



Opinion Poll: The Threat of Extremist Groups Misusing Digital and Social Media Platforms



Executive Summary

Sample distribution

- Male respondents expressed greater interest in participating in the poll and comprised **70 percent** of the respondents, with females representing **30 percent**.
- **Twenty-eight percent** of the respondents belonged to the 40-49 age group, **27 percent** were in the 18-29 age category, and **25 percent** were in the age group of 30-39. The remaining **20 percent** were aged 50 and above.
- A majority (**51 percent**) of respondents held postgraduate degrees, while **33 percent** had bachelor's degrees. Those with diplomas and high school certificates comprised **11 percent** and **6 percent**, respectively.
- More than two-thirds (**69 percent**) of respondents were from the Middle East, with the remaining **31 percent** representing other regions.

Highlights

- **Eighty-three percent** of the respondents use social media platforms and applications daily, with **63 percent** using them most of the time.
- Instagram ranked first among apps used by respondents, with **54 percent** of them using it. Twitter (**53 percent**) ranked second.
- **Seventy-five percent** of respondents followed issues of public concern on social media platforms, with **45 percent** following most of the time.
- According to the poll results, **92 percent** of respondents thought young people were significantly influenced by the ideas shared on social media platforms and applications, with **59 percent** believing that the youth were very influenced significantly.
- The results also reveal that **91 percent** of respondents said religious extremist groups (such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Muslim Brotherhood, and Boko Haram) significantly misused social media platforms and applications to disseminate their ideas and ideologies. Over half of them (**51 percent**) said those groups did so very significantly.



- **Eighty-nine percent** of respondents believed that far-right forces worldwide significantly misused social media platforms and apps, including **48 percent** who thought they did very significantly.
- The respondents ranked “spread of extremist ideology and incitement to violence” as the top threat posed by extremist groups’ misuse of social media platforms and apps, with **83 percent** of them sharing this view. “The brainwashing of children and youth into extremist ideology and deviant ideas” ranked second (**78 percent**).
- **Ninety-three percent** of respondents stated that the extent of danger emanating from extremist groups’ misuse of social media platforms was high, including **61 percent** who thought it was very high.
- **Seventy-three percent** of respondents believed “putting greater focus on the educational aspect and awareness” was the best way to combat digital extremism. “Cooperation between social/educational institutions to protect the community against the threat posed by these applications” ranked second (**68 percent**).
- In the opinion of most respondents (**72 percent**), the international community can tackle digital extremism by ensuring that technology companies play their role in combating extremist digital content. The next best measure, supported by **70 percent** of the respondents, was establishing more specialized centers to combat digital extremism.



Introduction

As part of its opinion poll series, TRENDS Research & Advisory conducted a poll – *The Threat of Extremist Groups Misusing Social Media Platforms and Applications* – from May 16 to June 3, 2021. The poll focused on exploring the Arab and international public opinion trends related to the misuse, its implications on the security and stability of societies, and how to deal with it decisively.

It tried to measure the use of social media platforms and applications in daily life, identifying the most used applications and determining the extent to which individuals follow issues of public concern on social media platforms and applications. It also tried to measure how the youth are influenced by the ideas shared on social media platforms.

The poll included questions related to the extent to which religious extremist groups misuse social media platforms and apps to disseminate their ideologies.

It also included several questions to identify the threat posed by extremist groups misusing social media platforms and applications. The questions were framed from the Arab and international public opinion perspectives. The objective was to understand the extent of these dangers and to determine how the international community can tackle it and the best measures to combat digital extremism.

Respondents comprised a random sample of 415 people of both genders, with varied nationalities, age groups, and educational levels.



Objectives

- Measuring the use of social media platforms and applications in daily lives;
- Determining the most used applications by respondents;
- Measuring the extent to which respondents follow issues of public concern through social media platforms and applications;
- Measuring the extent to which young people are influenced by the ideas shared on social media platforms and applications;
- Measuring the extent to which religious extremist groups misuse social media platforms and apps to disseminate their ideas and ideologies;
- Identifying the dangers of extremist groups' misuse of social media platforms and applications;
- Identifying the extent of danger emanating from extremist groups' misuse of social media platforms and applications; and
- Determining the best measures to combat digital extremism and how the international community can tackle it.



Methodology

Target population



Arab and international community was the target population.

Design



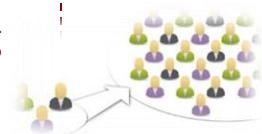
The questionnaire was designed using software specially developed for **TRENDS Research & Advisory**.

Data collection



Data was collected electronically by posting the questionnaire on the **TRENDS Research & Advisory** website.

Sampling



The Snowball Sampling method was used given the difficulty of reaching the target population. A link to the questionnaire was sent to people in the **TRENDS Research & Advisory** databases, and they were asked to forward it to other people within the target population. The sample size was 415 respondents, with a margin of error of 4.8%±.

Data collection period



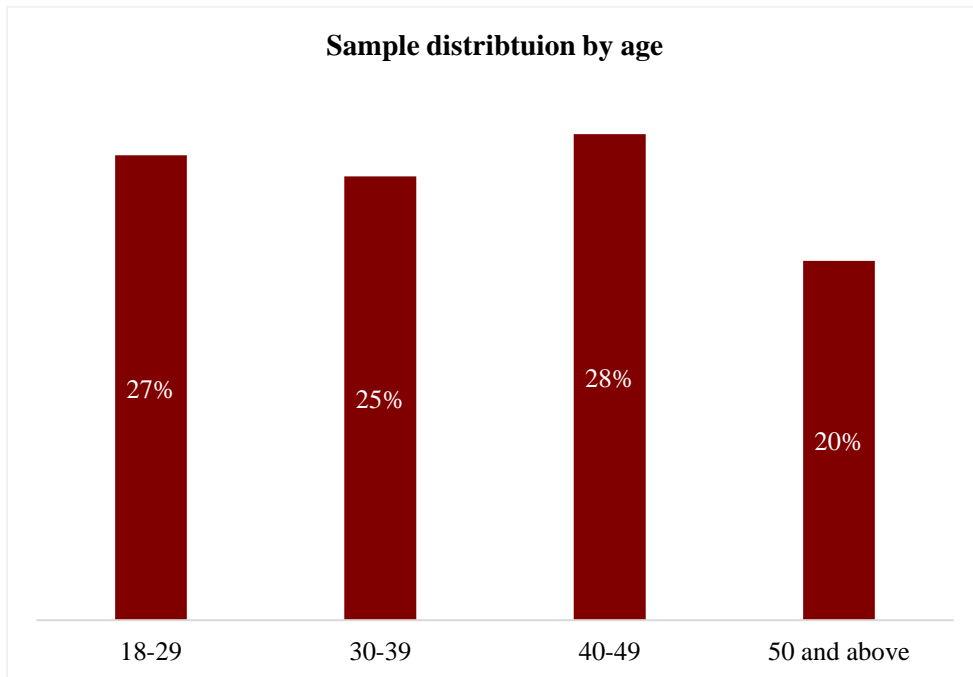
The data collection period was from May 16, 2021, to June 3, 2021.

Data Analysis

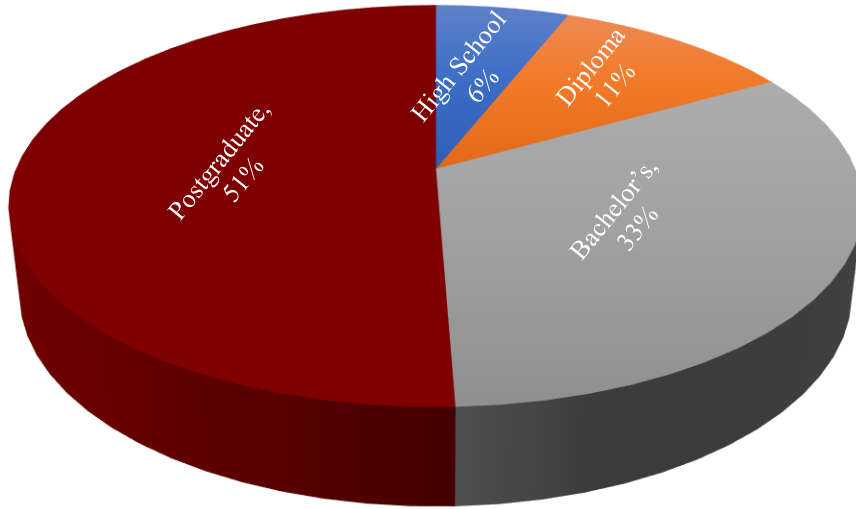


Data was analyzed using SPSS software, and Excel was used for data validation and analysis. Tables and charts were then created, and the statistical report was prepared.

