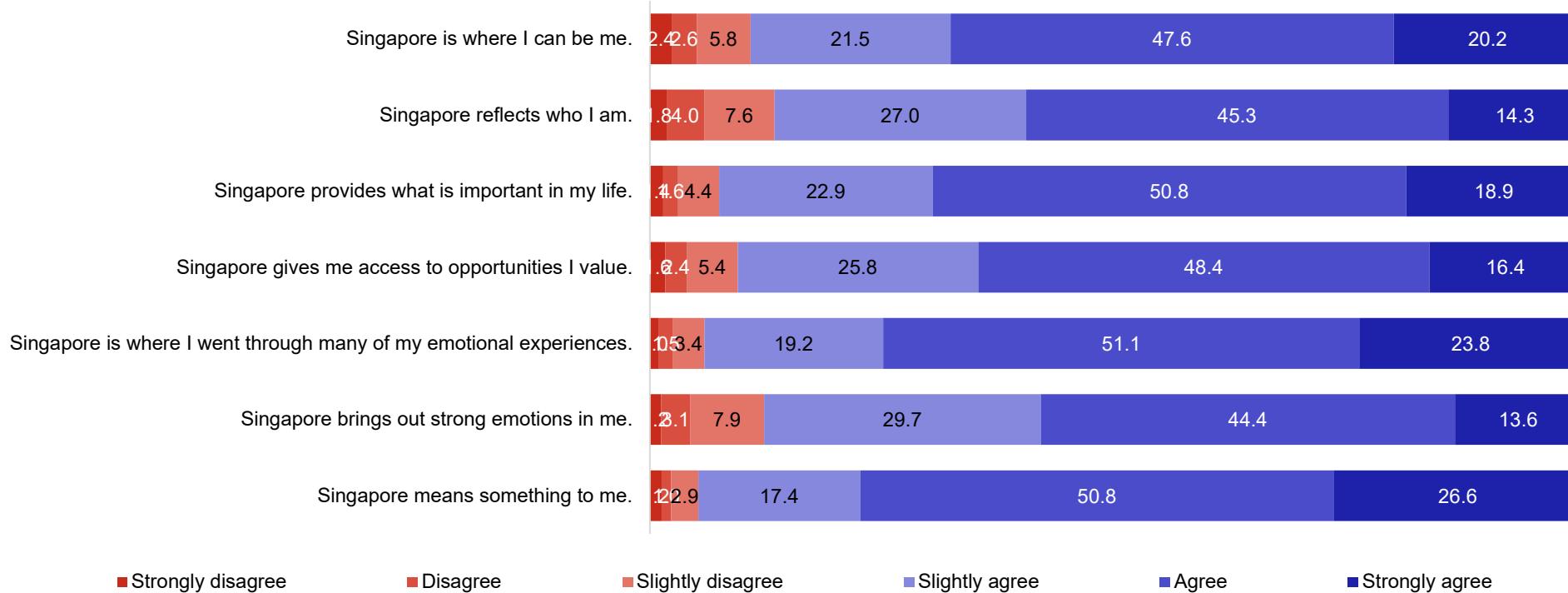
*demographic controls were added

Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Sense of Place

Around 9 in 10 respondents held positive sentiments about their sense of place in Singapore

Agreement / Disagreement towards statements about how you think and feel about Singapore. (%)

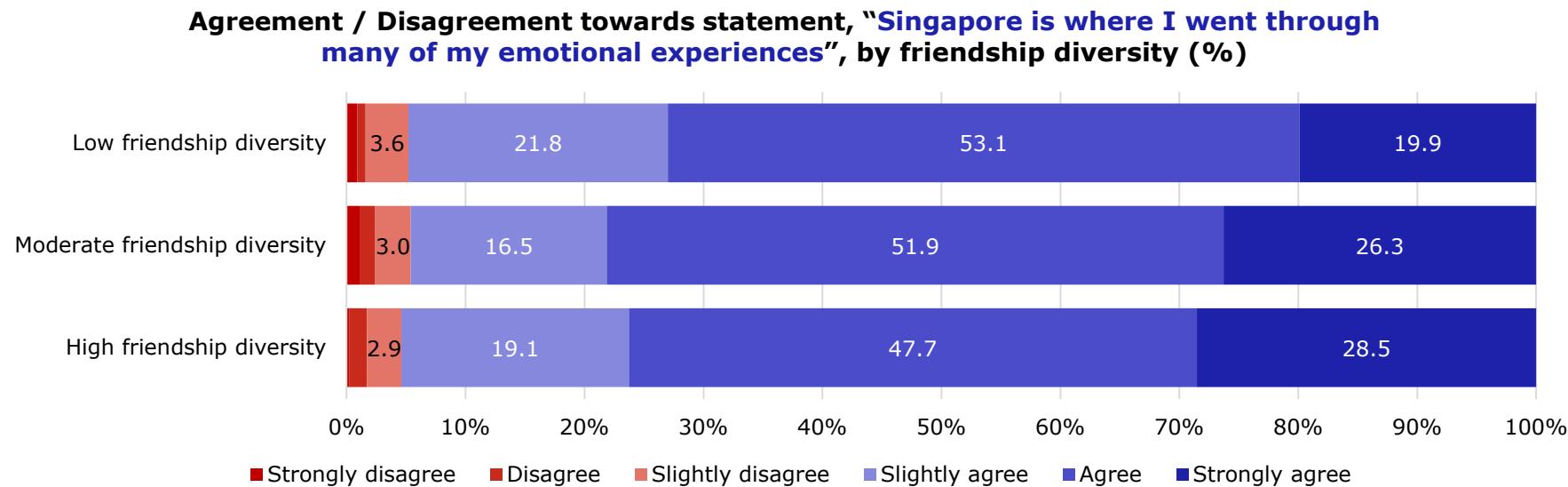


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Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Sense of Place

Individuals with more diverse friendships were more likely to report stronger emotional attachment to Singapore



