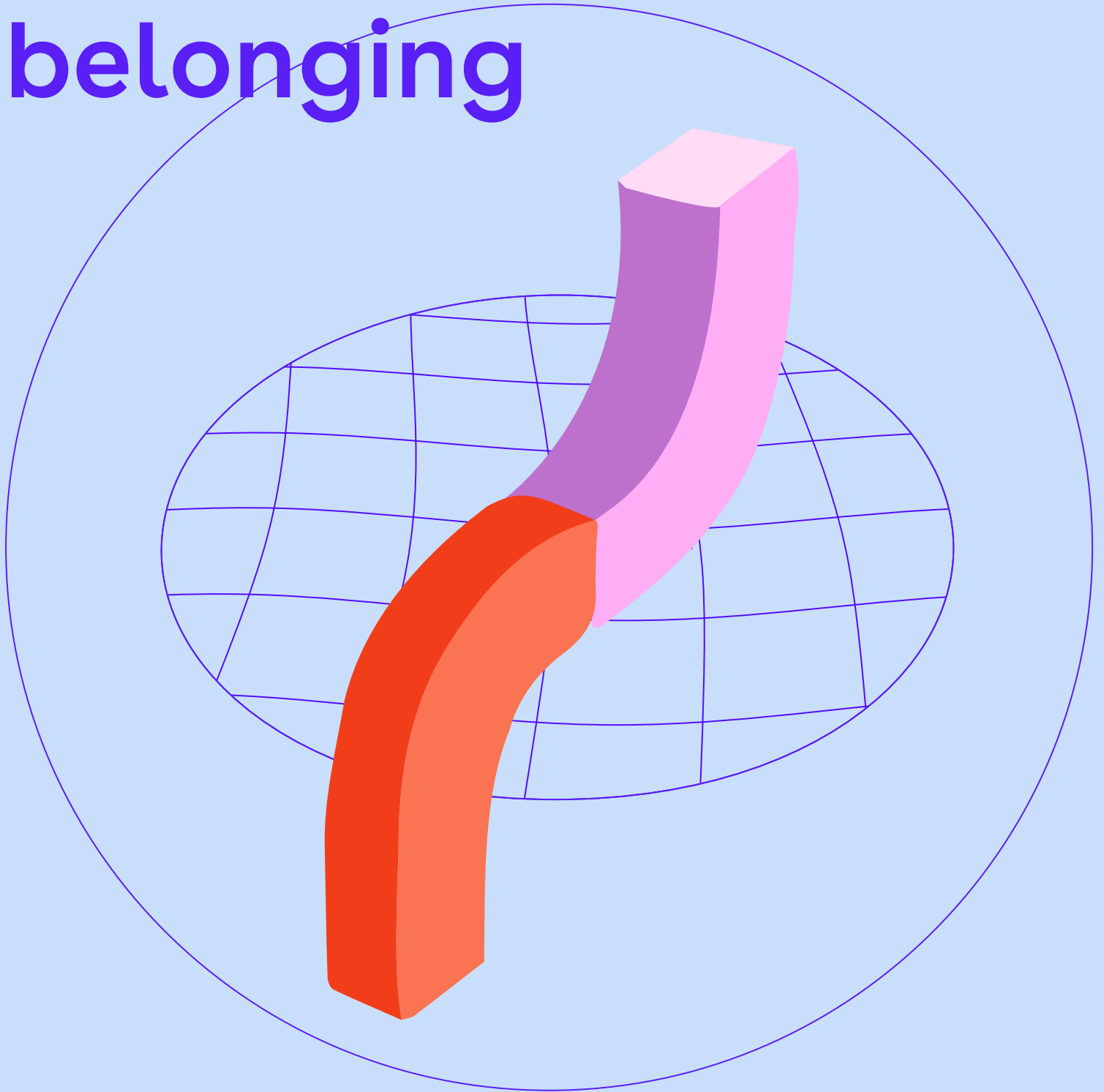# Cultivate belonging

This signal is part of Civic Signals, a larger framework to help create better digital public spaces. We believe it's a platform's responsibility to design the conditions that promote ideal digital public spaces. Such spaces should be designed to help people feel Welcome, to Connect, to Understand and to Act. These four categories encompass the 14 Civic Signals.

Table of contents

At a glance

Belonging is a basic need that people have to feel connected to others.

Why It Matters

Belongingness is a fundamental human need. When belongingness increases, self-esteem increases. Conversely, those who feel less belonging perceive daily life as more stressful; act more aggressively, selfishly, and with less self-control; and are at greater risk of depression and suicide. Among adolescents, belonging is associated with academic motivation, but lack of belonging coincides with perpetration of cyberbullying.

> *"In June or July, there were a lot of talks about the Pride movement. Facebook posted a lot about this topic, which I liked a lot. It was very positive towards the LGBT community. They showed that people are welcome… They said that they are normal, they belong and there is nothing to be ashamed of. And they should make this topic transparent and show it to everybody in the world."*
> *– Omer, German focus group participant*

Putting the Signal Into Practice

- When considering ways to increase belongingness, care should be given to consider how to create more meaningful relationships with fewer people. Garden is an app that reminds people to stay in touch with those they care about. https://gardenapp.io/

- Panion is an app that aims to help people form meaningful connections by matching them based on their common interests. https://panion.com/

- Meetup is a website that lets people join interest groups for real-life gatherings. Here's how some of its groups have coped with the COVID-19 pandemic: https://www.meetup.com/blog/meeting-up-in-a-time-of-social-distancing/

- Belongingness can be nurtured when people are randomly assigned to be in a group with others. In other words, simply placing people in the same arbitrary group can be enough to get them to build relationships.

- Information science researcher Di Lu and her colleagues' study of Meetup found that simple steps, such as long-standing group members increasing their use of inclusive words like "we" and "us" when posting, helped to encourage newcomers' offline participation. https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3083671.3083693

- The U.K. government created an office of Minister for Sport, Civil Society, and Loneliness. Its inaugural loneliness strategy is here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/750909/6.4882_DCMS_Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update.pdf. The government's public campaign to get people talking about loneliness is here: https://letstalkloneliness.co.uk/

Literature review
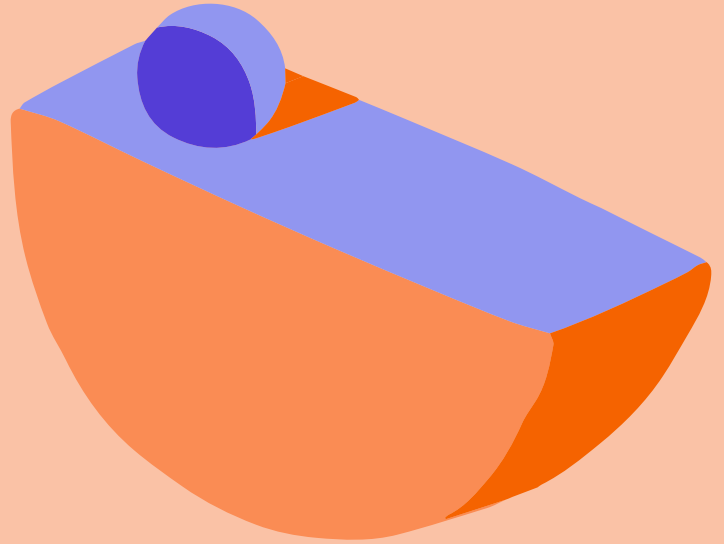
By Alex Curry,
Western Oregon University
With thanks to Roy Baumeister,
University of Queensland

What the Signal Is

At its core, belongingness is a basic need that people have to feel connected to others. With few exceptions, people have a natural aversion to loneliness, so they inherently pursue opportunities to build relationships. Belongingness is fulfilled when these connections are successfully established and maintained, thus replacing loneliness and alienation with feelings of companionship and mutual obligation.

A team of behavioral researchers led by Bonnie Hagerty concluded that for belongingness to be fulfilled, two key factors must

be present. First, a person must feel that her involvement in a group is valued by the group members. Second, a person must feel that she brings value to the other group members. In essence, there must be positive (or at least neutral) feelings emanating from a person *toward* a group, and *from* a group toward a person; if one of these two factors is absent, belongingness will not occur.

Additionally, psychologists Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary suggested that for belongingness to be maintained, the interactions should generally be frequent and marked by concern for others in the group. Furthermore, Baumeister and Leary

concluded that belongingness can come from positive interactions (e.g., two people having a friendly conversation together) *or* neutral interactions (e.g., two people sitting quietly together watching a movie). However, belongingess does not arise from bad interactions.

Although most academic work on belongingness – including the literature we cite in this paper – has focused on relationships between and among people, psychologist Glenn Malone and his colleagues noted that "belongingness may also be influenced by… relationships with objects, animals, nature, ideologies, and the spiritual – thereby transcending interpersonal relationships."

One key to remember: Belongingness is more about perception than reality. Work by psychologists Richard Lee and Stephen Robbins emphasized that belongingness is subjective. For example, a group of people may not actually value another person's membership in the group, but if that person *perceives* himself as being valued by other group members, the need to belong can still be fulfilled.

Related Concepts

Some academic research refers to belongingness using the term "social connectedness." But research by Lee and Robbins has suggested that social connectedness may act as one of several factors that make up the notion of belongingness. We have chosen to use "belongingness" because the term suggests the person feels welcomed and valued, and as more than merely a member of the same group. For example, a coworker could feel connected to a group of fellow employees because

they all work in the same office, but without feeling like a valued member of the group.