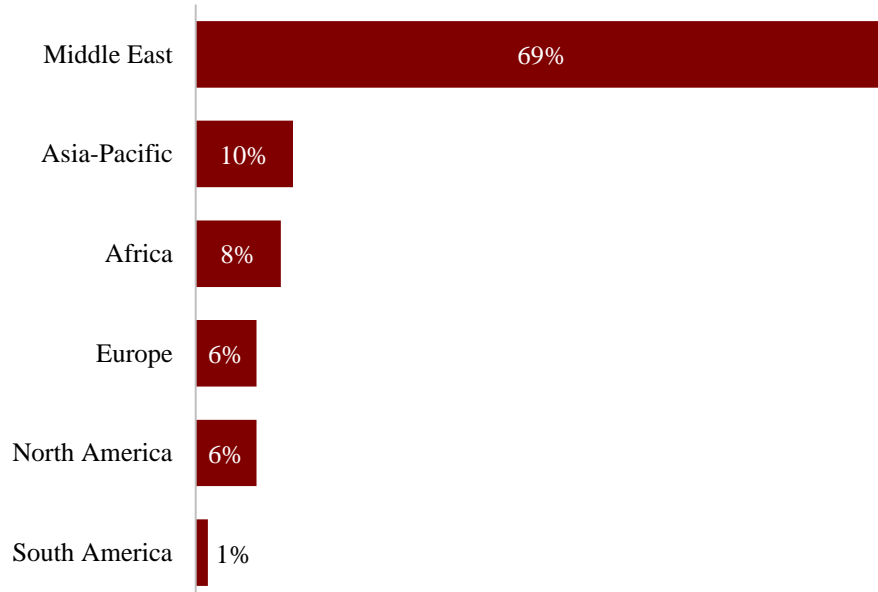
Sample distribution



Sample distribtuion by education level



Sample distribtuion by region

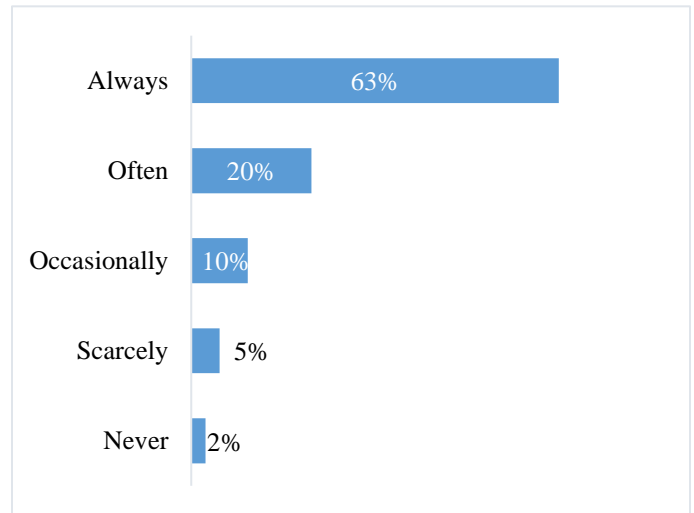




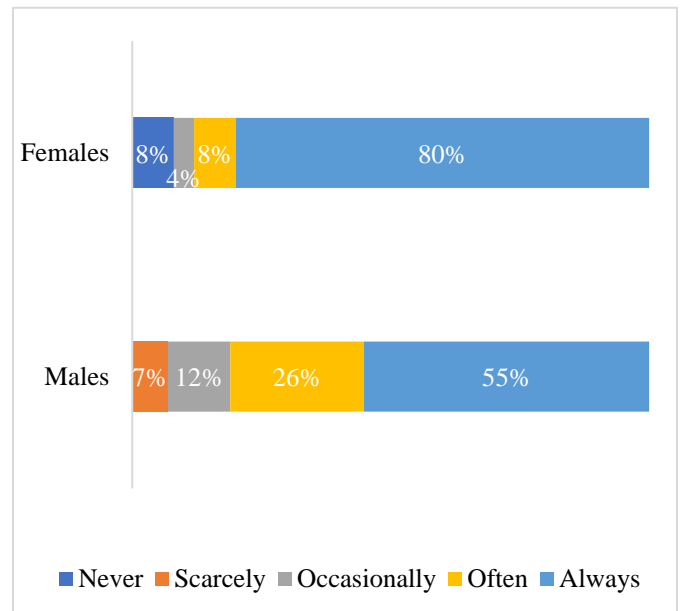
Main findings

Question 1: Do you use social media platforms and applications in your daily life?

TRENDS asked respondents a direct question about their use of these platforms and applications to measure the daily use of social media platforms and applications. The results revealed that 83 percent of respondents used them, including 63 percent using them all the time. This indicates the importance of these platforms and applications.

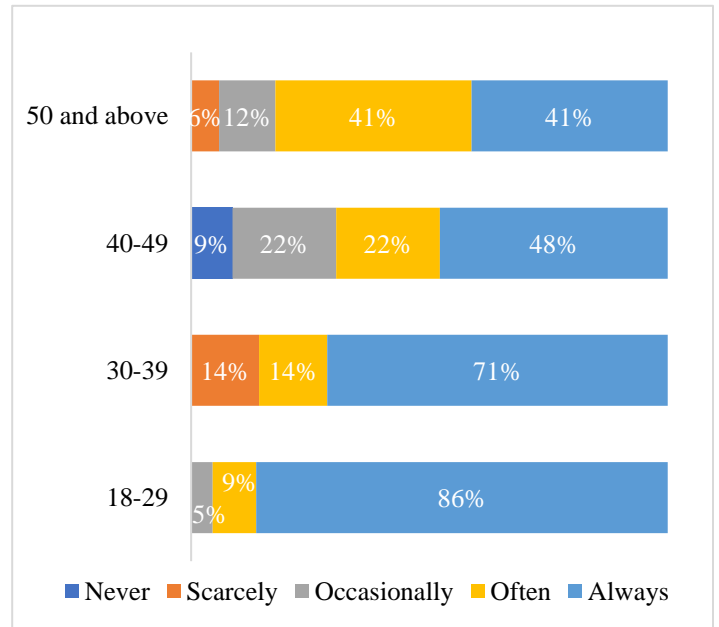


On a gender scale, female respondents used social media platforms and applications daily compared to males. While 88 percent of females used social media platforms and applications, including 80 percent who always used them, 81 percent of males used these platforms, including 55 percent who always did so.

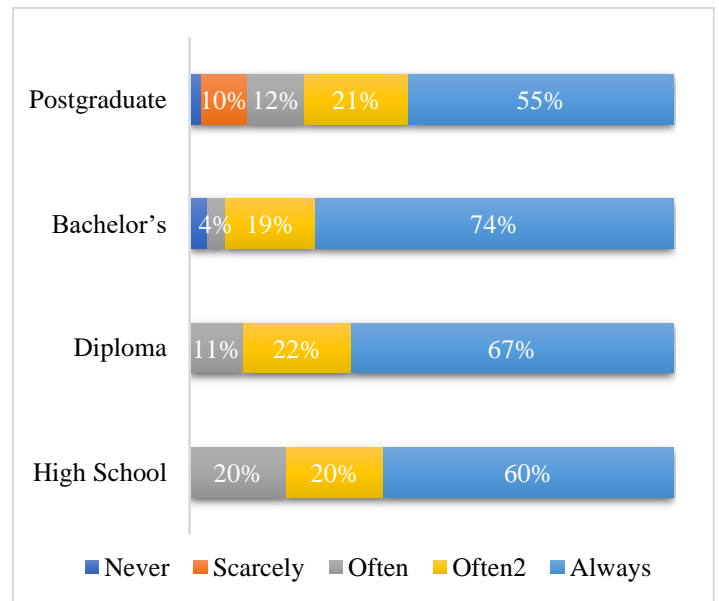




Among the different age groups, respondents in the youngest (18-29) age group used social media the most in their daily lives (96 percent), including 86 percent who always used them. The 30-39 age group ranked second (86 percent), followed by the group aged 50 and above (82 percent) and then the 40-49 age group (70 percent).



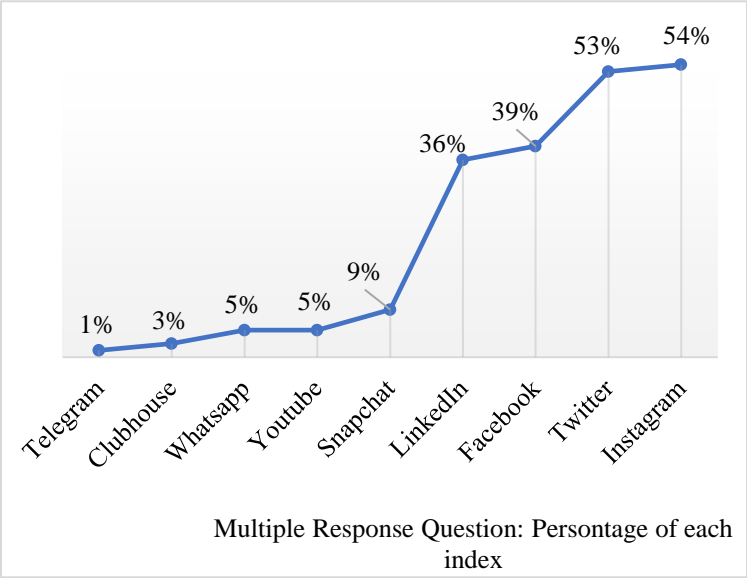
As far as the level of education is concerned, the results indicate that 93 percent of respondents holding bachelor's degrees used social media platforms and applications in their daily lives, including 74 percent who always used them. In contrast, respondents holding postgraduate degrees used social media the least, as 76 percent of them used them daily, including 55 percent always.