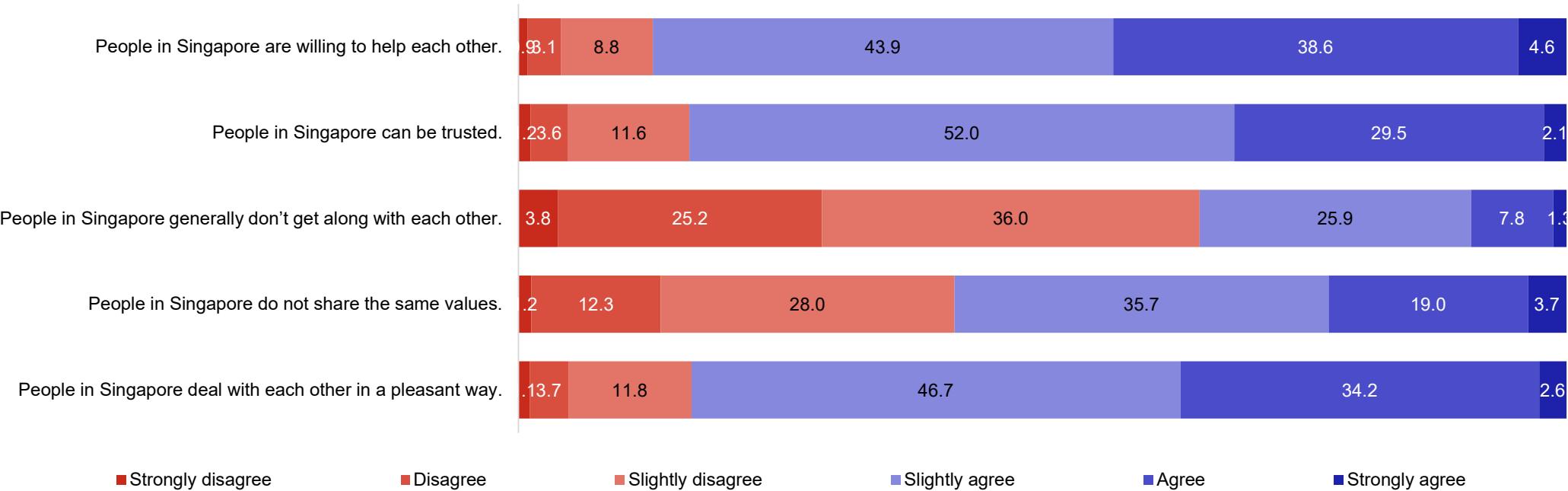
*demographic controls were added

Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Social Cohesion

Around 8 in 10 respondents agreed that people in Singapore are willing to help each other, deal with each other in a pleasant way, and can be trusted

Agreement / Disagreement towards statements about Social Cohesion (%)

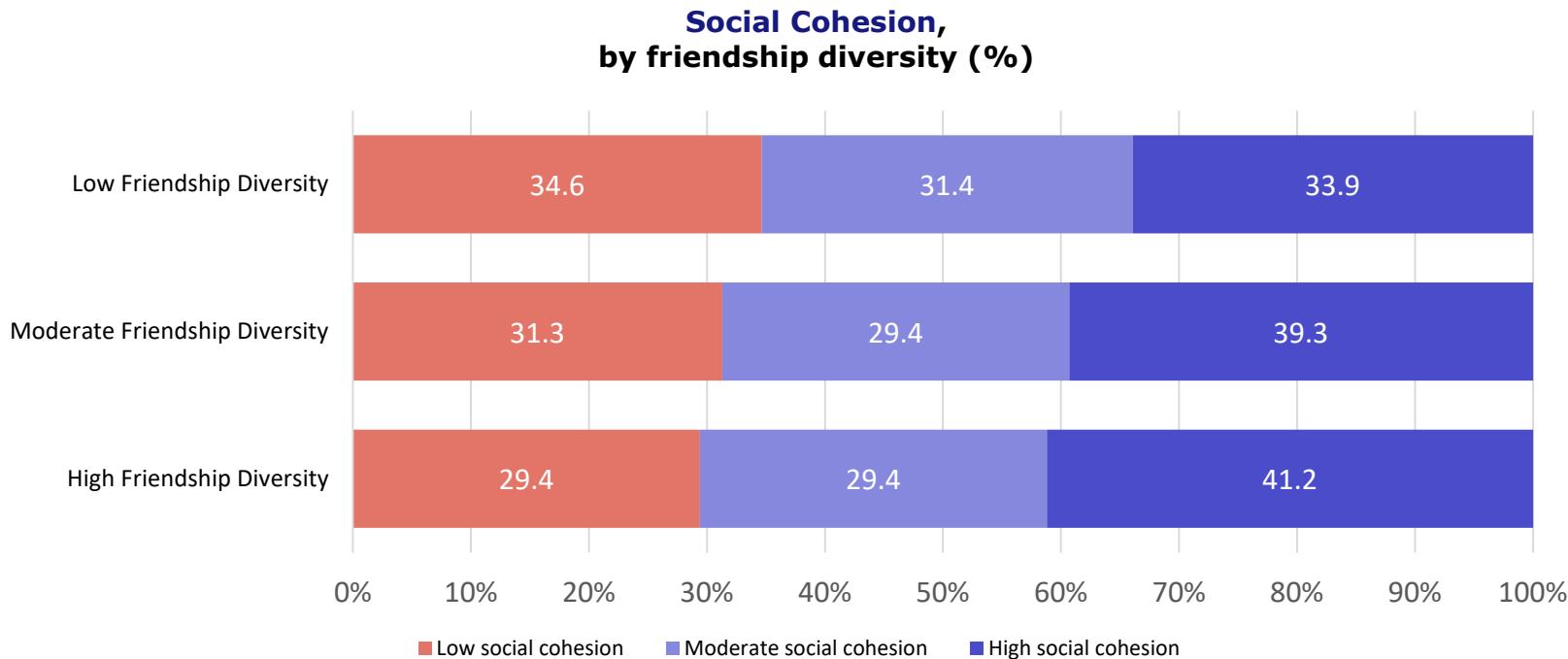


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Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Social Cohesion

41.2% of respondents with high friendship diversity reported high social cohesion, compared with 33.9% among those with low friendship diversity

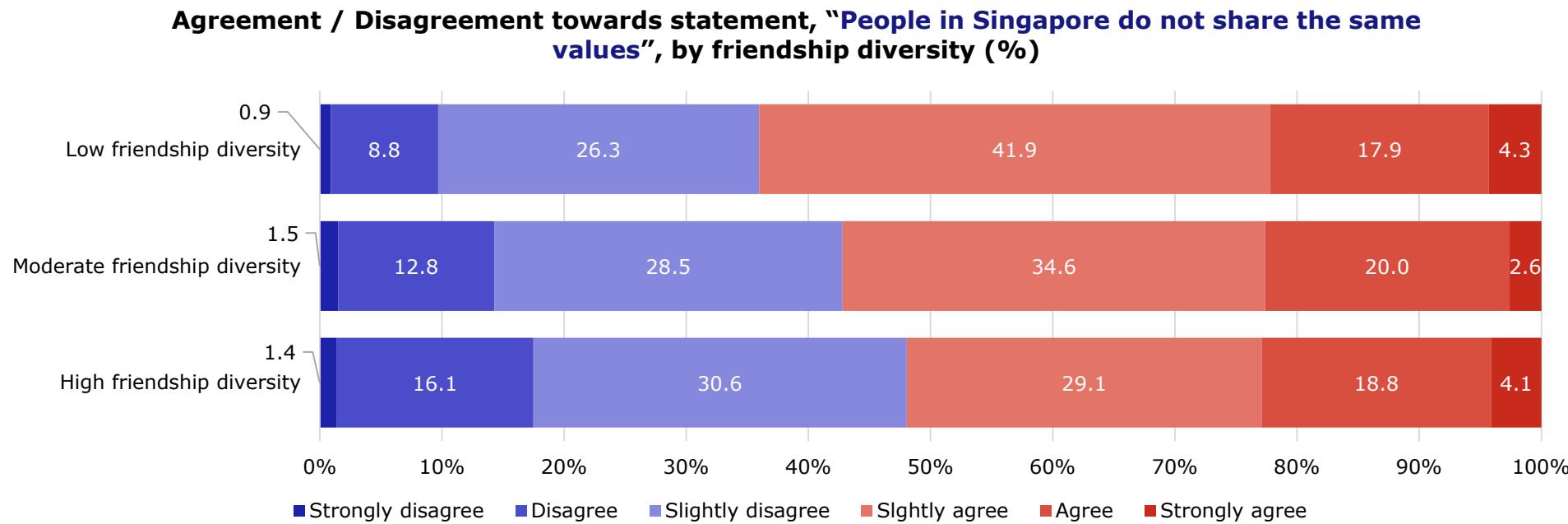


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Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Social Cohesion