There are two Civic Signals that are related to, yet distinct from, belongingness: Invite Everyone to Participate and Build Bridges Between Groups. The former is focused on giving people a chance to share their thoughts, regardless of their demographic background. The latter is about providing opportunities for different groups to interact. Belongingness centers on feelings of being connected to others.

Why It's Important

When psychologist Abraham Maslow introduced his influential hierarchy of needs in the 1940s, he ranked only physiological needs (food, water, and so on) and safety needs as more important than belongingness. In the intervening years, researchers have further established the significance of belongingness to individual and societal well-being. Psychologists Mark Leary and Cody Cox, among others, argued that the need to belong is not merely one of many motives for social action, but a "fundamental social motive that underlies and helps to explain a great deal of human behavior."

Lee and Robbins noted that belongingness operates like a "social lens with which to view and interact with the world." In other words, a person's sense of belonging does not just influence her relationships with others; it influences her core feelings about herself and the world around her. For example, Lee and Robbins found that people who felt a low sense of belongingness perceived daily life as more stressful than those who felt a higher sense of belongingness.

With belongingness seen as a basic need, researchers have explored how it relates to a wide variety of topics including human memory, television viewing, mobile phone use, homesickness, job satisfaction, and much more. In fact, the wide-ranging topics explored in connection with belongingness are too numerous to summarize in this paper adequately. Instead, we highlight several key findings as examples of the central role that belongingness plays in affecting a person's beliefs and behaviors:

Belongingness is tied to self-esteem, with studies showing that as belongingness increases, self-esteem also increases, as elucidated by psychologists Matthew Gailliot and Roy Baumeister. Related studies show that increases in belongingness are also directly tied to decreases in depression and suicide risk. Conversely, as belongingness decreases, depression and suicide risk increase. Work by psychologist James Lynch, as well as psychology and neuroscience professor Julianne Holt-Lunstad and colleagues, suggests that improved social connections are related to decreased mortality and morbidity rates for a host of mental and physical illnesses.

Psychologists Cari Gillen-O'Neel and Andrew Fuligni found that, for high school students, a greater sense of belonging at school is linked to being more academically motivated and to feelings that school is useful and enjoyable.

Technology researcher Kagan Kircaburun and colleagues found that a lack of belongingness is associated with problematic social media use (e.g., negative mood changes following social media use, a total preoccupation with social media use, etc.) and cyberbullying perpetration among adolescents.

Psychologist C. Nathan DeWall and colleagues showed that a decrease in belongingness is associated with (a) an increase in aggression, (b) a tendency to behave selfishly, and (c) a lack of self-control (e.g., poor eating habits, poor attention to tasks and poor listening to others).

Baumeister and Leary noted that the desire for belongingness is strong enough to overcome past competitive behaviors and negative experiences and inclinations.

In essence, belongingness is a basic human need, and the more people feel a sense of belongingness, the better their beliefs and behaviors in relation to themselves and others.

How We Can Move the Needle

Moving the needle relies on finding answers to the following question: *How can we help people feel a greater sense of belonging?*

To feel like a valued and valuable group member – to foster belonging – people need opportunities to have meaningful positive or neutral interactions with others. At its core, this is about people spending more time with one another. Psychologists David Wilder and John Thompson found that people who spent more time together had more favorable opinions of each other – even when they belonged to disliked outgroups. Spending time together actually overcame previous prejudices, something we address in more detail in our discussion of the signal Encourage the Humanization of Others.

Experimental research by psychologist Anne Locksley and colleagues has shown that, even in the absence of some reward-related

motivation, belongingness can be nurtured when people are randomly assigned to be in a group with others. In other words, simply placing people in the same arbitrary group was enough to get them to build relationships. The implication here is that when people are given more opportunities to see similarities with others, the more likely they will be to feel a sense of belongingness with these others.

Belongingness is not so much related to the number of relationships as it is related to the quality of the relationships. Baumeister and Leary noted that "people seem to prefer a few close friendships over a high number of transient or superficial encounters." Hence, when considering ways to increase belongingness, care should be given to consider how to create more meaningful relationships with fewer people. Furthermore, it should be remembered that belongingness is a need that can be satisfied. Once a person feels fulfilled in their pursuit of belongingness, their desires to seek out more relationships may be diminished.

Some people satisfy their need to belong through their group ties, whereas for others, it is the one-on-one relationships that matter. This difference appears to have a gender dimension. Psychologists Shira Gabriel and Wendi Gardner found that women's need to belong is tied to one-on-one interactions. For men, belongingness is related to one-on-one interactions as well as interactions with large groups; large groups do little to satisfy women's sense of belongingness.

Not all belongingness is created equally, particularly when examining online/offline differences. Looking at social media use, several studies, including one by educational psychologist Kelly-Ann Allen and colleagues,

have found mixed results related to social media use and belongingness. Although belongingness can be achieved in both on-line and offline settings, there may be some detrimental belongingness-related effects specifically associated with social media, including cyberostracism, or ostracism that occurs in online social networks. On the other hand, psychologist Dong Liu and colleagues concluded that online relationships, while not as fulfilling as offline relationships, can nevertheless play a role in enriching offline relationships. Psychologists Donald Sacco and Mohamed Ismail, while acknowledging that technology-mediated interactions such as instant messaging can foster belongingness, concluded that offline, face-to-face communication created a significantly greater sense of belongingness than instant messaging. This finding suggests that online communications that lead to face-to-face interactions could have an important positive impact on belongingness, above and beyond the belongingness that is possible via some online interactions.

In that vein, information science researcher Di Lu and her colleagues studied the social networking site Meetup in order to better understand what influences members of an online community to eventually "meet up" offline. They found, among other things, that fostering an online sense of belonging with fellow group members was an important factor in getting people to meet offline. Simple steps, such as long-standing group members increasing their use of inclusive words like "we" and "us" when posting, helped to encourage newcomers' offline participation.

In sum, creating opportunities for people to have frequent positive or neutral interactions with others – online and especially offline – is key to fulfilling the need to belong.

How to Measure

Numerous studies measure belongingness by simply asking a question or two along the lines of "How much do you feel like you are a part of your neighborhood?" or, as was asked by psychologist Kipling Williams and his colleagues in a study of ostracism among online groups, "How much do you feel you belonged to the group?" Responses to these questions are typically recorded using answers ranging from "a lot" to "not at all."

For a more robust assessment of belongingness, more than one or two questions should be used. Lee and Robbins developed a measure that included eight items. People were asked to rate their agreement on a 6-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Some of the items included: "I feel disconnected from the world around me," "I feel so distant from people," and "Even among my friends, there is no sense of brother/sisterhood."

The Lee and Robbins measure consisted of only negative items (i.e., all items focused on the absence of social connections), prompting the creation of another scale by psychologist Glenn Malone and colleagues that balanced six positive items and six negative items. The measure again asked people to rate their agreement from strongly agree to strongly disagree, this time on a 7-point scale. Several of the positive items are: "When I am with other people, I feel included," "I feel accepted by others," and "I have a sense of belonging." Several of the negative items are: "I feel like an outsider," "I feel as if people do not care about me," and "Friends and family do not involve me in their plans."

This section has focused on measuring how satisfied people are with their level of belongingness. However, people have differences in their desire to connect with others, and for this reason, Leary and colleagues created a measure of "need to belong." Using a five-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*, people were asked to indicate the degree to which 10 statements applied to them. Examples of statements include: "If other people don't seem to accept me, I don't let it bother me," "I want other people to accept me," and "My feelings are easily hurt when I feel that others do not accept me."
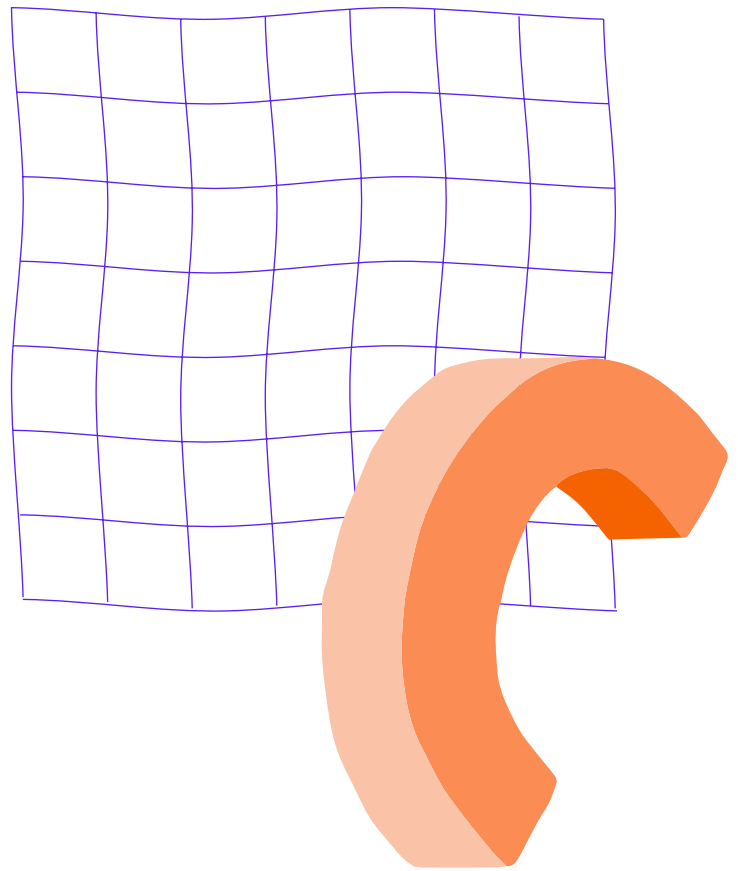
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Expert Q&A

Three key questions with
Roy F. Baumeister, University of Queensland

How does this principle help create a world we'd all want to live in?