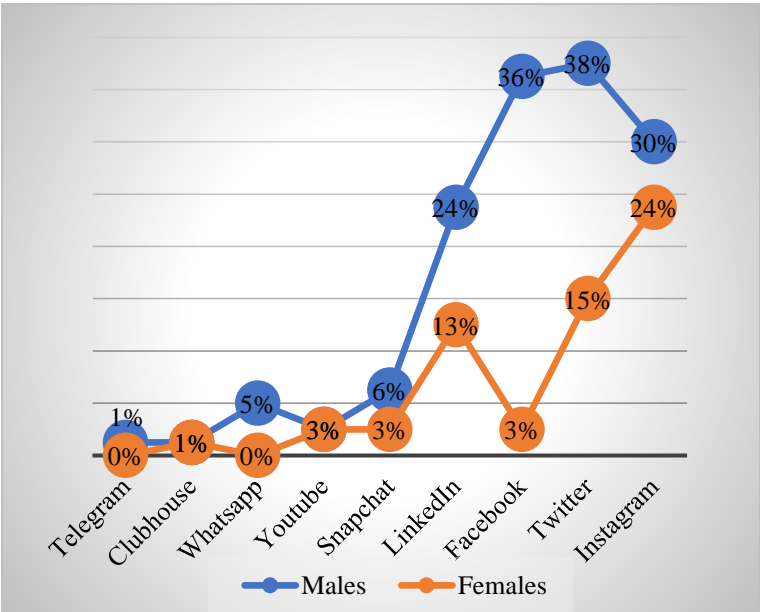
Question 2: Which social media application/s do you use the most?

In terms of the most-used applications, Instagram ranked first, with 54 percent of respondents using it, followed by Twitter (53 percent).



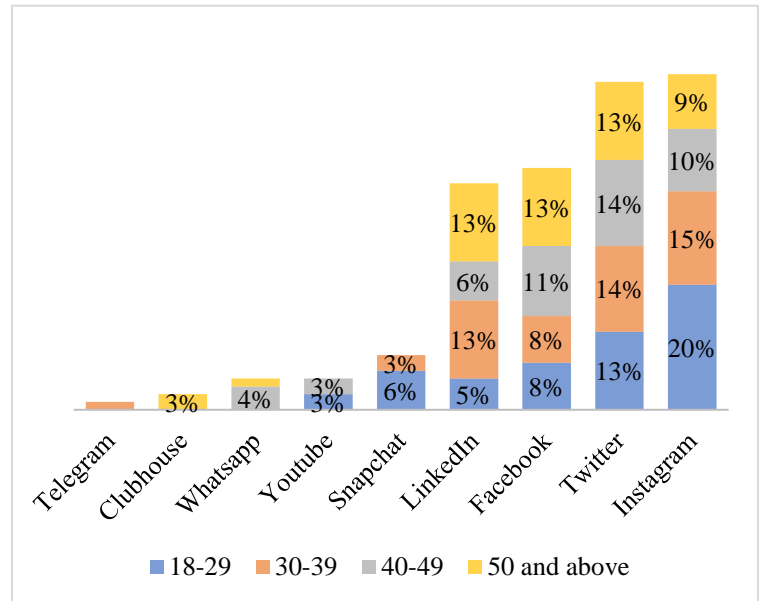
The results reveal variation by gender in terms of the most used application. Twitter ranked first among males (38 percent), followed by Facebook (36 percent) and then Instagram (30 percent).

On the other hand, Instagram was the most used application among females (24 percent), with Twitter ranking second (15 percent), and LinkedIn third (13 percent).

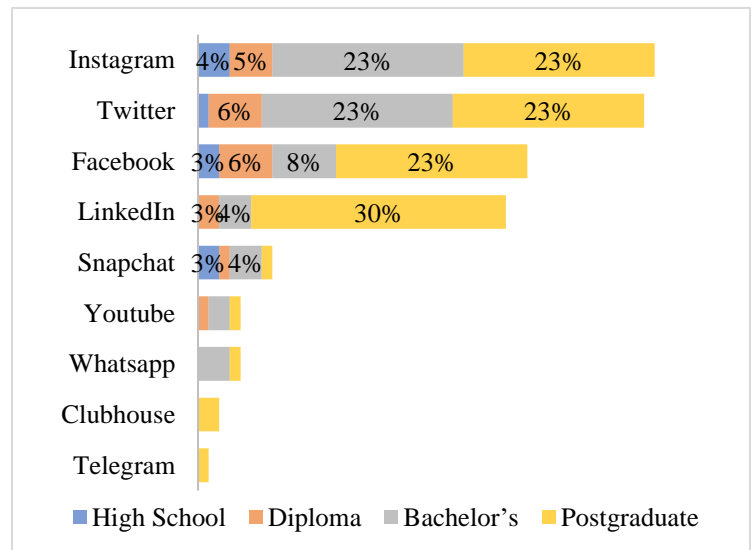




Among different age groups, Instagram was the most used application among respondents aged 18-29 (20 percent) and those aged 30-39 (15 percent). Twitter was the most used application among respondents in the age group of 40-49 (14 percent). Facebook and LinkedIn shared the top rank among respondents aged 50 and above, with each application being used the most by 13 percent of them.



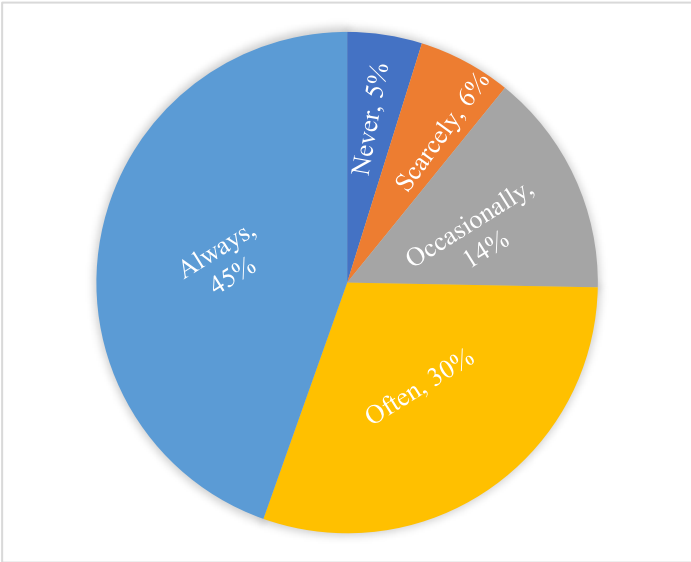
The results also indicate that the most-used application among respondents holding postgraduate degrees was LinkedIn (30 percent). Instagram and Twitter were the most-used applications by holders of bachelor's degrees, with 23 percent for each.



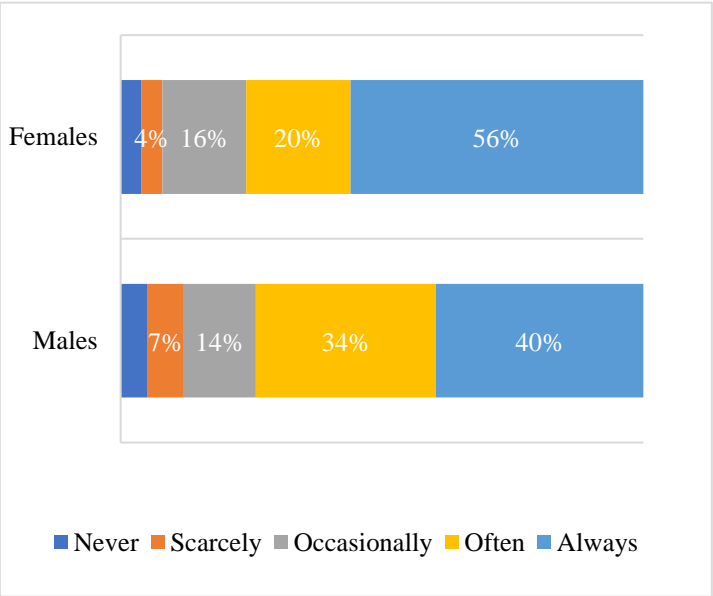


Question 3: Do you follow issues of public concern on social media platforms and applications?