Individuals with more diverse friendships were less likely to perceive a lack of shared values among people in Singapore



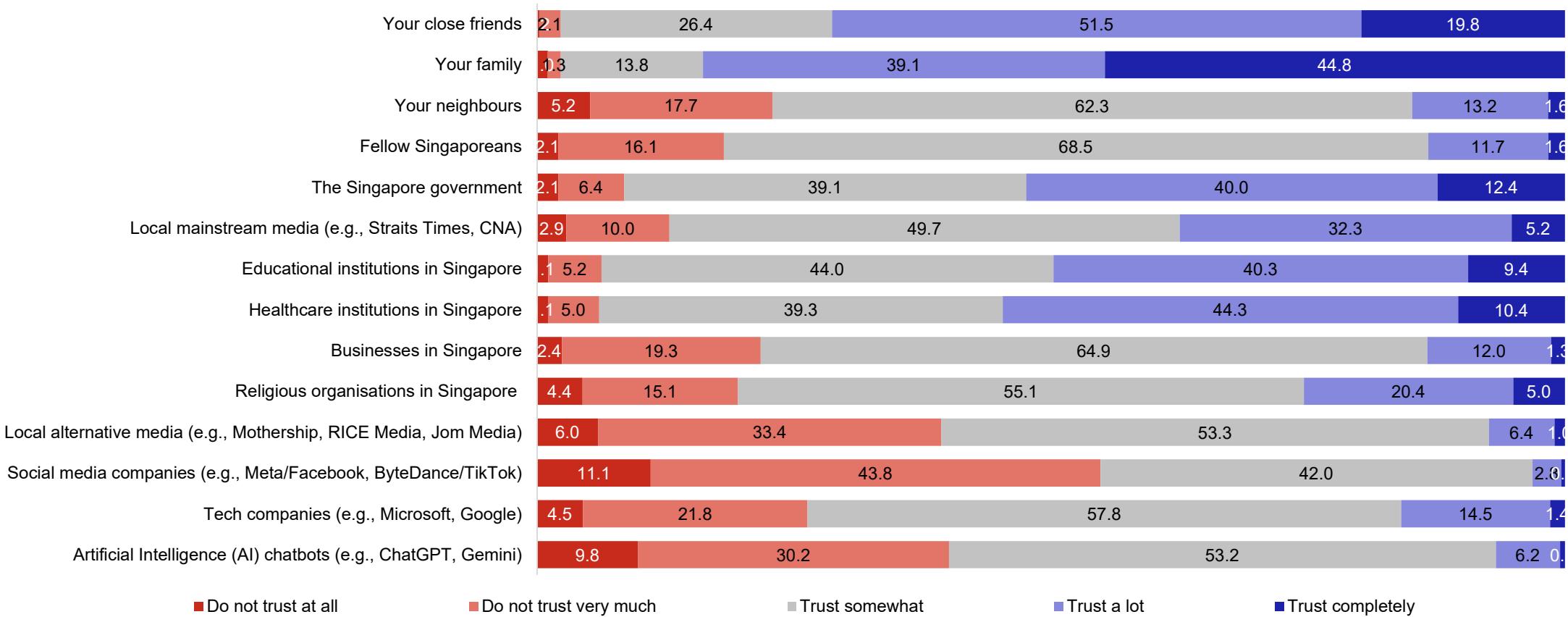
**demographic controls were added*

Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Trust

Trust in family was strongest, followed by trust in local institutions; trust in online institutions appeared weakest

How much do you trust the following groups or entities? (%)

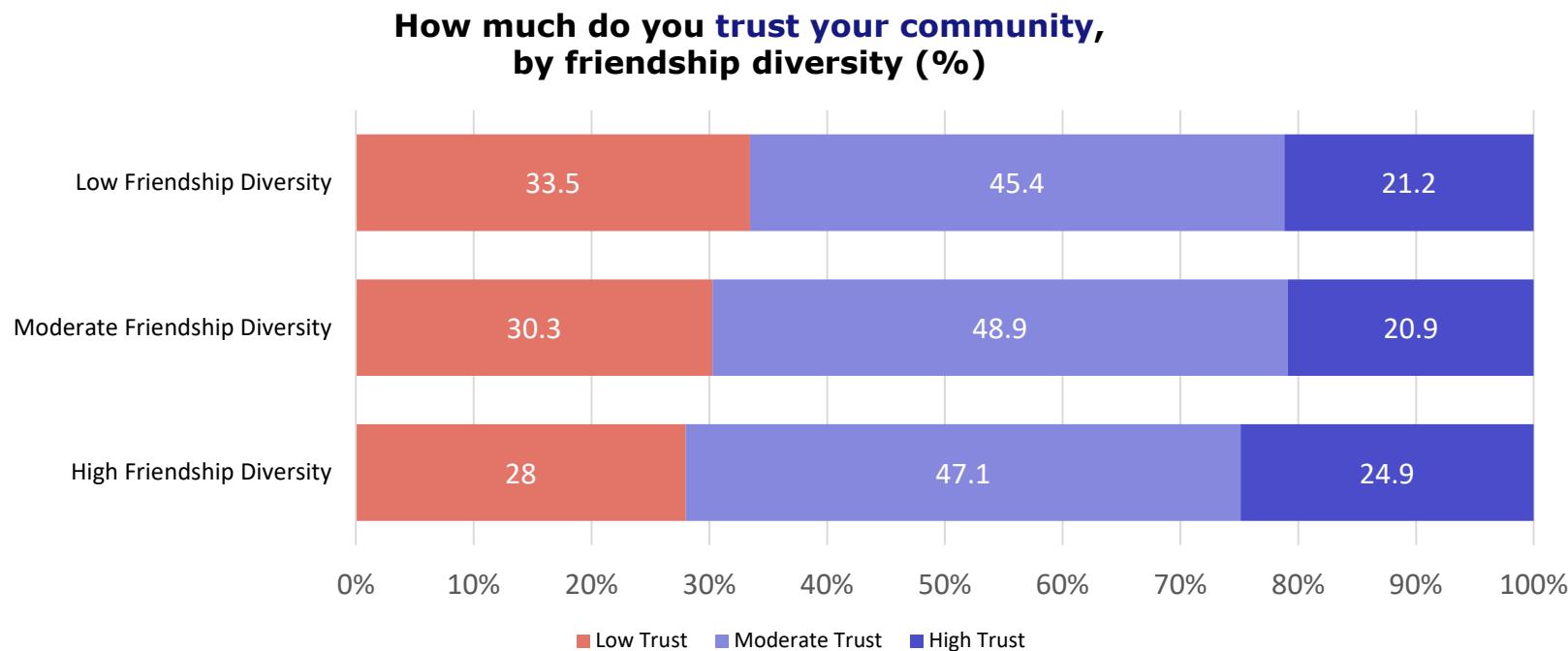


*demographic controls were added

Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Trust

Low community trust was reported by 28.0% of those with high friendship diversity, versus 33.5% with low friendship diversity