All human beings have a need to belong. Understanding and accommodating this need is absolutely essential for the world we live in, and the one we want to live in. People with a strong sense of belonging have multiple and diverse advantages over people who do not. Their physical health is better, and they recover faster and more thoroughly from illnesses, injuries, and surgery. Their mental health is better. They suffer less from loneliness. They perform better in work and school. They engage in less self-destructive behavior. They are much happier. They are less prone to engage in aggression. They

cooperate and help people more. In contrast, feeling that oneself is rejected leads to a broad variety of destructive and antisocial behavior. A social world that people want to live in consists of happy, healthy people who obey laws and rules, take care of themselves and others, cooperate, work hard, and perform at their best. Belongingness facilitates that.

If you were to envisage the perfect social media, messaging or web search platform in terms of maximizing this principle, what would it look like?

To maximize belongingness, such a platform would enable people to interact in

positive, friendly ways, amid happy feelings and positive emotions. My own research suggests that online relationships are not an adequate substitute for genuine human connection – but online interactions can do wonders for strengthening and sustaining relationships that started offline. Ideally, it would be easy to find the people with whom you wish to connect, to interact in a controlled and adjustable manner (many people like to see the person they are talking to; but others might prefer to interact without visual contact). Because of the importance of olfactory cues in human attraction, the ideal platform would enable people to share not just words and images but also smells. Sex is an important (though optional) form of human connection, so online media should find ways to improve people's sexual interactions online. (This has become particularly apparent during the pandemic lockdown, which keeps many long-distance lovers from being able to see each other in person.) Moreover, because some people derive belongingness not (just) from one-to-one relationships but rather from groups and organizations, the online platform should promote such feelings by enabling people to connect with meaningful groups and to affirm their belongingness to the group. Some evidence suggests that ingroups are strengthened by competition with rivals and outgroups, so the online platform would enable that too.

How would you measure a messaging, social media, or web search platform's progress against this principle?

I hope progress is toward belongingness, not against it! Success could be measured in subjective terms, such as the user's feelings of connection, belonging, and pleasure in communicating with others. Reduced anxiety and loneliness would also be positive signs. Mere frequency of usage would be a further sign: The more people use a platform, presumably, the more evidence one has that they derive something of value from it. Secondary success can be measured by asking people about their health and happiness, both of which suffer when belongingness needs are unmet.

Survey results
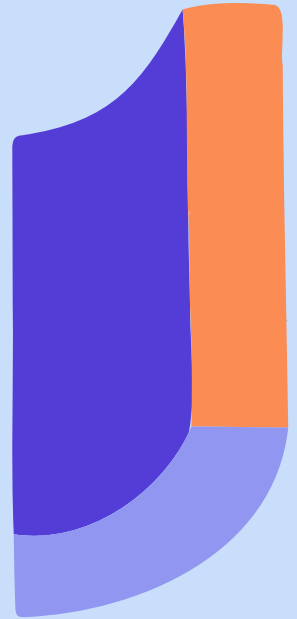
By Jay Jennings, Taeyoung Lee, Tamar Wilner, and Talia Stroud, Center for Media Engagement

We conducted a survey with participants in 20 countries to understand more deeply how the signals resonated with people globally. Please find more about the methodology here.

The survey asked people to evaluate whether it was important for platforms to "give people the chance to feel connected to other people and groups," and asked people to assess how well the platforms perform with respect to this signal. People were only asked about the platforms for which they are "superusers," by which we mean people who identify the platform as their most used social media, messaging, or search platform.

We analyzed how different demographic and political groups rate the importance of this signal, as well as the platforms' performance. In particular, we looked at age, gender, education, ideology, and country.

We did this analysis for five platforms: Google, Facebook, YouTube, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp.[1] Only statistically significant results are shown and discussed.

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1   The analyses include only countries where at least 200 people responded that the social/ message/ search platform was the one that they use most frequently, and then only those platforms where we had data for at least 1,000 people. For Google, this includes all 20 countries. For Facebook, this includes 18 countries and excludes Japan and South Korea. For YouTube, this includes Brazil, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, and the United States. For Facebook Messenger, this includes Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, the U.K., and the United States. For WhatsApp, this includes all countries except Canada, Japan, Norway, Poland, South Korea, Sweden, and the United States. Note that the total number of respondents varies by platform: Google = 19,554; Facebook = 10,268; YouTube = 2,937; Facebook Messenger = 4,729; and WhatsApp = 10,181. The larger the sample size, the smaller the effect that we are able to detect.

Importance of the Signal

We first examined whether platform superusers thought that the signal was important. This signal was rated as most important by Facebook superusers in Poland; Instagram superusers in Brazil, Malaysia, and Sweden; WhatsApp superusers in Brazil and Malaysia; and Facebook Messenger superusers in Poland.

Importance ranking: Cultivate belonging

A ranking of "1" means that the signal was seen as the most important of the 14 signals for superusers of a given platform in a given country based on a survey of over 20,000 people across 20 countries.

	Facebook	Youtube	Instagram	WhatsApp	FB Messenger	Google
Argentina	4		5	3		10
Australia	2	6		2	2	6
Brazil	3	4	1	1		6
Canada	2				2	7
France	12			5	10	12
Germany	2	6	2	6		9
Ireland	4	10		2	2	7
Italy	6			2		12
Japan		8				11
Malaysia	2	6	1	1		6
Mexico	6			6		12
Norway	6				5	10
Poland	1				1	
Romania	5			3	3	9
Singapore	2	6		2		6
South Africa	3			2		6
South Korea		6				9
Sweden	3		1		3	13
UK	2			2	2	8
US	2	8			2	12

Signal is most important
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
Signal is least important

Data from the Center for Media Engagement. Weighted data. Asked of those who indicated that a given social media, messaging or search platform was their most used. Question wording: Which of the following do you think it is important for [INSERT SOCIAL, MESSAGING OR SEARCH PLATFORM] to do? Please select all that apply. Data only shown for those countries where at least 200 survey respondents said that the platform was their most used social media, messaging, or search platform.

Importance of the Signal by Age[2]

Age predicted whether superusers thought that "giving people the chance to feel connected to other people and groups" was important for three of the five platforms: Facebook, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp. For Facebook and WhatsApp, those who were older (55+) were more likely to think that the signal was important than those who were younger. For Facebook Messenger, those who were younger and those who were older were more likely to say that the signal was important than those who were middle-aged.

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2   Results shown are predicted probabilities, calculated from a logistic regression analysis predicting that the signal is important based on age, gender, education, ideology, and country, each treated as a categorical variable. The baseline (based on the excluded categories) is a 55+ year old male with high education and middle ideology from the United States (except for WhatsApp, where the baseline is South Africa).
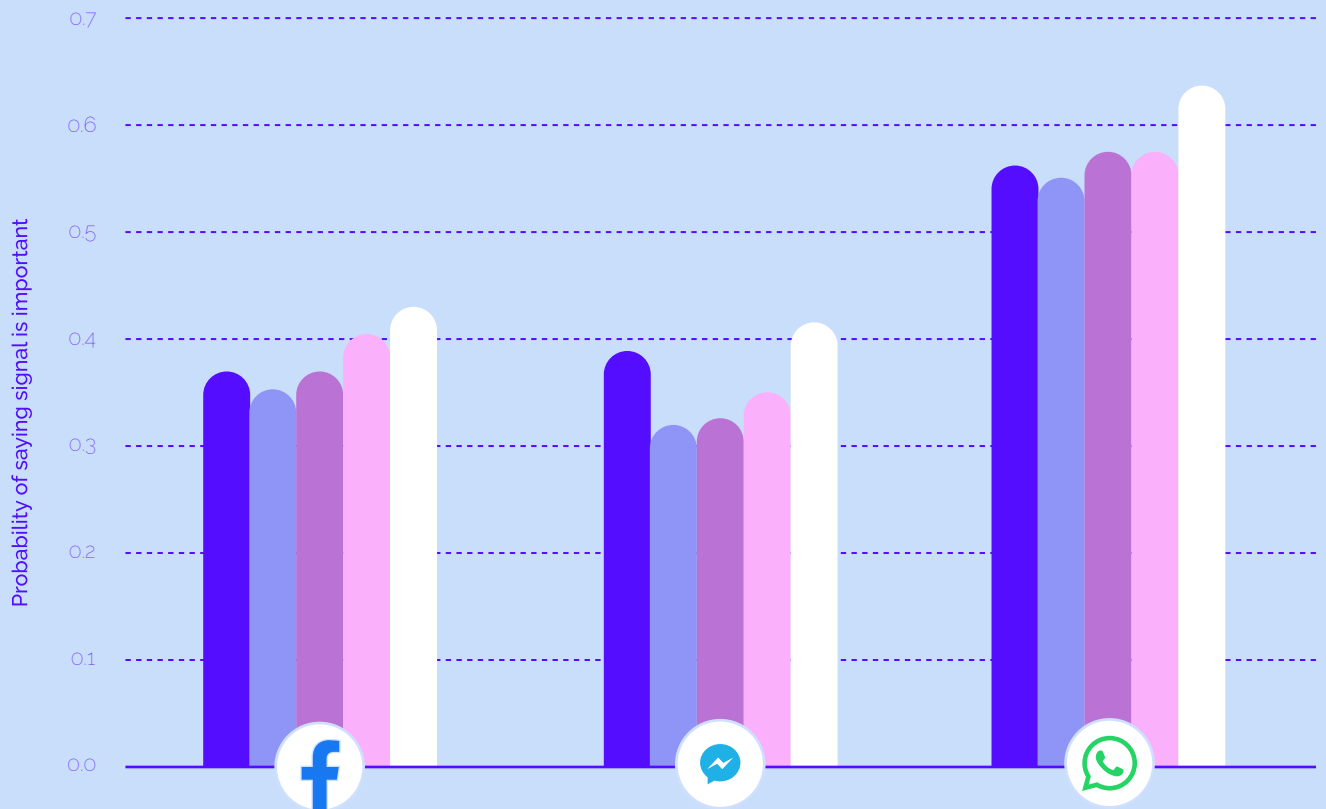
Importance of the Signal by Gender