Respondents were asked whether they follow issues of public concern on social media platforms and applications. The results show that 75 percent of them do, with 45 percent doing so all the time.

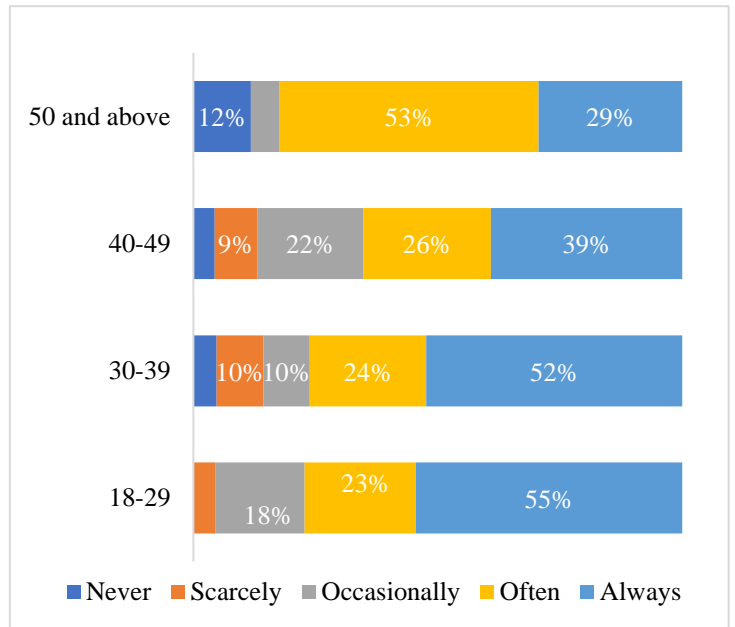


In terms of gender, the results show that female respondents follow issues of public concern on social media platforms and applications slightly more than males: 76 percent and 74 percent respectively, including 56 percent and 40 percent, respectively, using them all the time.

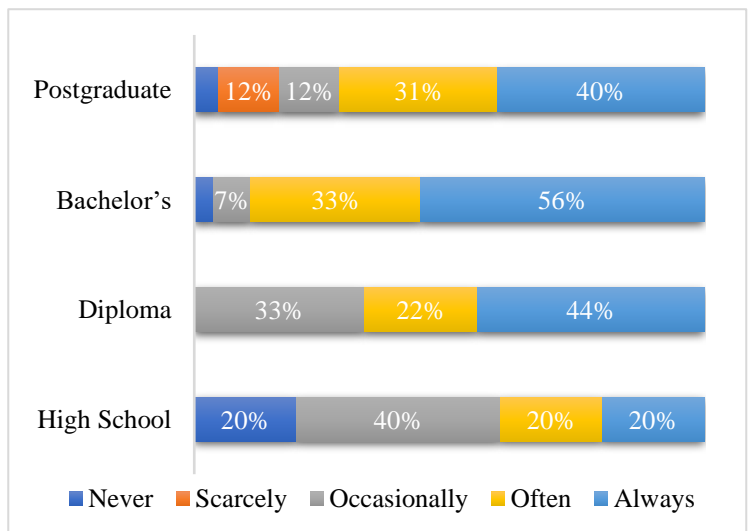




The distribution of results by age groups reveals that 55 percent of respondents aged 18-29 always follow issues of public concern on social media. This percentage decreases as we advance to older age groups, with 29 percent of respondents aged 50 and above following matters of public concern on social media platforms and applications.

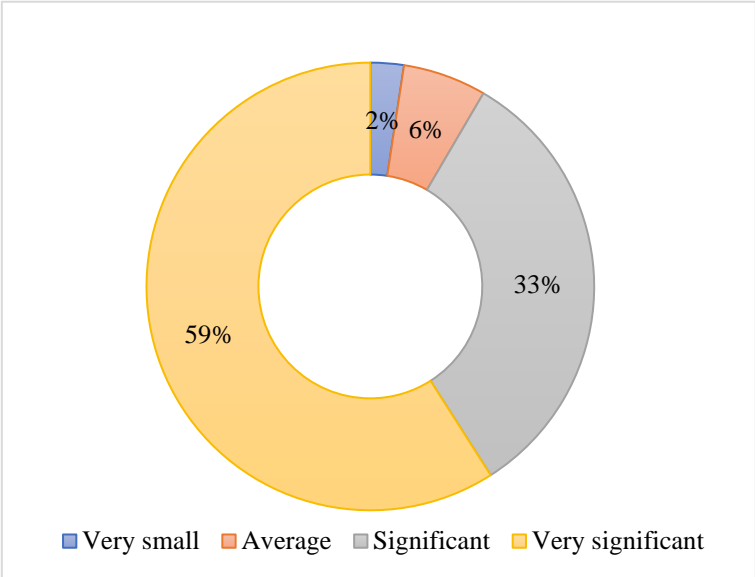


As far as the educational level is concerned, the results reveal those respondents holding bachelor's degrees follow issues of public concern on social media platforms and applications the most (89 percent), with 56 percent of them always doing so.

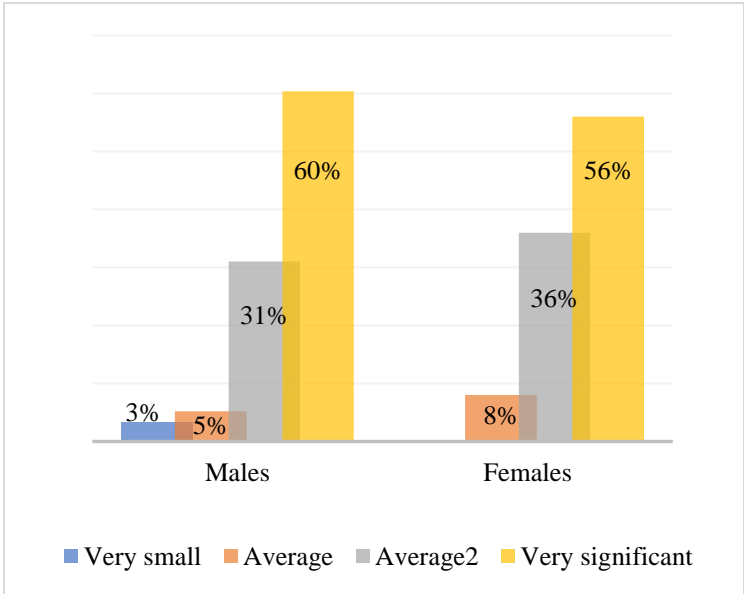


Question 4: To what extent are young people influenced by the ideas shared on social media platforms and applications?

To measure the extent to which young people are influenced by the ideas shared on social media platforms and applications, respondents were asked about the extent to which they think extremist ideas influence young people. Most respondents (92 percent) stated that young people were significantly influenced by ideas shared on social media, including 59 percent saying these ideas very significantly influenced young people.

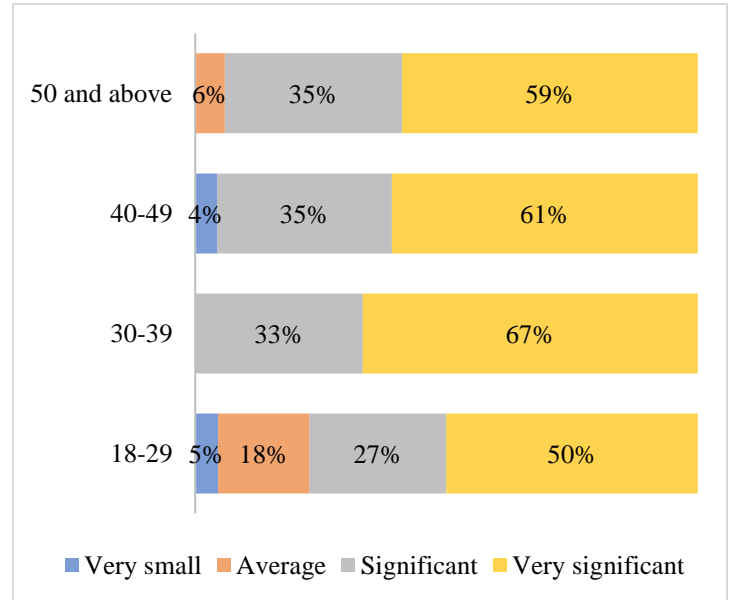


Results hardly varied by gender, with 92 percent of female respondents and 91 percent of male respondents saying that young people were significantly influenced by ideas shared on social media platforms and applications. Fifty-six percent of females and 60 percent of males said that those ideas' influence was very significant.