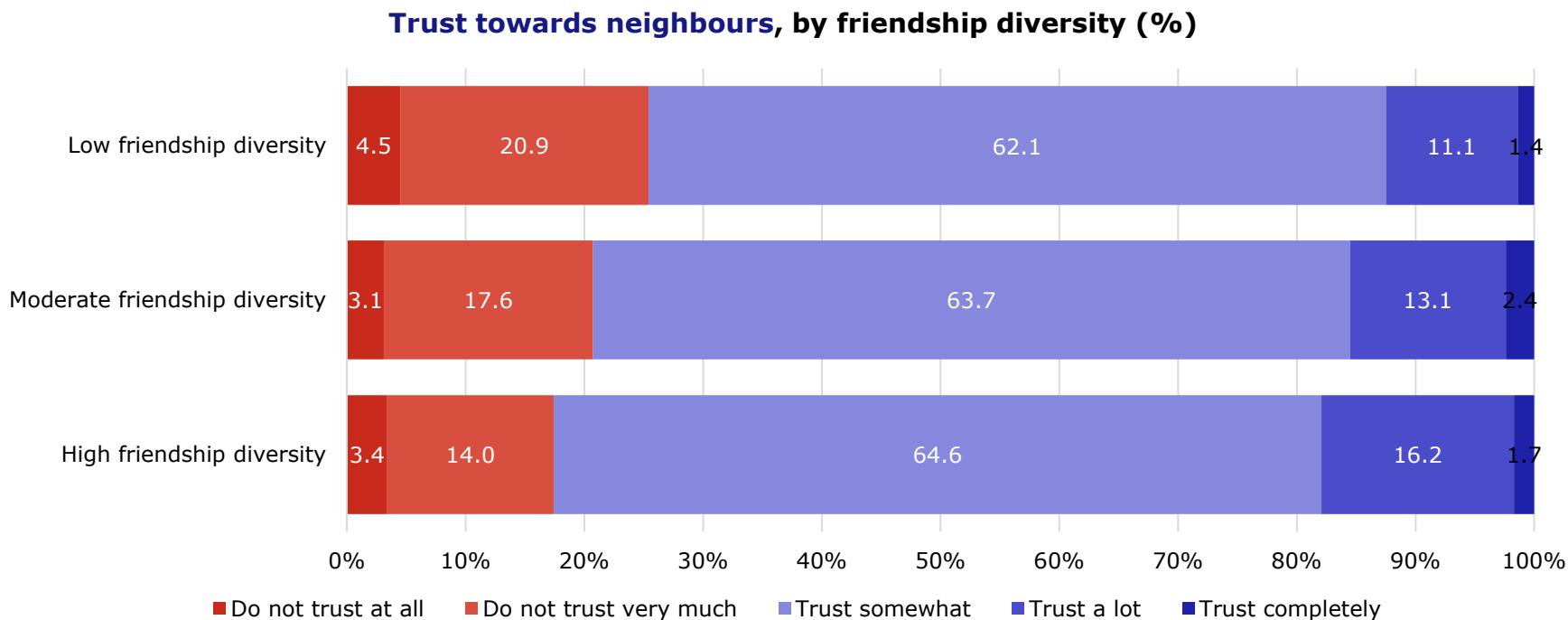


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Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Trust

Individuals with more diverse friendships reported higher trust in neighbours



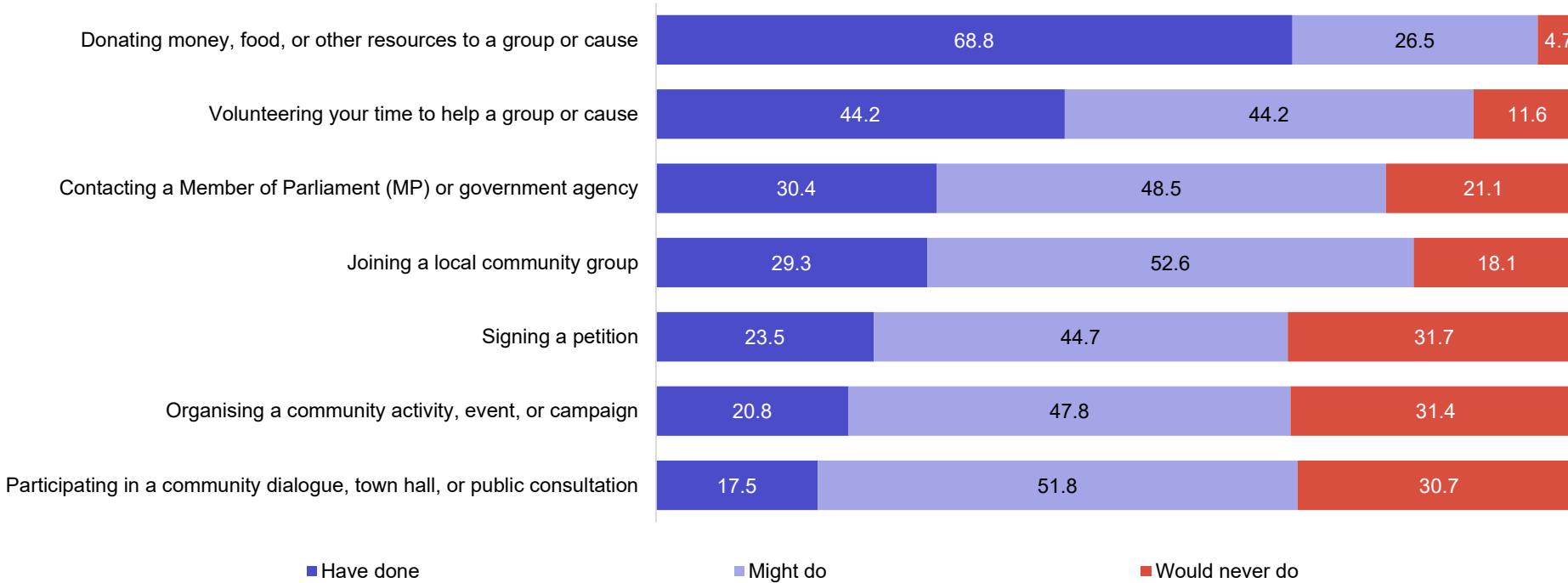
*demographic controls were added

Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Civic Involvement

Donating and volunteering were the most common civic activities that respondents reported engaging in