Men and women differed in the importance they ascribed to "giving people the chance to feel connected to other people and groups" for Facebook, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp. For all three, women were more likely than men to say that the signal was important.

Probability of saying signal is important

- Female
- Male
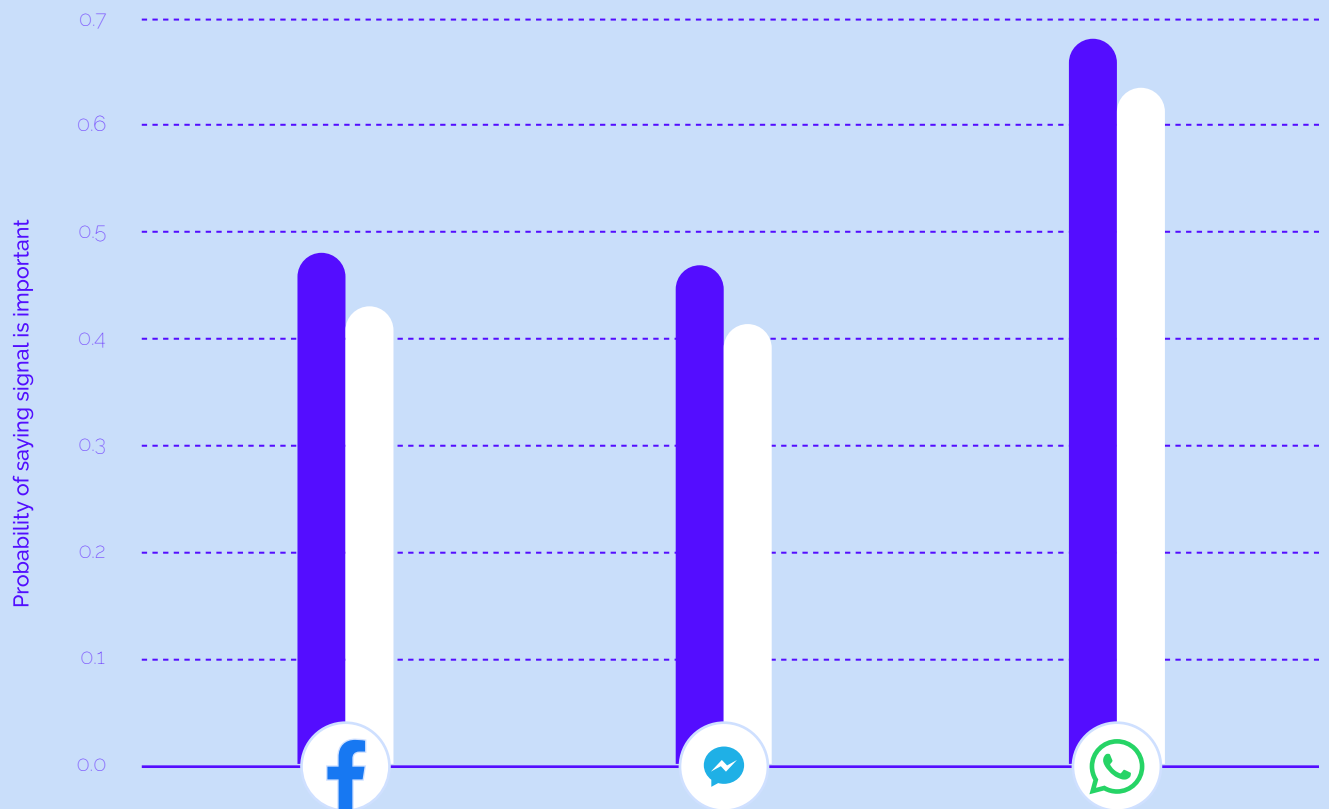
Importance of the Signal by Education

The importance of "giving people the chance to feel connected to other people and groups" varied by education only when people were evaluating Facebook. Here, more educated superusers are more likely to think that the signal was important than were less educated superusers.

Probability of saying signal is important

- Low
- Medium
- High
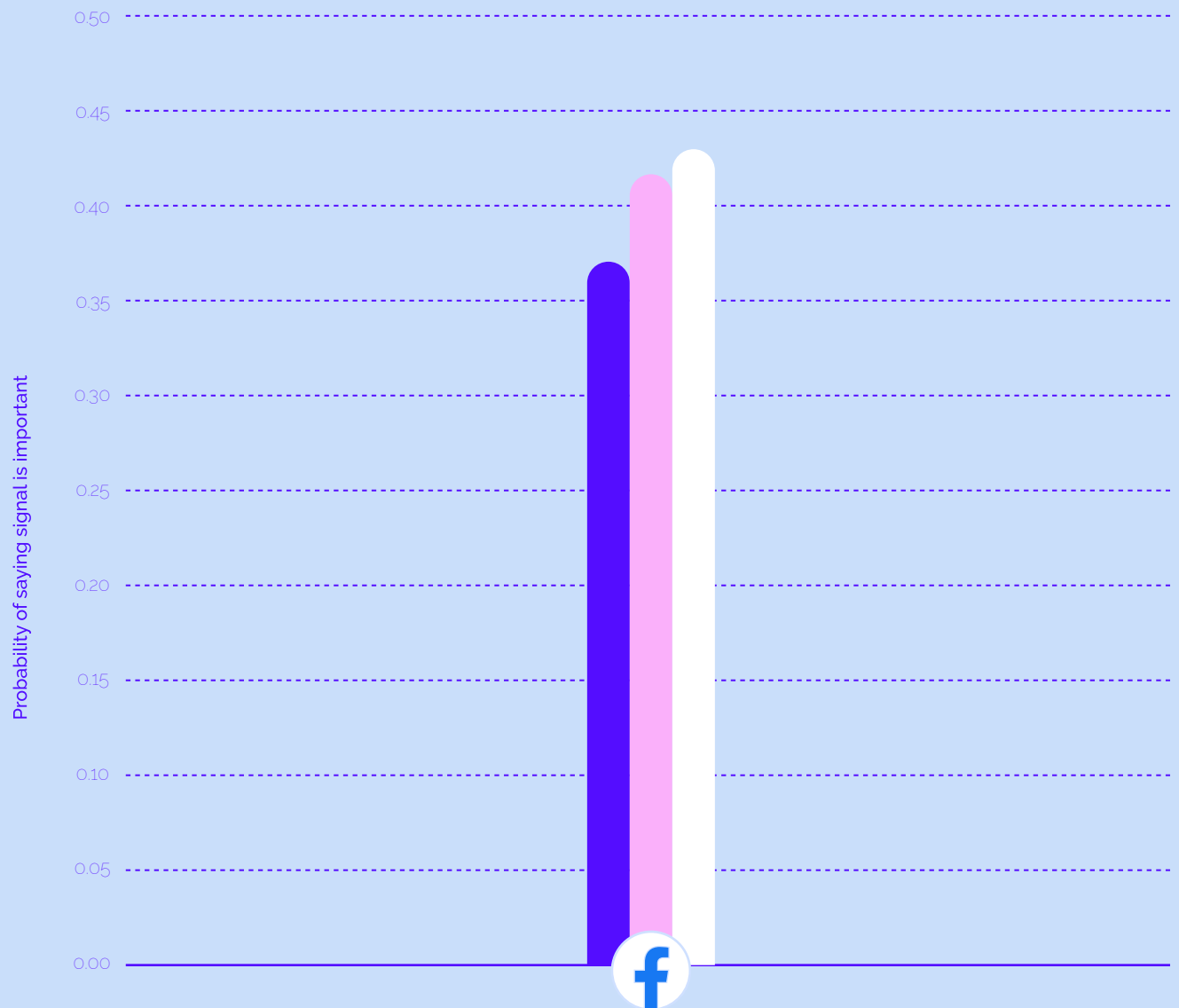
Importance of the Signal by Ideology[3]

When it came to ideology, superusers on the political left were more likely to say that "giving people the chance to feel connected to other people and groups" was important, compared to those with other ideologies for Facebook, YouTube, and Facebook Messenger. For Google, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp, those who didn't know their ideology were less likely to say that the signal was important than those with other ideologies. Finally, for Facebook Messenger, those identifying as having an ideology in the middle reported thinking that the signal was more important than those on the right or those saying that they did not know their ideology.