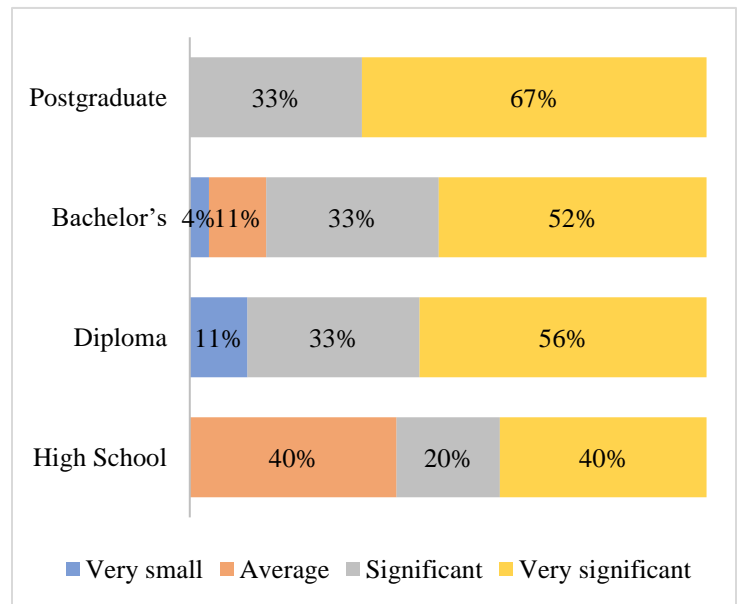




All respondents (100 percent) aged 30-39 believed that young people were significantly influenced by ideas shared on social media platforms and applications. The 40-49 age group followed. Following this was the 50 and above age group, with 96 percent and 94 percent of them, respectively, believing so. Although the 18-29 age group recorded the lowest percentage of respondents who believed that young people were significantly influenced by ideas shared on social media, this percentage is still high (77 percent).

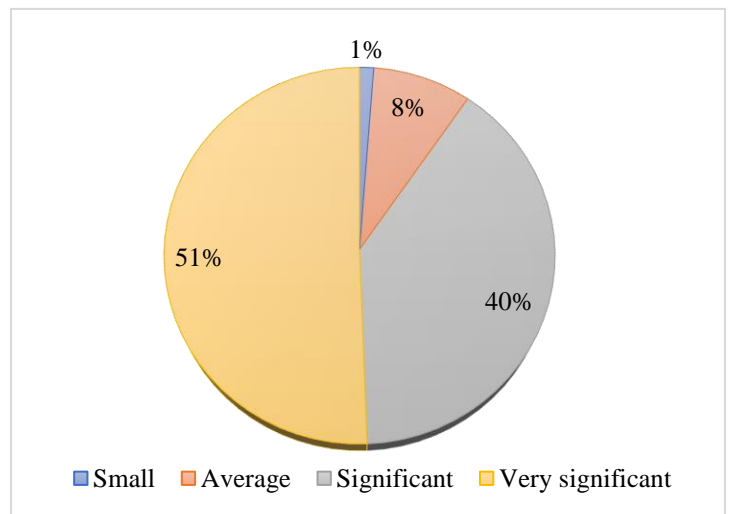


In terms of the education level of respondents, the results show that 100 percent of respondents holding postgraduate degrees believed that young people are significantly influenced by ideas shared on social media platforms and applications, including 67 percent who thought that the influence of those ideas was very significant.

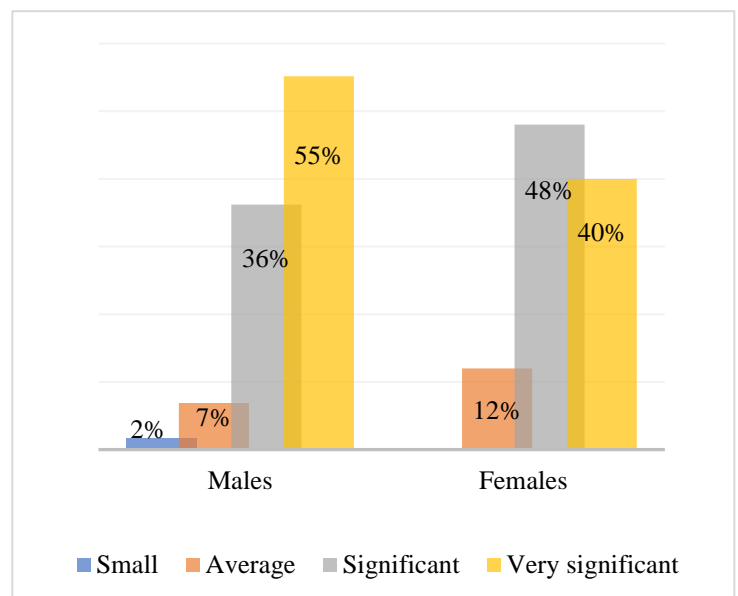


Question 5: To what extent do religious extremist groups misuse social media platforms and applications to disseminate their ideas and ideologies?

When asked about the extent to which religious extremist groups (such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Muslim Brotherhood, and Boko Haram) misuse social media platforms and applications to disseminate their ideas and ideologies, 91 percent of respondents stated that these groups significantly misused those platforms, including 51 percent who thought these groups did so very significantly.

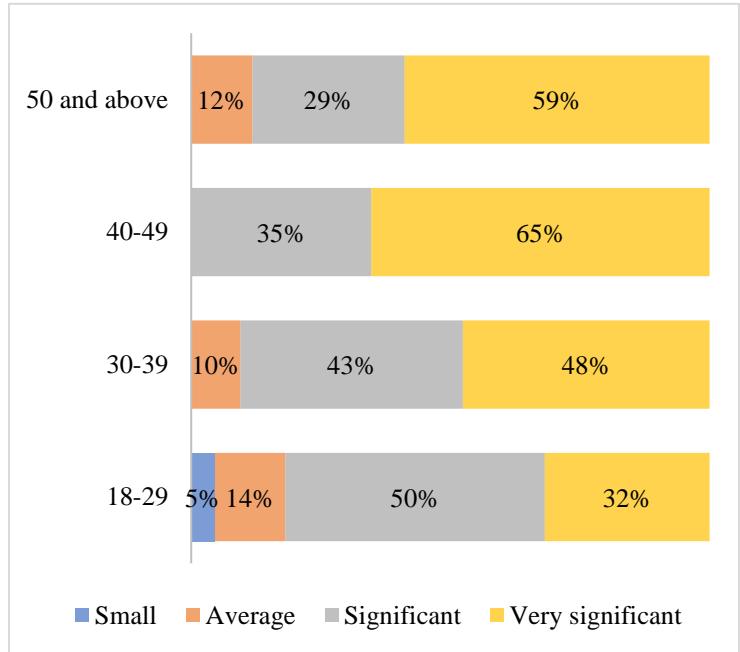


The results slightly varied by gender, with 91 percent of male respondents and 88 percent of female respondents stating that religious extremist groups significantly misused social media platforms to disseminate their ideas and ideologies. Fifty-five percent and 40 percent, respectively, said they did so very significantly.

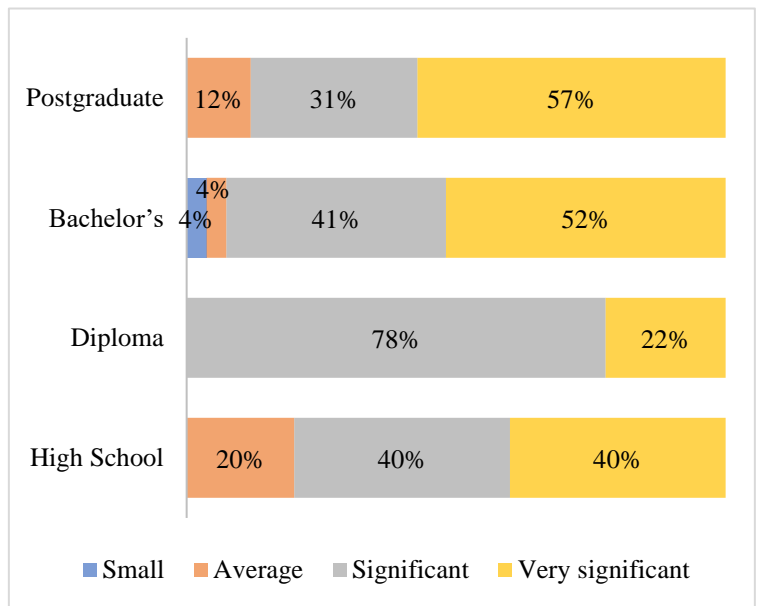




Most respondents of all age groups believed that religious extremist groups (such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Muslim Brotherhood, and Boko Haram) significantly misused social media platforms and applications to disseminate their ideas and ideologies. One hundred percent of respondents aged 40-49 thought that those groups did so significantly, including 65 percent who believed those groups misused those platforms and applications very significantly. Around 90 percent of respondents aged 30-39, 88 percent aged 50 and above, and 82 percent aged 18-29 thought these groups misused social media platforms significantly.