Please indicate whether you have done any of these civic actions, whether you might do it, or would never under any circumstances do it. (%)



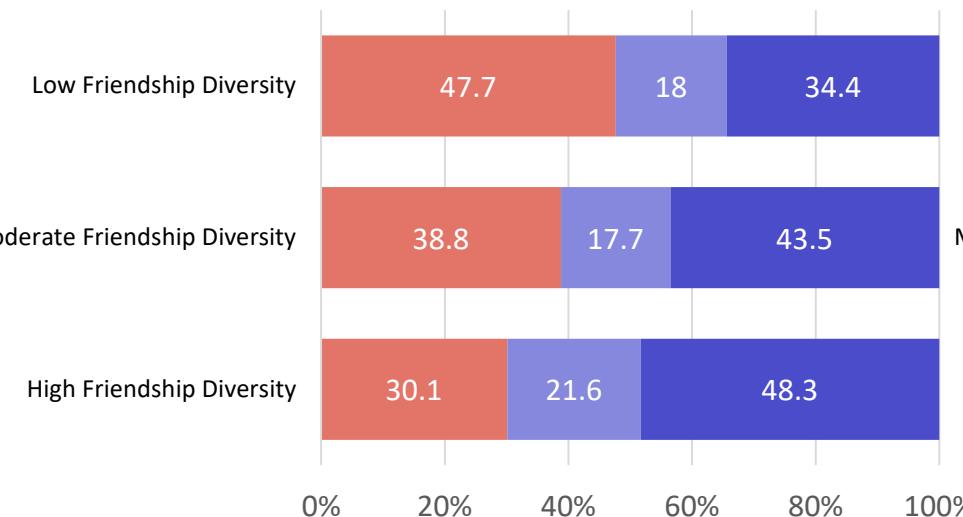
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Diversity in Friendships

Social Outcomes – Civic Involvement

Respondents reported civic behavior patterns that tend to align with friendship diversity: more engagement for those with high friendship diversity, more disengagement for those with low friendship diversity

**Civic activities done,
by friendship diversity (%)**



**Civic activities that one would never do,
By friendship diversity (%)**



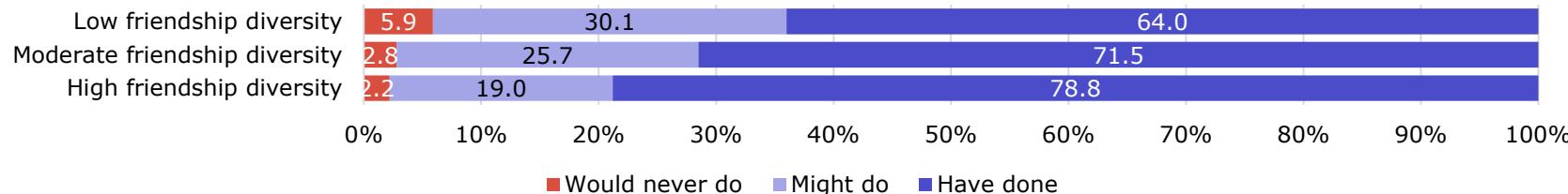
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Diversity in Friendships

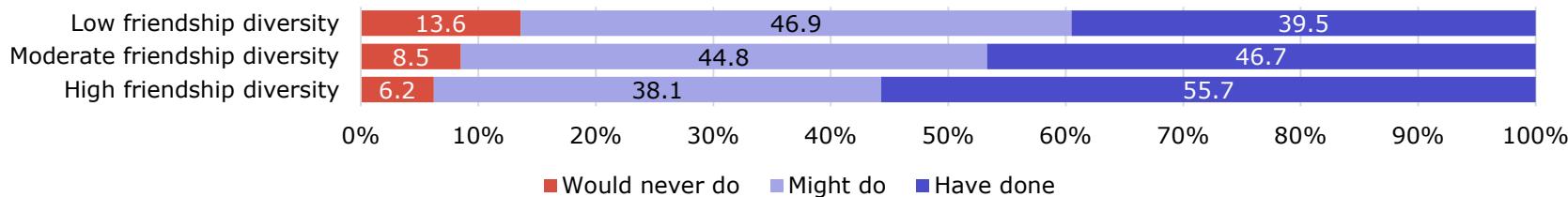
Social Outcomes – Civic Involvement

Individuals with more diverse friendships were more likely to engage in civic activities such as donating resources, volunteering time, and organising community events

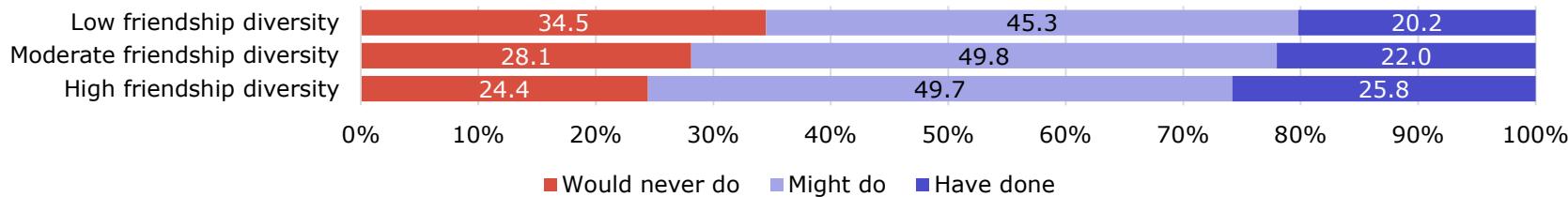
Donated money, food, or other resources to a group or cause, by friendship diversity (%)



Volunteering your time to help a group or cause, by friendship diversity (%)



Organising a community activity, event, or campaign, by friendship diversity (%)



**demographic controls were added*

Diversity in Friendships

Prevalence of Heterogeneity



Diversity in Friendships

Role Multiplexity and Support Gaps

Diversity in Friendships

Role Multiplexity and Support Gaps

Greater diversity in one's friendship network was associated with fewer gaps in friendship roles

We constructed a count variable capturing the number of roles for which none of a respondent's close friends fulfilled that role.

Friendship network diversity, measured using Blau's index, was strongly and negatively associated with the number of absent roles even after accounting for sociodemographic and controls for time spent with and trust in friends.

Feel comfortable sharing personal problems with?

Confide in when you feel down?

Hang out or engage in social activities with?

Approach for professional matters? (e.g., job information, career tips, advice on professional development)

Approach for personal matters? (e.g., advice on personal growth or everyday lifestyle matters such as those related to health, wellness, self-care, etc.)

Borrow money from?

Diversity in Friendships

Role Multiplexity and Support Gaps

When close online friendships are relied upon, they tend to serve a similar mix of emotional, social, and instrumental functions as close offline friendships

Implications for the evolving nature of online friendships and their role in people's social lives:

- People can turn to online friends for meaningful support, just as they would with traditional offline friends
- This challenges existing assumptions that online friendships are superficial or limited to interest-based roles
- This suggests that digital platforms are important social infrastructure, especially for people who are time-constrained or have geographically distant social networks.