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3   Ideology was asked on a 10-point scale and people were given the option of saying "don't know." This was recoded into 4 categories (1 through 3, 4 through 7, 8 through 10, and "don't know").
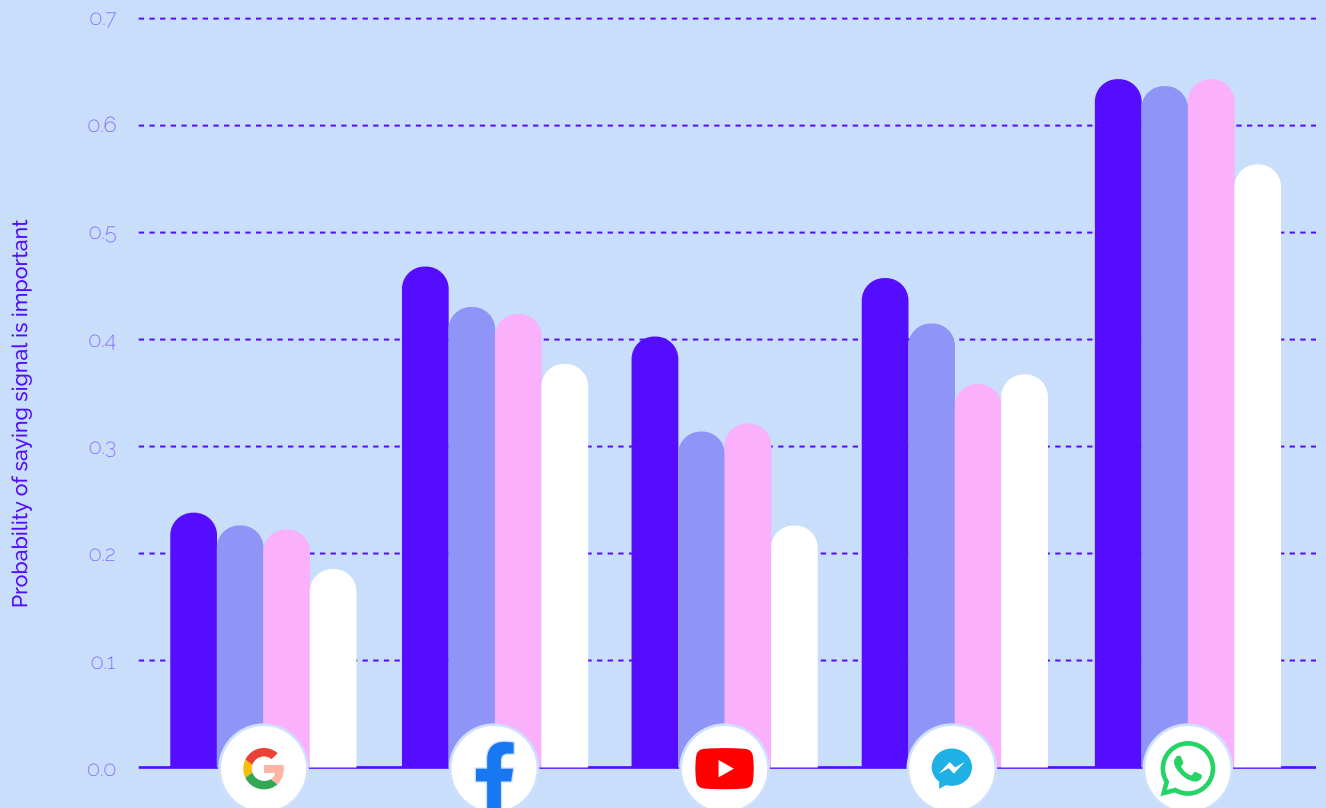
Importance of the Signal by Country

There was significant variation by country for all five of the platforms we examined based on how important people thought that "giving people the chance to feel connected to other people and groups" was. The chart below shows the probability of saying that the signal is important by platform and by country. Overall, superusers in South Africa, Brazil, and Malaysia were more likely to endorse this signal as important across platforms. Fewer superusers endorsed the signal as important across platforms in France, Germany, Sweden, Japan, Norway, and Italy.
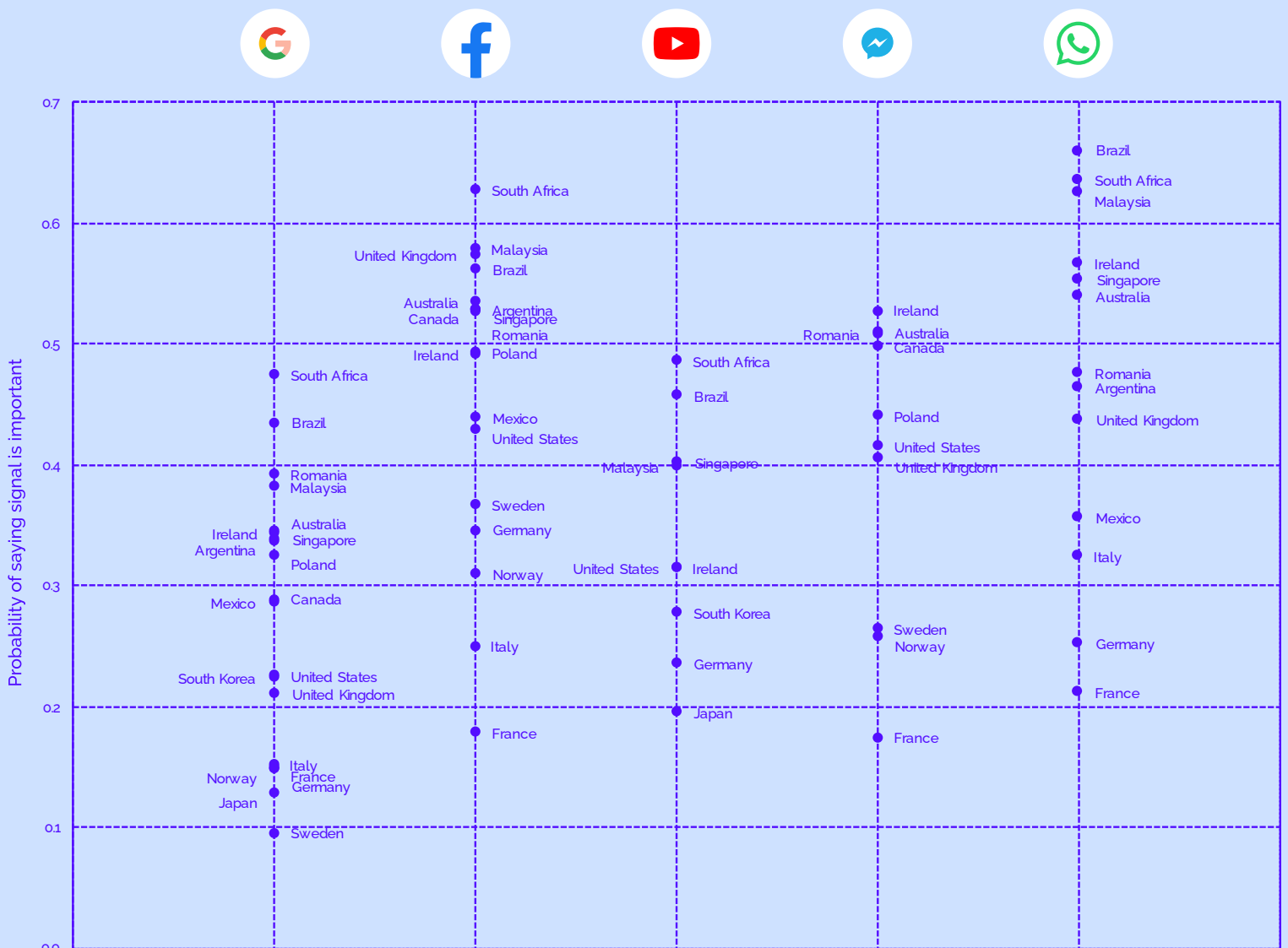
Platform Performance on the Signal

For specific platforms, superusers were first asked to say on which of the signals they thought that the platform was doing well, and then on which of the signals they thought that the platform was doing poorly. We then categorized people's responses as (0) believe that the platform is doing poorly, (1) believe that the platform is doing neither well nor poorly, or (2) believe that the platform is doing well. Users rated all platforms as performing better than a neutral score of 1.0, although more so for the social media and messaging platforms than Google.

Performance index: Cultivate belonging

Responses of "2" indicate that everyone in a particular country thought that the platform was performing well on a signal; responses of "0" indicate that no one in a particular country thought that the platform was performing well on a signal based on a survey of over 20,000 people across 20 countries.