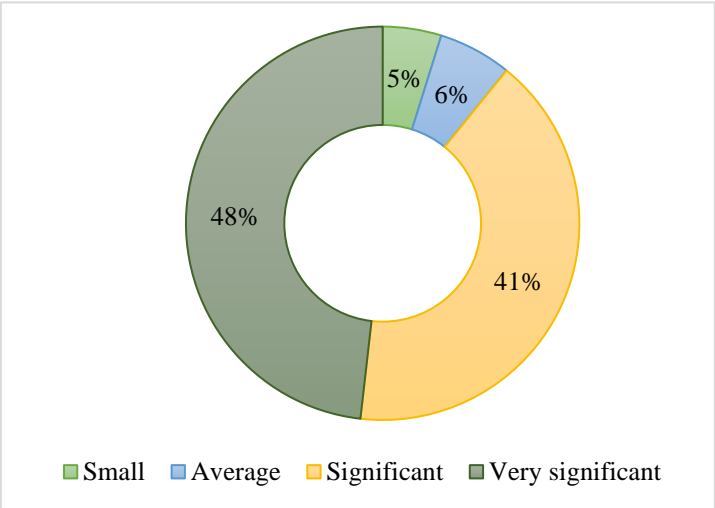


As far as the educational level is concerned, the results showed that 100 percent of respondents holding diplomas believed that religious extremist groups significantly misused social media platforms to disseminate their ideas and ideologies, including 22 percent who thought those groups did so very significantly. As many as 93 percent of respondents holding bachelor's degrees thought those groups did so significantly, including 52 percent who thought they were misused very significantly. Among respondents holding postgraduate degrees, 88 percent believed those groups significantly misused those platforms and applications.

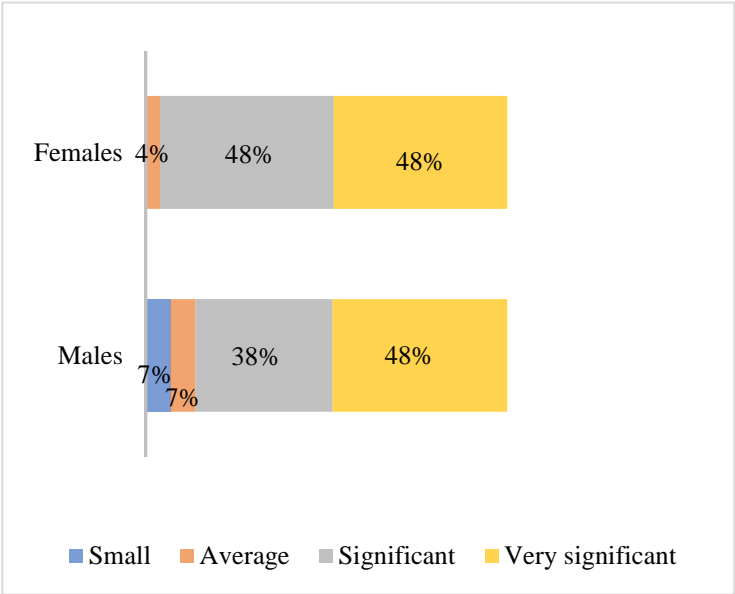


Question 6: To what degree do far-right forces worldwide misuse social media platforms and applications?

This question was asked to measure the respondents' perception of the extent to which far-right forces worldwide misuse social media platforms. The results showed that 89 percent of respondents believed far-right forces did so significantly, including 48 percent who thought those forces did so very significantly.

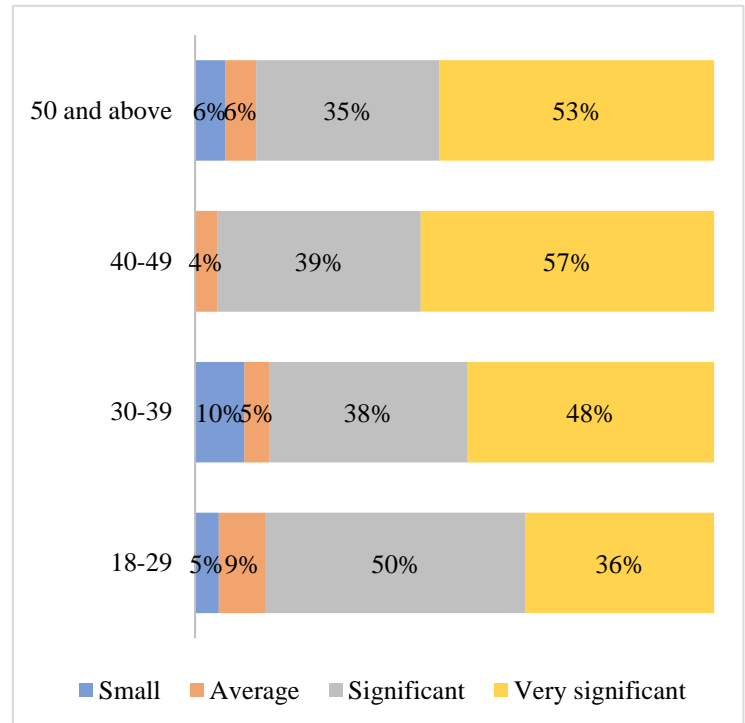


In terms of the gender variable, the results showed that while 96 percent of female respondents believed that far-right forces worldwide significantly misused social media platforms and applications, including 48 percent who thought they did so very significantly. Eighty-six percent of male respondents said these forces significantly misuse these platforms, including 48 percent who thought they did so very significantly.

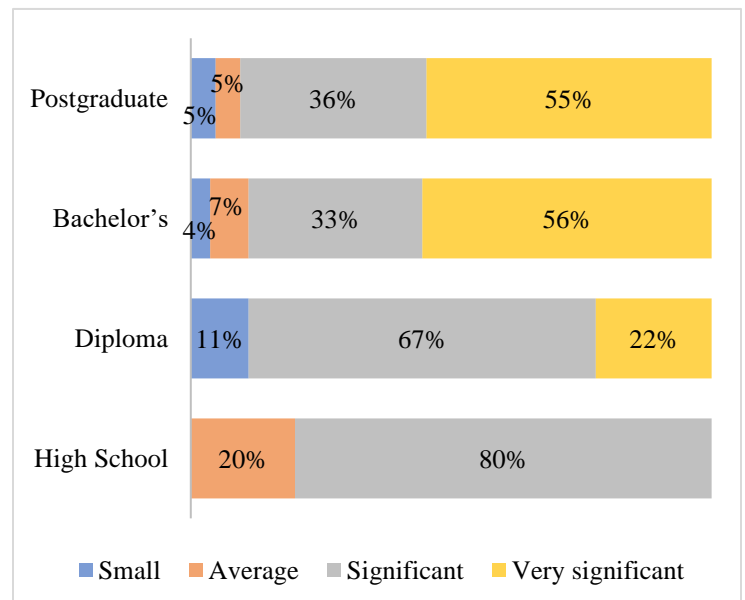




The 40-49 age group ranked first, with 96 percent of respondents in this category believing that far-right forces worldwide significantly misused social media, including 57 percent who thought they did so very significantly. This was followed by the group of respondents aged 50 and above, with 88 percent of them thinking that extremist forces significantly misused these platforms and applications, including 53 percent who said they did so very significantly.

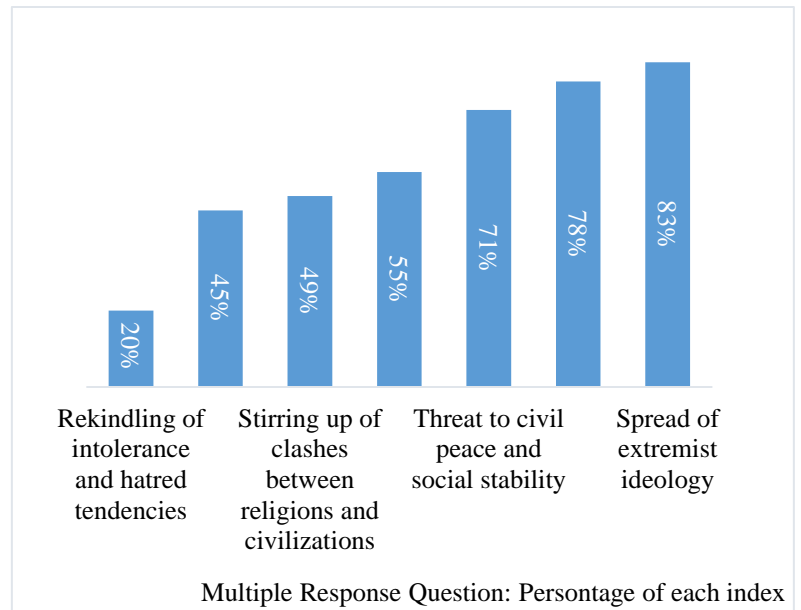


In terms of the education level, holders of postgraduate degrees ranked first, with 90 percent of them believing that far-right forces worldwide significantly misuse social media platforms, including 54 percent who thought they did so very significantly. Respondents holding bachelor's degrees and diplomas shared the second position, with 89 percent thinking those groups did so significantly. Finally, 80 percent of the respondents holding high school said the same.