AI Chatbots' Emerging Roles

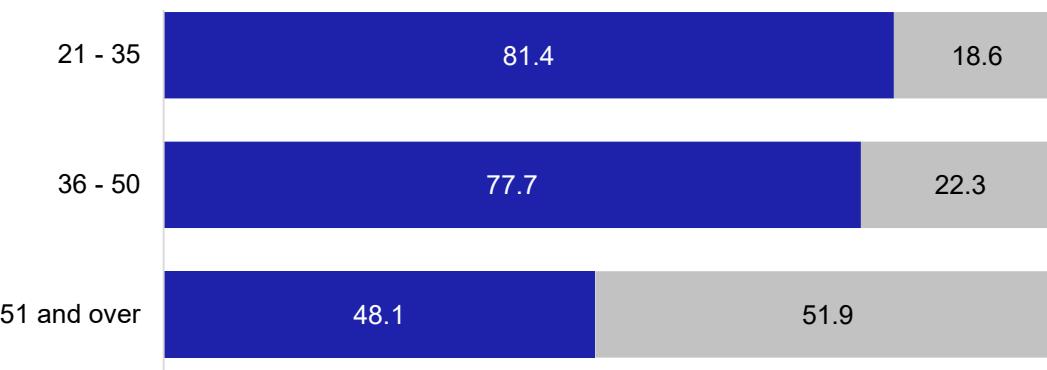
AI Use Today

AI Chatbots' Emerging Role

AI Use Today

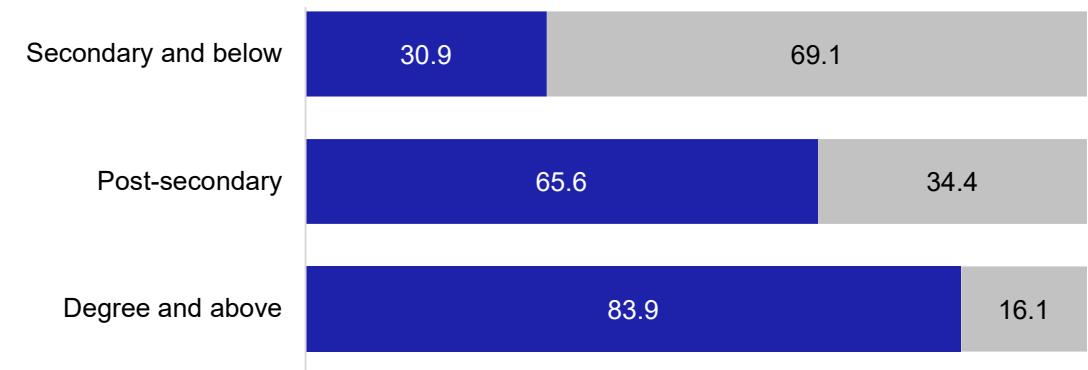
64.0% of respondents reported using AI chatbots; usage was more prevalent among younger and higher-educated respondents

**Use of AI chatbots,
by age group (%)**



■ Yes ■ No

**Use of AI chatbots,
by educational attainment (%)**



■ Yes ■ No

AI Chatbots' Emerging Role

AI Use Today

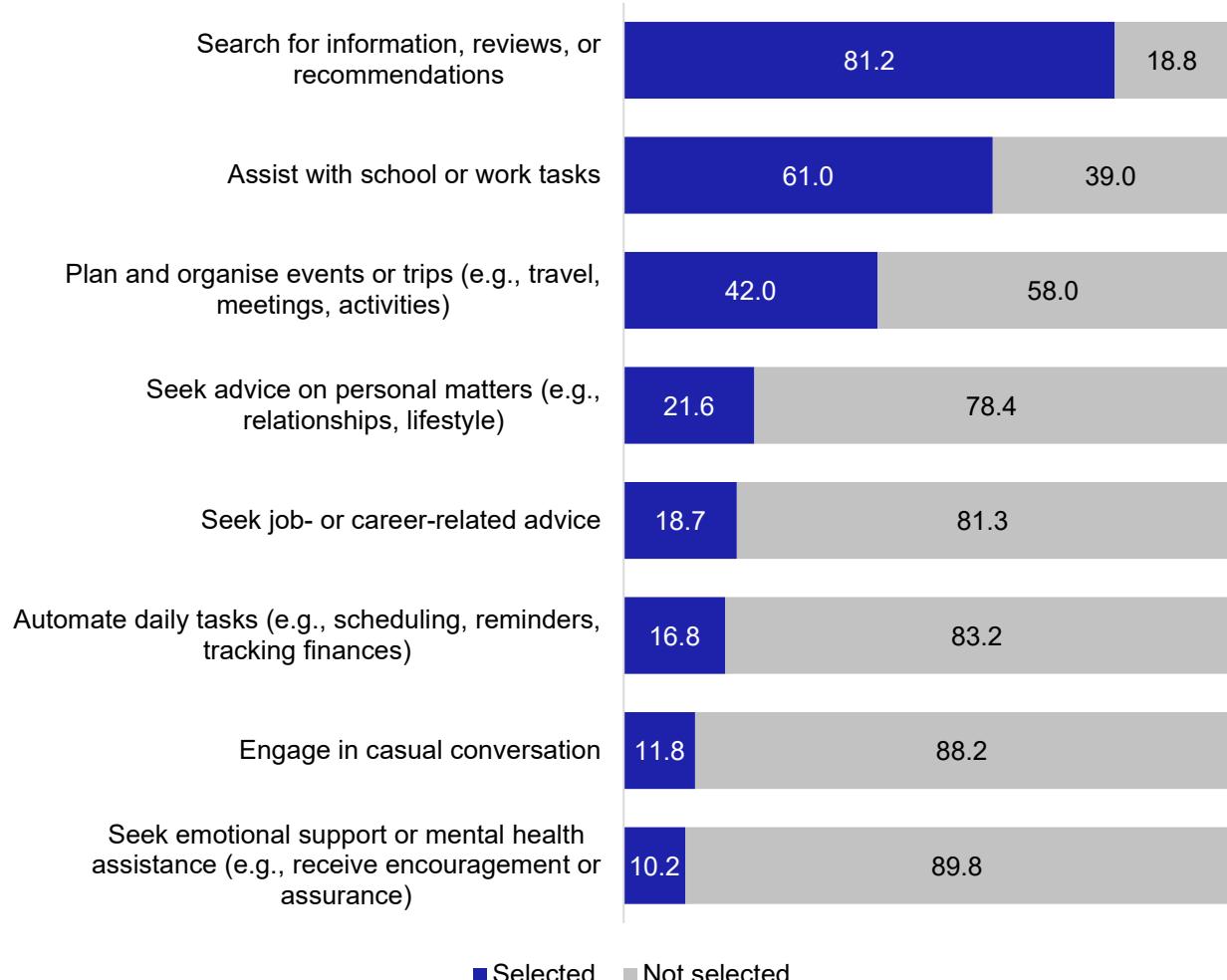
AI chatbot use was driven mainly by practical and informational needs rather than social or emotional ones

Most respondents reported using chatbots to:

- Search for information, reviews, or recommendations (81.2%)
- Assist with school or work tasks (61.0%)
- Plan or organise events or trips (42.0%)

Respondents who engaged in casual conversations with AI chatbots were likelier to express agreement toward the potential for social connections with AI chatbots, and lower perceived risks associated with their use.