	Facebook	Youtube	Instagram	WhatsApp	FB Messenger	Google
Argentina	1.5		1.4	1.5		1.3
Australia	1.4	1.2		1.4	1.4	1.2
Brazil	1.5	1.4	1.4	1.5		1.3
Canada	1.4				1.4	1.2
France	1.2			1.3	1.2	1.1
Germany	1.2	1.1	1.2	1.2		1.1
Ireland	1.4	1.3		1.5	1.5	1.2
Italy	1.3			1.3		1.1
Japan		1.2				1.1
Malaysia	1.5	1.3	1.4	1.5		1.2
Mexico	1.4			1.3		1.2
Norway	1.3				1.2	1.0
Poland	1.4				1.3	1.2
Romania	1.5			1.4	1.4	1.3
Sigapore	1.5	1.3		1.4		1.2
South Africa	1.6			1.5		1.3
South Korea		1.2				1.1
Sweden	1.3		1.2		1.2	1.0
UK	1.4			1.3	1.3	1.1
US	1.3	1.2			1.3	1.1

Well
2.0
1.8
1.6
1.4
1.2
1.0
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
0
Poor

Data from the Center for Media Engagement. Weighted data. Asked of those who indicated that a given social media, messaging or search platform was their most used. Question wording - Which of the following do you think [INSERT SOCIAL, MESSAGING OR SEARCH PLATFORM] does well at? Please select all that apply. And which of the following do you think [INSERT SOCIAL, MESSAGING OR SEARCH PLATFORM] does poorly at? Please select all that apply. Data only shown for those countries where at least 200 survey respondents said that the platform was their most used social media, messaging, or search platform.

Platform Performance on the Signal by Age[4]

For four of the five platforms (Google Facebook, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp), older superusers rated the platform's performance on "giving people the chance to feel connected to other people and groups" more positively than did younger superusers.

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4   Results shown are predicted responses, calculated from a regression analysis predicting that the signal is important based on age, gender, education, ideology, and country, each treated as a categorical variable. The baseline (based on the excluded categories) is a 55+ year old male with high education and middle ideology from the United States (except for WhatsApp, where the baseline is Germany).

Legend:
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55+

Y-axis: Evaluation of platform on signal (from doing poorly=0, to doing well=2)
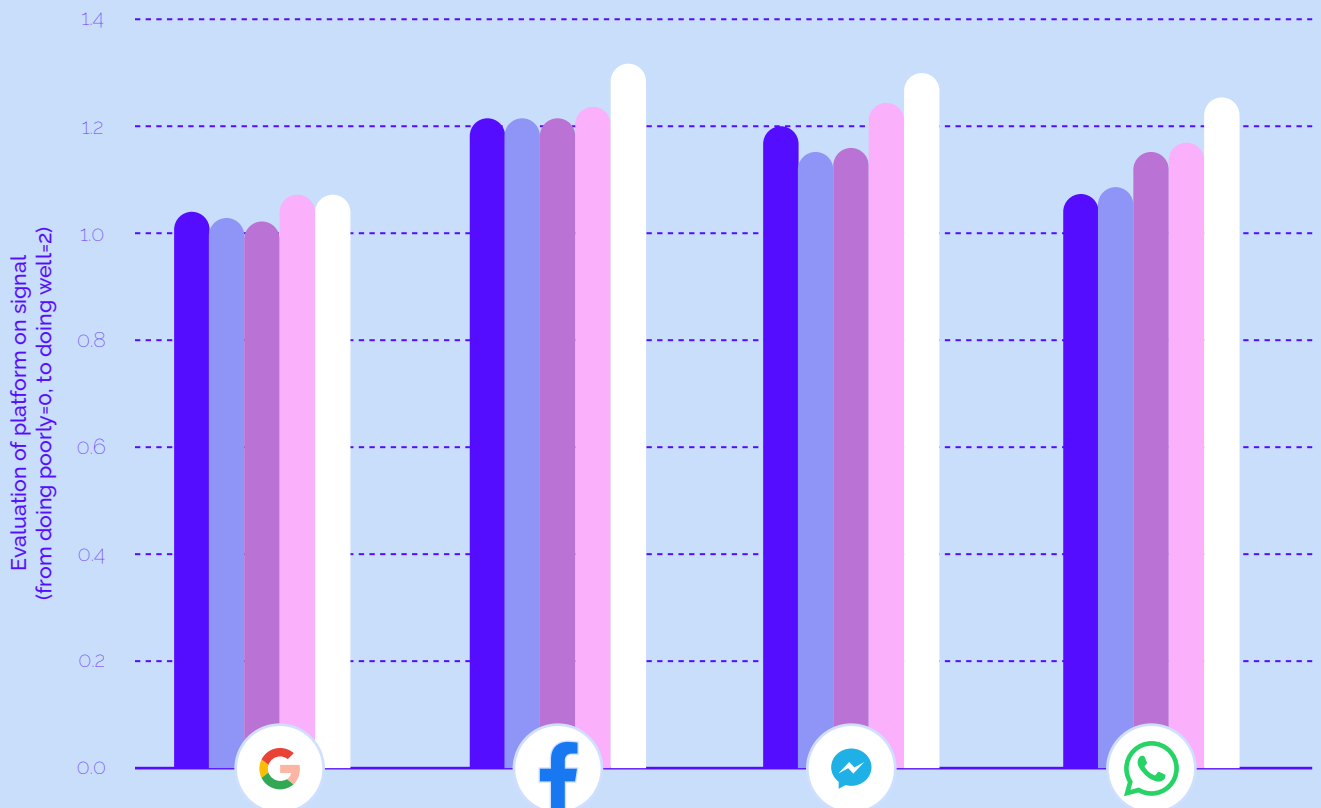
Platform Performance on the Signal by Gender

For all the five platforms we examined, women rated the platforms' performance on "giving people the chance to feel connected to other people and groups" better than did men.

Evaluation of platform on signal (from doing poorly=0, to doing well=2)

- Female
- Male
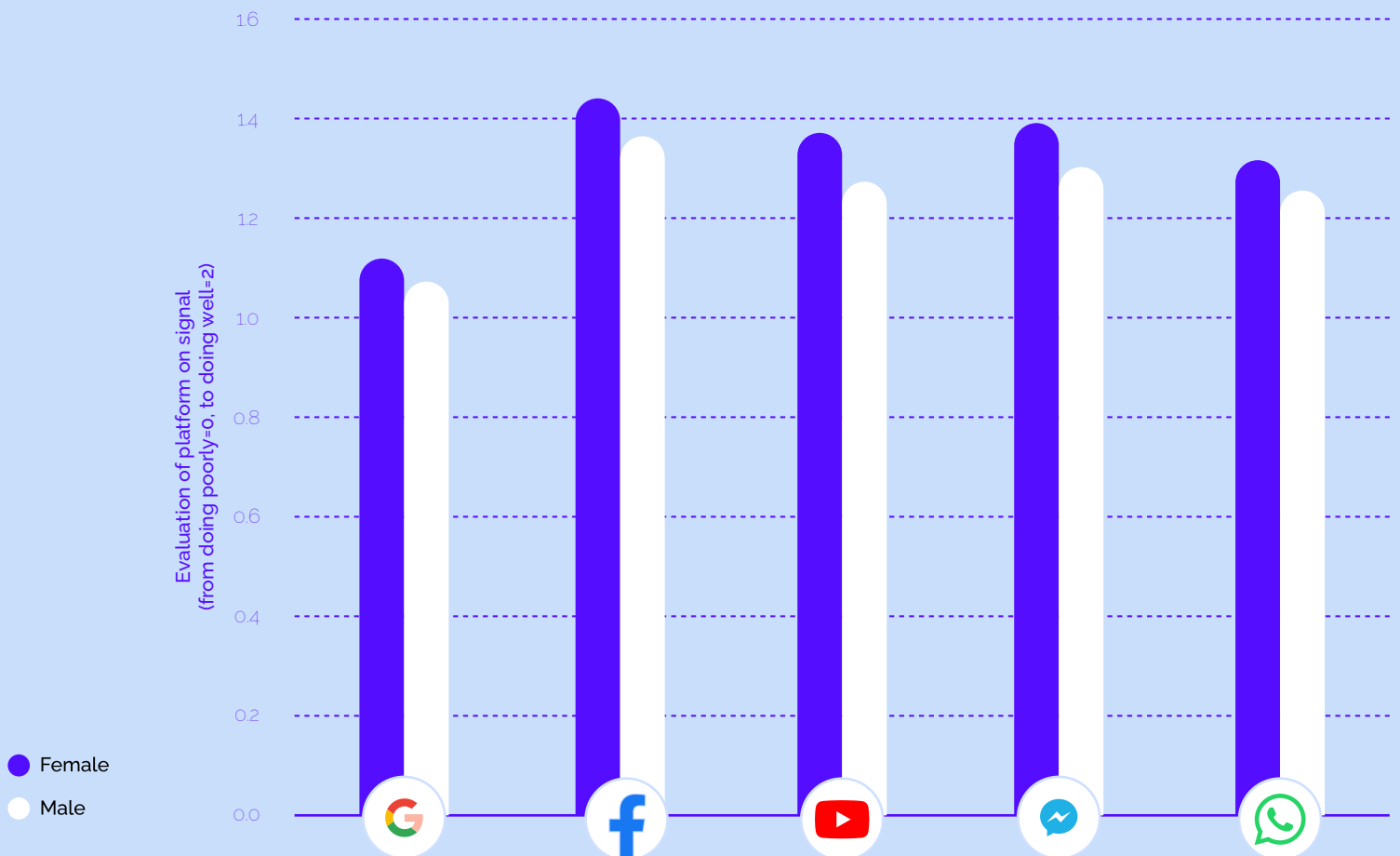
Platform Performance on the Signal by Education

For two platforms, Facebook and WhatsApp, superusers with higher levels of education thought that the platform was doing a better job at "giving people the chance to feel connected to other people and groups."