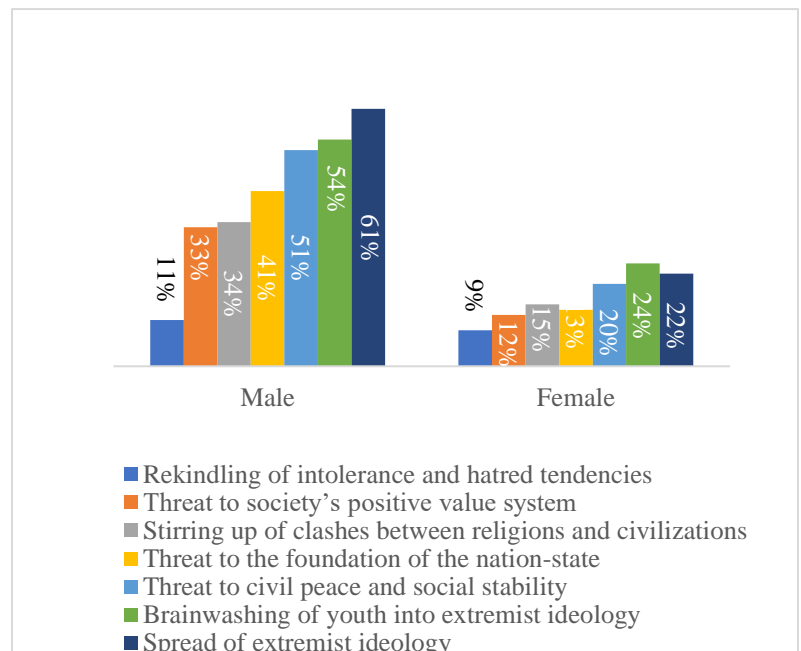


Question 7: What are the dangers of extremist groups misusing social media platforms and applications?

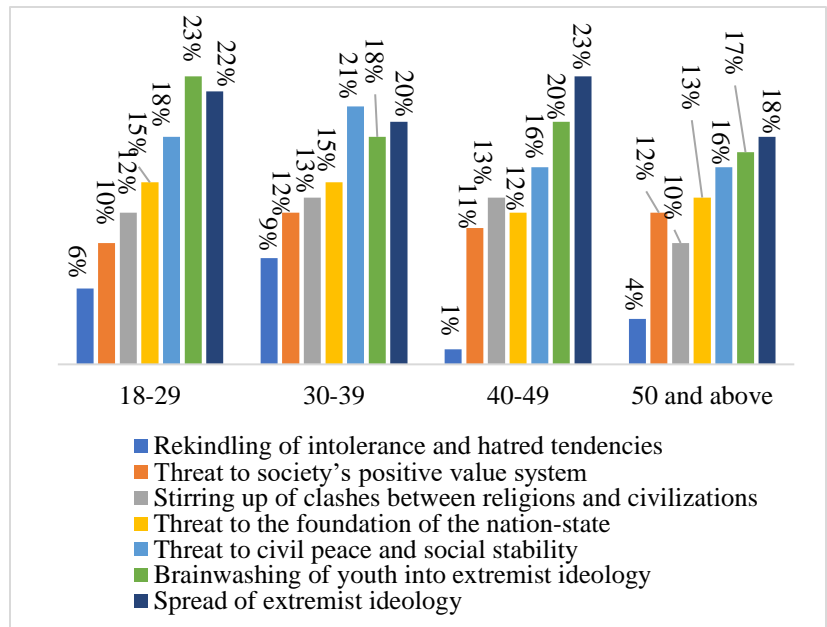
Respondents were asked to identify the dangers of extremist groups misusing social media platforms and applications as perceived by respondents. The results indicated seven main risks associated with such misuse, with the “spread of extremist ideology and incitement to violence” ranking first (83 percent), followed by “brainwashing of children and youth into extremist ideology and deviant ideas” (78 percent). “Rekindling of intolerance and hatred tendencies” ranked the last (20 percent).



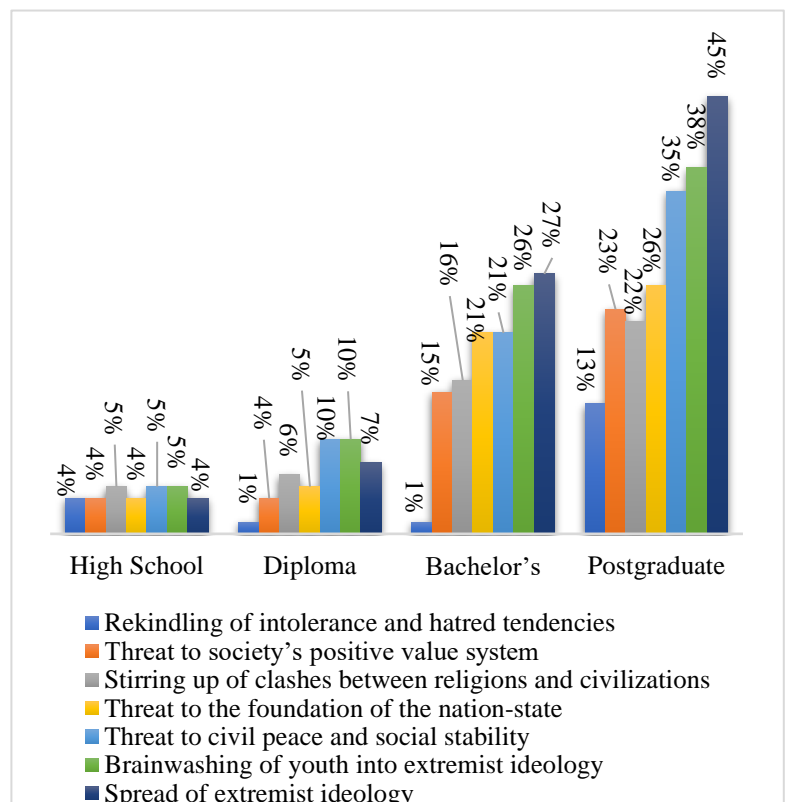
Male respondents perceived the dangers of extremist groups misusing social media platforms more than females, with the threat of “spread of extremist ideology and incitement to violence” ranking first (61 percent of males and 22 percent of females), followed by the danger of “brainwashing of children and youth into extremist ideology and deviant ideas” (54 percent of males and 24 percent of females).



In terms of age groups, the top danger associated with the extremist groups’ misuse of social media platforms and applications for the age group 18-29 was “brainwashing of children and youth into extremist ideology and deviant ideas” (23 percent). Respondents aged 30-39 thought the top danger was the “threat to civil peace and social stability” (21 percent). “Spread of extremist ideology and incitement to violence” was perceived as the most potent danger by respondents aged 40-49 (23 percent) and by those aged 50 and above (18 percent).

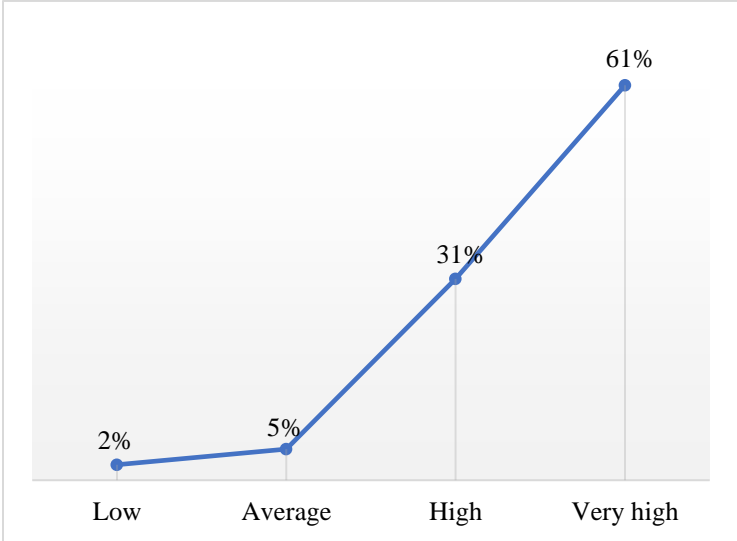


On the educational level, respondents holding postgraduate degrees perceived the dangers of extremist groups’ misuse of social media more than other respondents, with 45 percent of them ranking the “spread of extremist ideology and incitement to violence” as the most significant danger. The same applied to respondents holding bachelor’s degrees, with 27 percent of them having a similar opinion. Respondents holding diplomas highlighted the biggest threats as “brainwashing of children and youth into extremist ideology and deviant ideas” (10 percent) and “threat to civil peace and social stability” (10 percent).