Which of the following tasks do you use AI chatbots for?
Please select all that apply. (%)

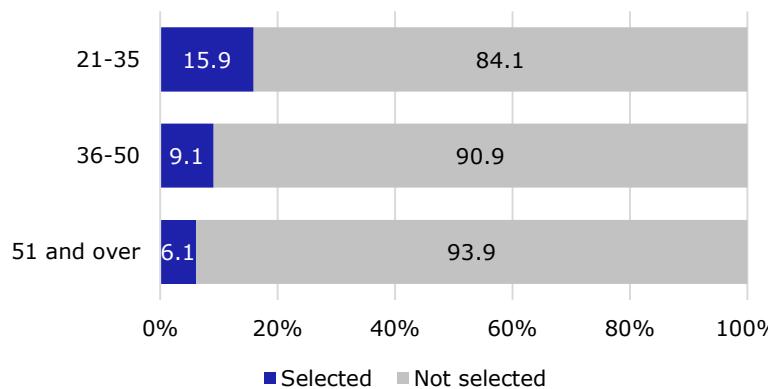


AI Use Today

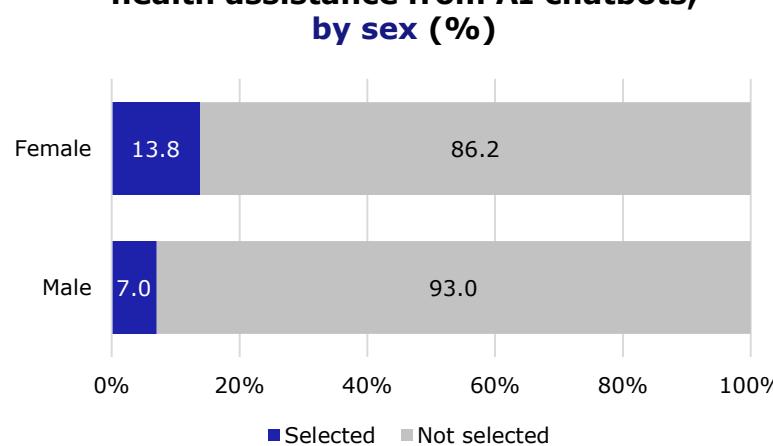
Engaging in Conversation and Seeking Emotional Support

Younger respondents were more likely to engage in casual conversations with AI chatbots and to use them for emotional support; female respondents were also likelier to use AI chatbots for emotional support

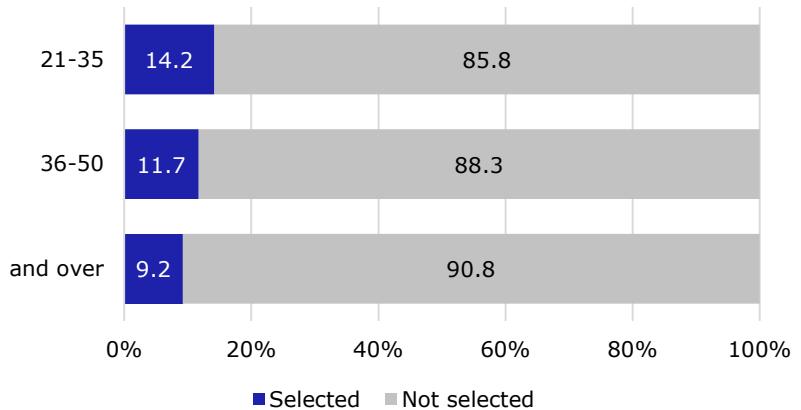
Seek emotional support or mental health assistance from AI chatbots, by age group (%)



Seek emotional support or mental health assistance from AI chatbots, by sex (%)



Engage in casual conversation with AI chatbots, by age group (%)



Notably, younger and women respondents were also more likely to confide in close friends.

**demographic controls were added*

AI Chatbots' Emerging Roles

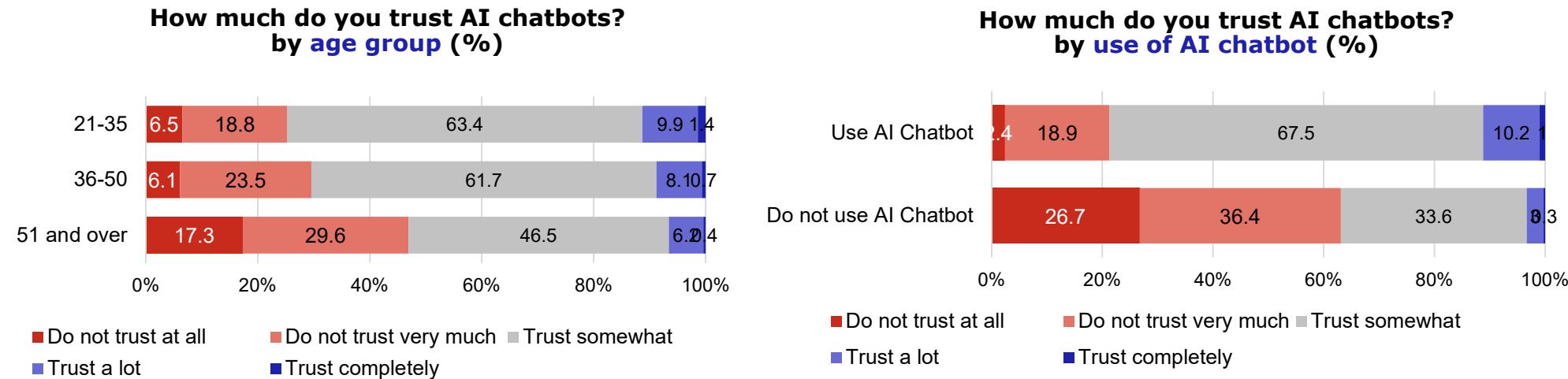
Trust in AI

Trust in AI

Differing Trust Levels

Younger respondents and those who use AI chatbots were more likely to trust in them

74.7% of those aged 21 to 35 indicated that they trust AI chatbots at least somewhat, compared to 70.5% for those aged 36 to 50 and 53.1% for those aged 51 and above