Legend:
- Low
- Medium
- High

Y-axis: Evaluation of platform on signal (from doing poorly=0, to doing well=2)
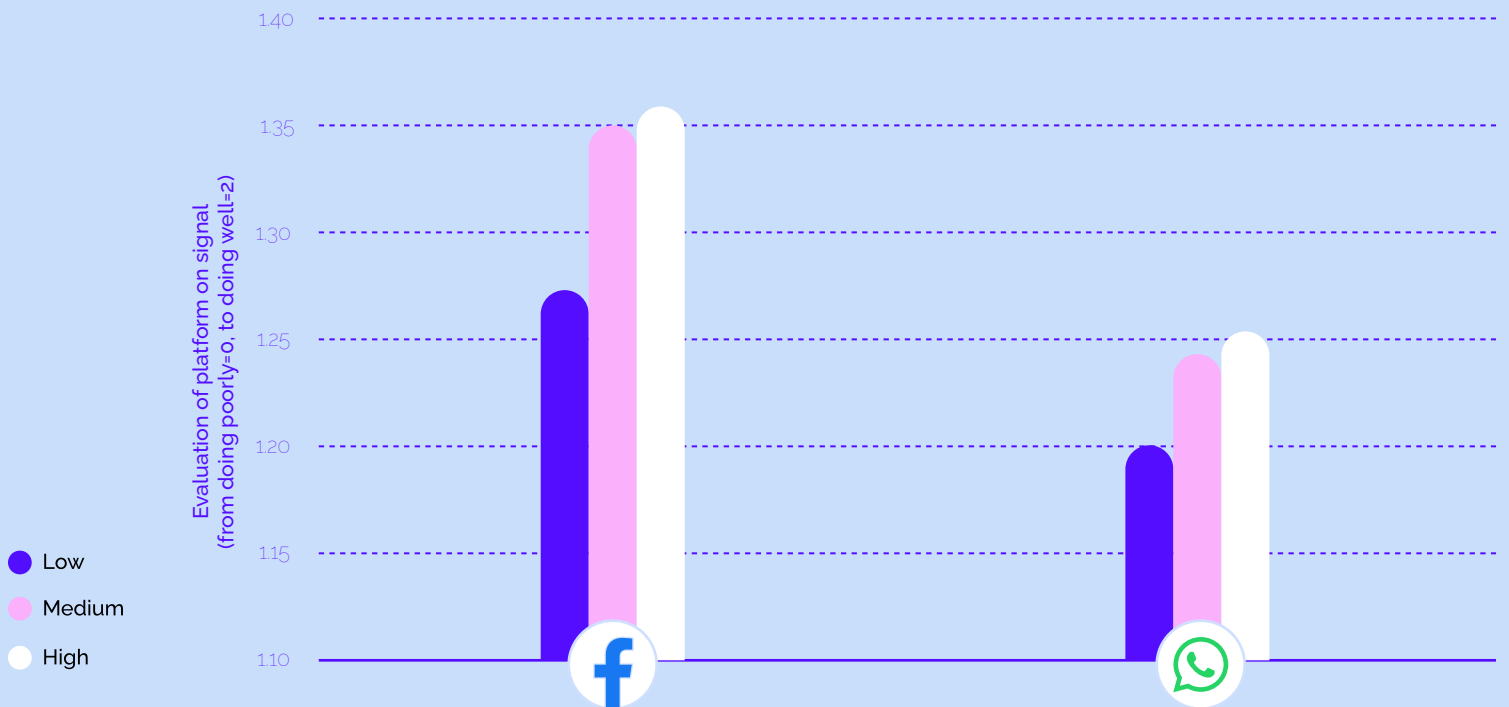
Platform Performance on the Signal by Ideology

For Google, those with middle levels of ideology rated the platform's performance on "giving people the chance to feel connected to other people and groups" more positively than those who didn't know their ideology. For Facebook, those who didn't know their ideology rated the platform less positively than did those with other ideologies. For YouTube, those with middle ideologies rated the platform's performance more positively than did those on the political right and those not reporting an ideology. Those on the left also rated the platform's performance better than those on the right. For Facebook Messenger, those on the left and with middle ideologies rated the platform's performance more positively than those on the right and those who didn't know their ideology. Finally, for WhatsApp, those who didn't know their ideology rated WhatsApp's performance on this signal more poorly than those with middle and left-leaning ideologies.
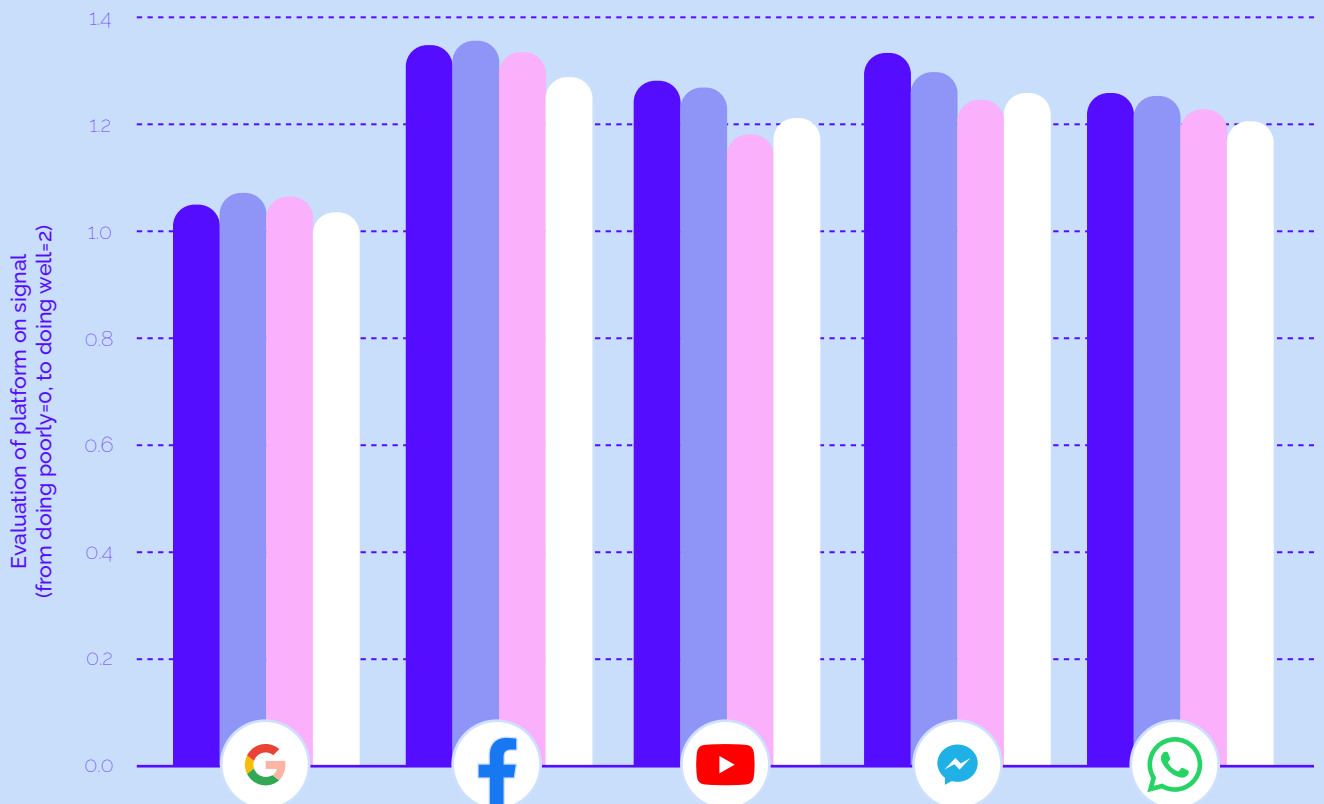
Platform Performance on the Signal by Country