AI Chatbots' Emerging Roles

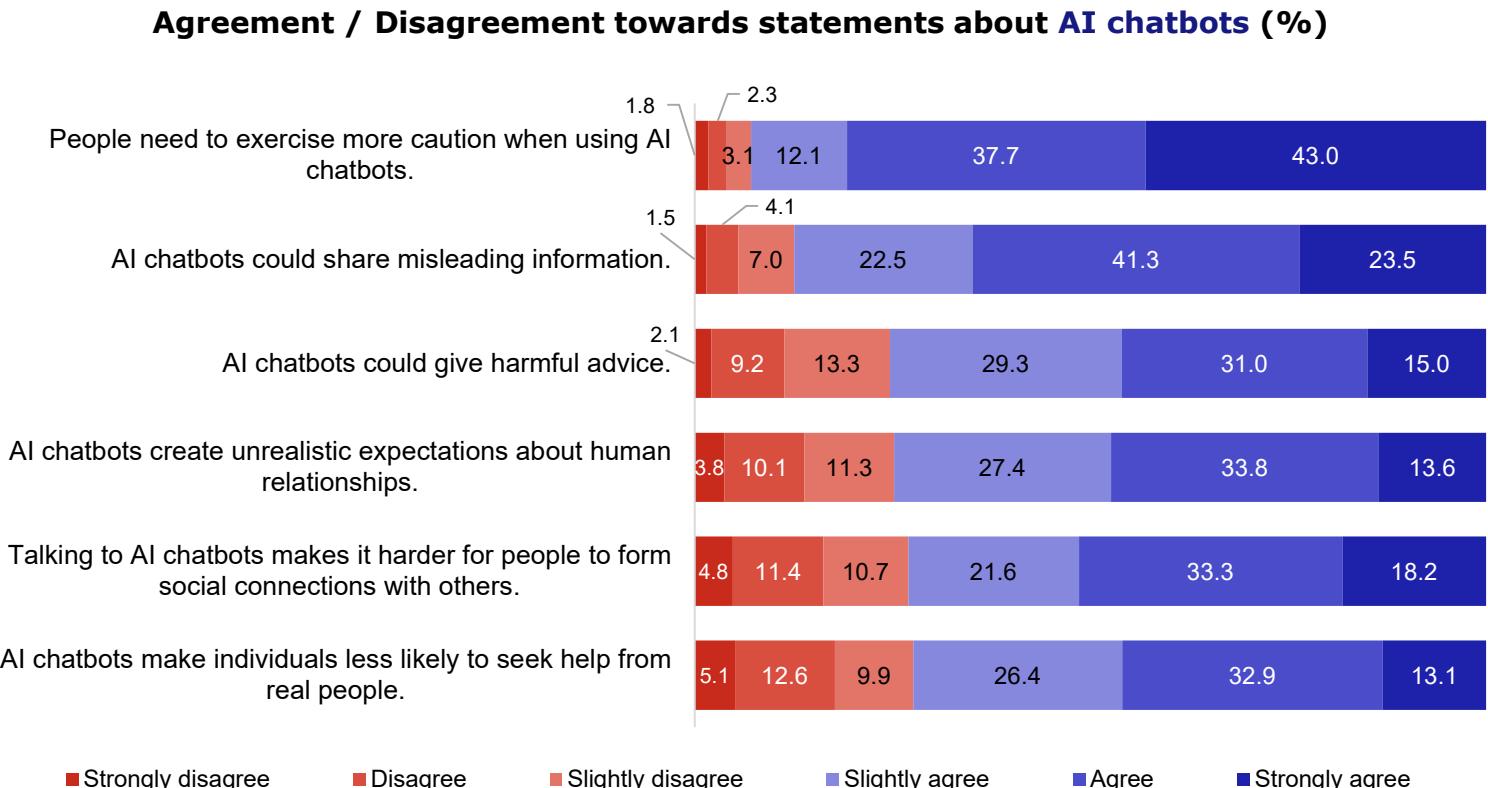
Attitudes Towards AI

Attitudes Towards AI

Caution and Wariness

Most respondents remained **cautious** about AI chatbots

- 92.8% said people need to exercise more caution
- 87.3% agreed chatbots can share misleading information
- Socially, more than 7 in 10 felt they create unrealistic expectations about relationships, make it harder to form connections, and reduce the likelihood of seeking help from real people.



Attitudes Towards AI

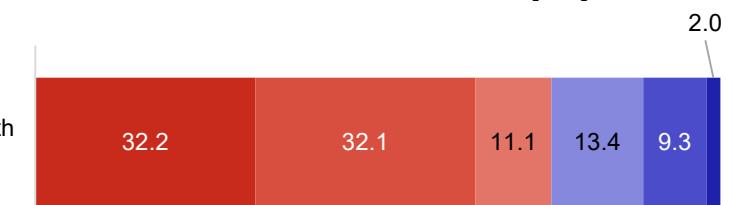
Caution and Wariness

Most respondents also did not view AI chatbots as a satisfying substitute for real-life interactions

- 75.4% indicated general disagreement that it is possible to form a friendship-like connection with an AI chatbot
- 77.3% did not find talking to AI chatbots more satisfying than talking to people in real life
- 81.8% generally disagreed that they would prefer talking to AI chatbots instead of a real person if they have a problem

Agreement / Disagreement towards statements about AI chatbots (%)

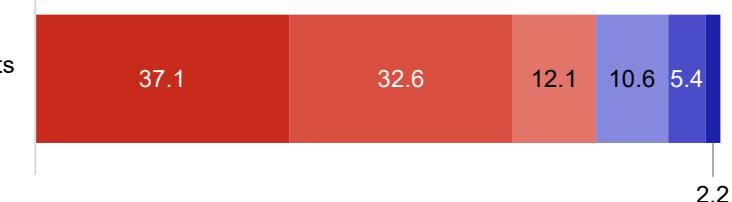
It is possible for me to form a friendship-like connection with an AI chatbot.



I find talking to AI chatbots more satisfying than talking to people in real life.



If I have a problem, I would prefer talking to AI chatbots instead of a real person.



Attitudes Towards AI

Perceptions of AI-Mediated Interactions

Few perceived AI chatbots as social substitutes; strong, emotionally supportive close friendships reduce reliance on AI chatbots as social substitutes, while having online friends was found to increase openness to them

Emotionally supportive human relationships particularly with family members, romantic partners, and close friends were consistently associated with **lower** openness to AI chatbots as social substitutes across three related outcomes:

- (1) respondents perceived AI chatbots as capable of forming friendship-like connections
- (2) they would prefer talking to a chatbot rather than a real person when facing problems
- (3) they found conversations with chatbots more satisfying than interactions with people in real life.

In contrast, having online friends was associated with greater acceptance of chatbots as friendship-like or emotionally preferable alternatives.

Recap of Findings

Amid rapid digitalisation, growing social stratification, and an unsettled global environment, our findings suggest that diverse friendships nurture trust and cohesion, while in-person ties remain crucial for friendships; online friendships have the potential to become a source of support. AI use for friendships is still at its seminal stage though trust in it remains measured.

Looking Forward...

- Forge friendships across divides through more opportunities for social mixing
- Consider trusted platforms for cultivating online friendships – e.g., neighbourhood level
- Practice prudent digital companionship



Thank you!

Singapore Perspectives 2026:
Fraternity and the Social Fabric in the Digital Age

If you need more information, please contact mathew.mathews@nus.edu.sg