There was variation by country in evaluations of platform performance. The chart below shows how superusers rated the platforms' performance in each country, controlling for age, gender, education, and ideology from "doing poorly" (0) to "doing well" (2). In general, those in South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, and Malaysia tended to say that the platforms performed better with respect to this signal than those in Germany, Norway, Sweden, and France.
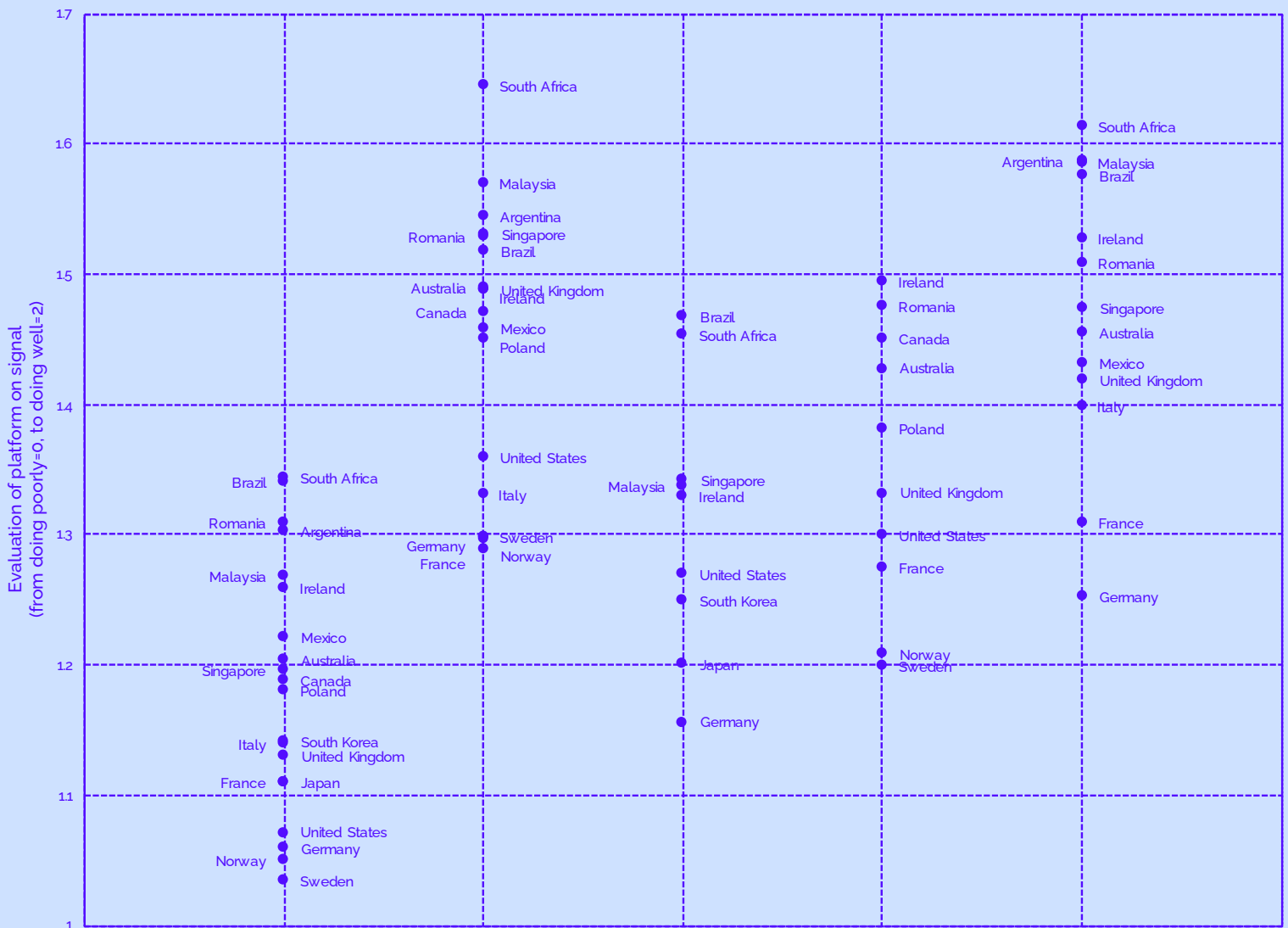
Focus group report
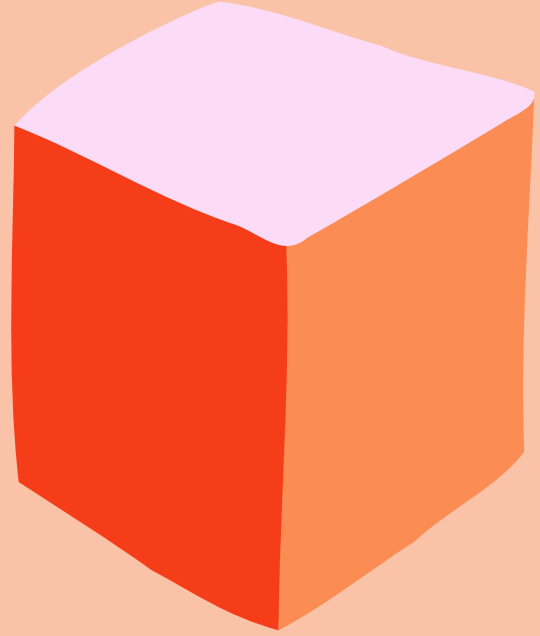
By Gina Masullo, Ori Tenenboim, and Martin Riedl,
Center for Media Engagement

We conducted two focus groups in each of five countries (Brazil, Germany, Malaysia, South Africa, and the United States). Please find more about the methodology here. Participants were asked to reflect on their social media experiences and the proposed signals. With respect to this signal, participants made several observations. Please note that all names included are pseudonyms.

Participants appreciated opportunities to be in a welcoming environment or to be part of groups/communities on social platforms. But they also worried about whether it is the job of social media platforms to make people feel they belong.

Participants noted that social media play a role in fostering a sense of belonging through online groups, although it is still up to individual users whether they actually participate in the groups. Most felt the presence of these groups was beneficial.

> " *It's not their [social media's] role to make you see who you are. However, they can help you. Social media helps you find people who are like you, people who are similar to what you already are."*
> *– Natalia, Brazilian focus group participant*

> **"**
>
> *Moms get support from Facebook groups... You don't understand why your child is behaving like this and why they are doing this. So you get a group of moms who are going to help you understand and get you to the right path on how to understand your kids." – Rachel, South African focus group participant*

For example, Shahirah, of Malaysia, was pleased with online groups, such as groups for people who are gay, because it helps people who are shy and might not join an offline group. Rachel, of South Africa, found online groups for mothers of children with autism or attention-deficit disorder beneficial. "Moms get support from Facebook groups," Rachel said. "There are things you don't understand. You don't understand why your child is behaving like this and why they are doing this. So you get a group of moms who are going to help you understand and get you to the right path on how to understand your kids."

A welcoming online environment can also go beyond specific groups, as demonstrated by Omer, of Germany. "In June or July, there were a lot of talks about the Pride movement. Facebook posted a lot about this topic, which I liked a lot," he said. "It was very positive towards the LGBT community. They showed that people are welcome. It is 2019 and it is the most natural thing in the world... They said that they are normal, they belong and there is nothing to be ashamed of. And

they should make this topic transparent and show it to everybody in the world."

However, some participants also expressed the view that it was not social media's responsibility to make people feel like they belong, beyond just providing a space for people to connect with each other. According to Andrew, of the U.S., "It's people's job to make everyone feel like they're included. Social media is just a vessel of which you can do that … But I think it's more the people's job to make sure everyone feels like they belong."

Natalia, of Brazil, expressed a similar belief. "It's not their [social media's] role to make you see who you are," she said. "However, they can help you. Social media helps you find people who are like you, people who are similar to what you already are." Bridget, of South Africa, said: "You can make yourself feel like you belong. You don't need other people assisting you to say I belong here, here and there. It is up to you to say if you belong."

User demographics from survey

Based on the survey respondents across all 20 countries, we looked at the demographics of superusers. For example, of those naming Facebook as their most used social media platform, 45% are male and 55% are female.

Facebook / Instagram / LinkedIn / Pinterest / Reddit

		Facebook	Instagram	LinkedIn	Pinterest	Reddit
Gender	Male	45%	34%	76%	30%	74%
	Female	55%	66%	24%	70%	26%
Age	18 – 24	6%	31%	5%	6%	32%
	25 – 34	17%	32%	18%	16%	38%
	35 – 44	19%	17%	21%	20%	20%
	45 – 54	19%	9%	23%	19%	6%
	55+	39%	12%	33%	39%	3%
Education	Low	10%	7%	6%	13%	9%
	Medium	41%	38%	24%	45%	41%
	High	49%	55%	70%	42%	50%
Ideology	Left	15%	15%	11%	13%	38%
	Middle	45%	47%	60%	50%	49%
	Right	21%	16%	21%	19%	7%
	Don't know	18%	23%	9%	19%	6%

Twitter / YouTube / Messenger / KakaoTalk / Snapchat

		Twitter	YouTube	Messenger	KakaoTalk	Snapchat
Gender	Male	59%	59%	45%	50%	44%
	Female	41%	41%	55%	50%	56%
Age	18 – 24	19%	15%	9%	12%	39%
	25 – 34	20%	19%	18%	17%	25%
	35 – 44	20%	20%	18%	18%	15%
	45 – 54	18%	17%	18%	17%	8%
	55+	24%	29%	37%	35%	13%
Education	Low	7%	9%	9%	2%	12%
	Medium	33%	38%	50%	34%	53%
	High	60%	53%	46%	64%	35%
Ideology	Left	20%	14%	19%	10%	18%
	Middle	49%	52%	42%	67%	46%
	Right	18%	17%	22%	13%	17%
	Don't know	14%	17%	17%	10%	19%

		Telegram	WhatsApp	Bing	Google	Yahoo
Gender	Male	60%	47%	64%	48%	44%
	Female	40%	53%	36%	52%	58%
Age	18 - 24	21%	13%	10%	13%	5%
	25 - 34	33%	21%	19%	19%	11%
	35 - 44	18%	20%	14%	19%	15%
	45 - 54	15%	17%	16%	17%	17%
	55+	13%	29%	41%	32%	52%
Education	Low	11%	10%	12%	10%	8%
	Medium	31%	35%	38%	39%	36%
	High	58%	55%	39%	51%	56%
Ideology	Left	14%	14%	14%	16%	9%
	Middle	53%	49%	51%	48%	50%
	Right	18%	18%	38%	18%	19%
	Don't know	14%	19%	7%	18%	22%

Logo glossary

Social media

 Facebook

 Instagram

 LinkedIn

 Pinterest

 Reddit

 Twitter

 YouTube

Messaging

 Facebook Messenger

 KakaoTalk

 Snapchat

 Telegram

 WhatsApp

Search engines

 Bing

 Google

 Yahoo

Civic Signals