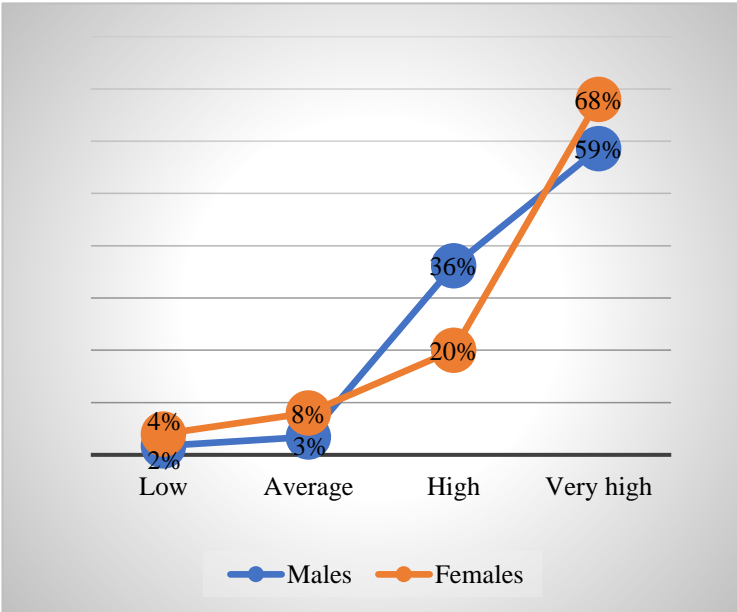


Question 8: What is the extent of danger emanating from extremist groups misusing social media platforms and applications?

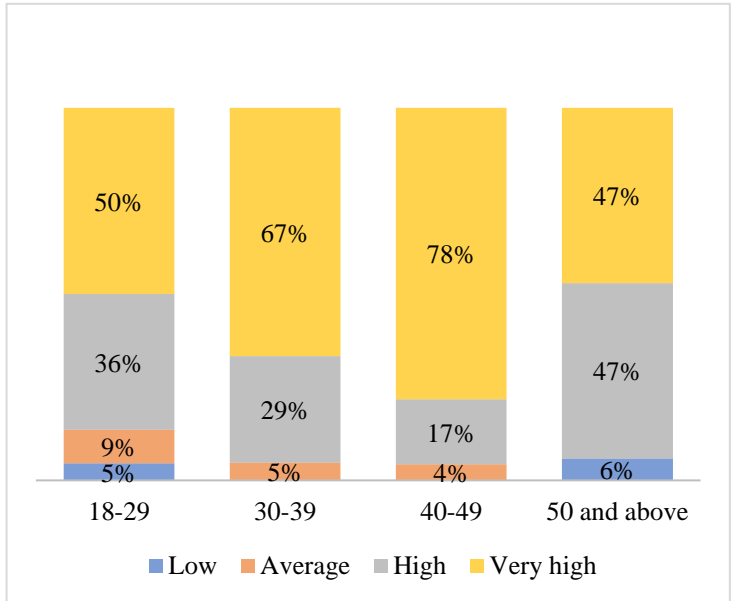
When asked about the extent of danger emanating from extremist groups misusing social media platforms, 92 percent of respondents called it high, including 61 percent considering it very high.



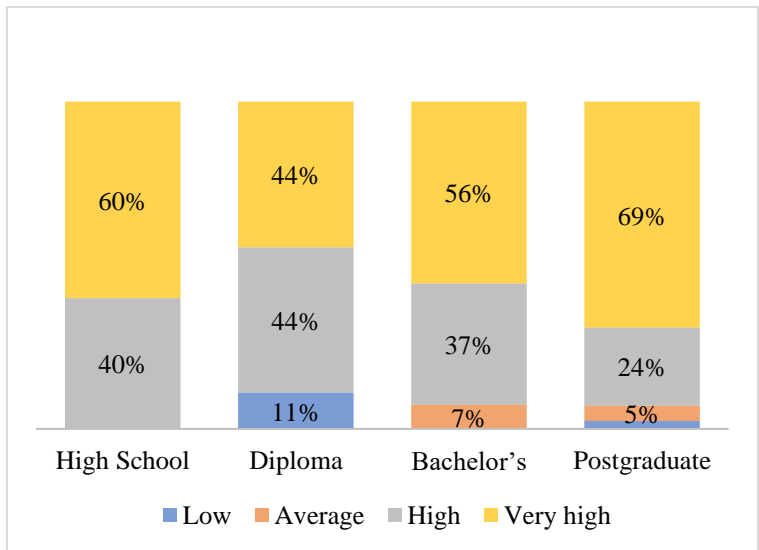
The results also showed that while 68 percent of female respondents thought the extent of danger emanating from extremist groups misusing social media was very high, 59 percent of male respondents had a similar response.



The majority of respondents across all age groups believed that the extent of danger emanating from extremist groups’ misuse of social media platforms and applications was very high. This opinion was shared by 78 percent of respondents aged 40-49, 67 percent aged 30-39, 50 percent aged 18-29, and 47 percent aged 50 and above.



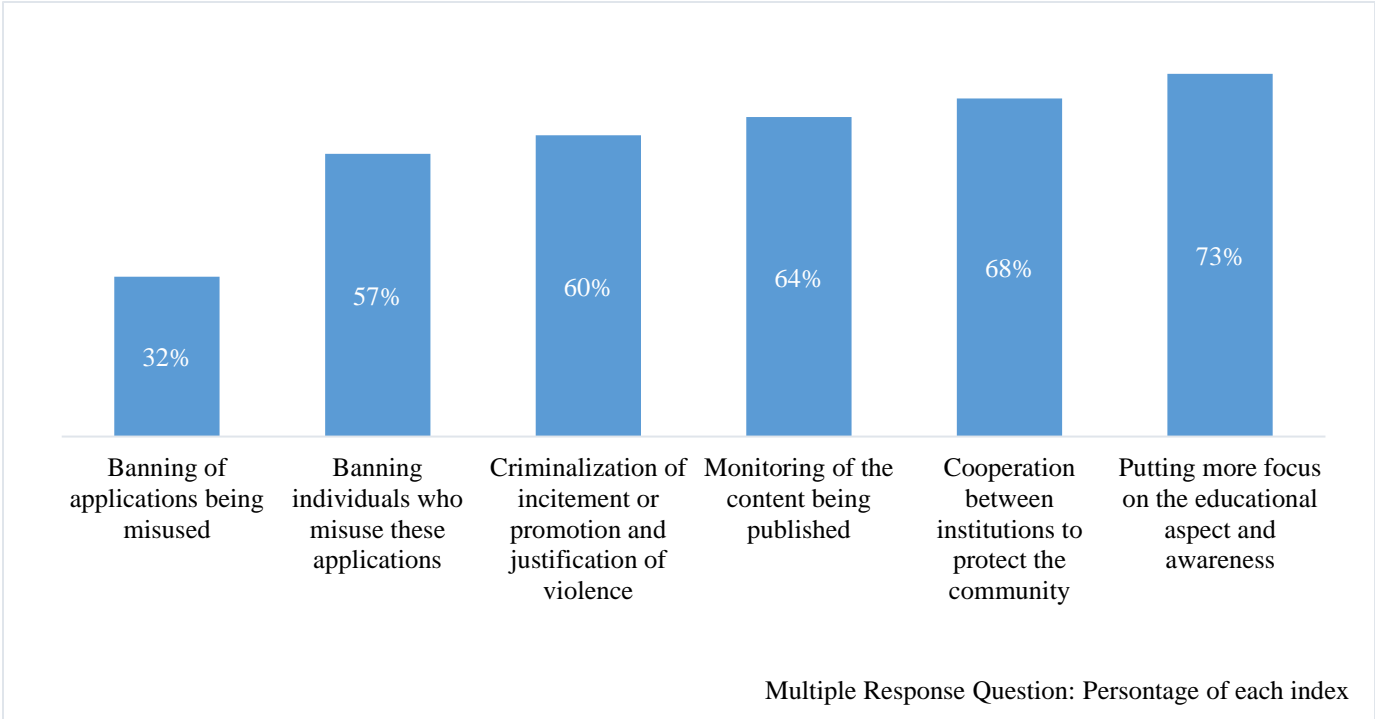
In terms of the education level, the results showed that 69 percent of respondents holding postgraduate degrees thought the extent of danger emanating from extremist groups’ misuse of social media platforms and applications was very high. Fifty-six percent of respondents holding bachelor’s degrees had a similar opinion.



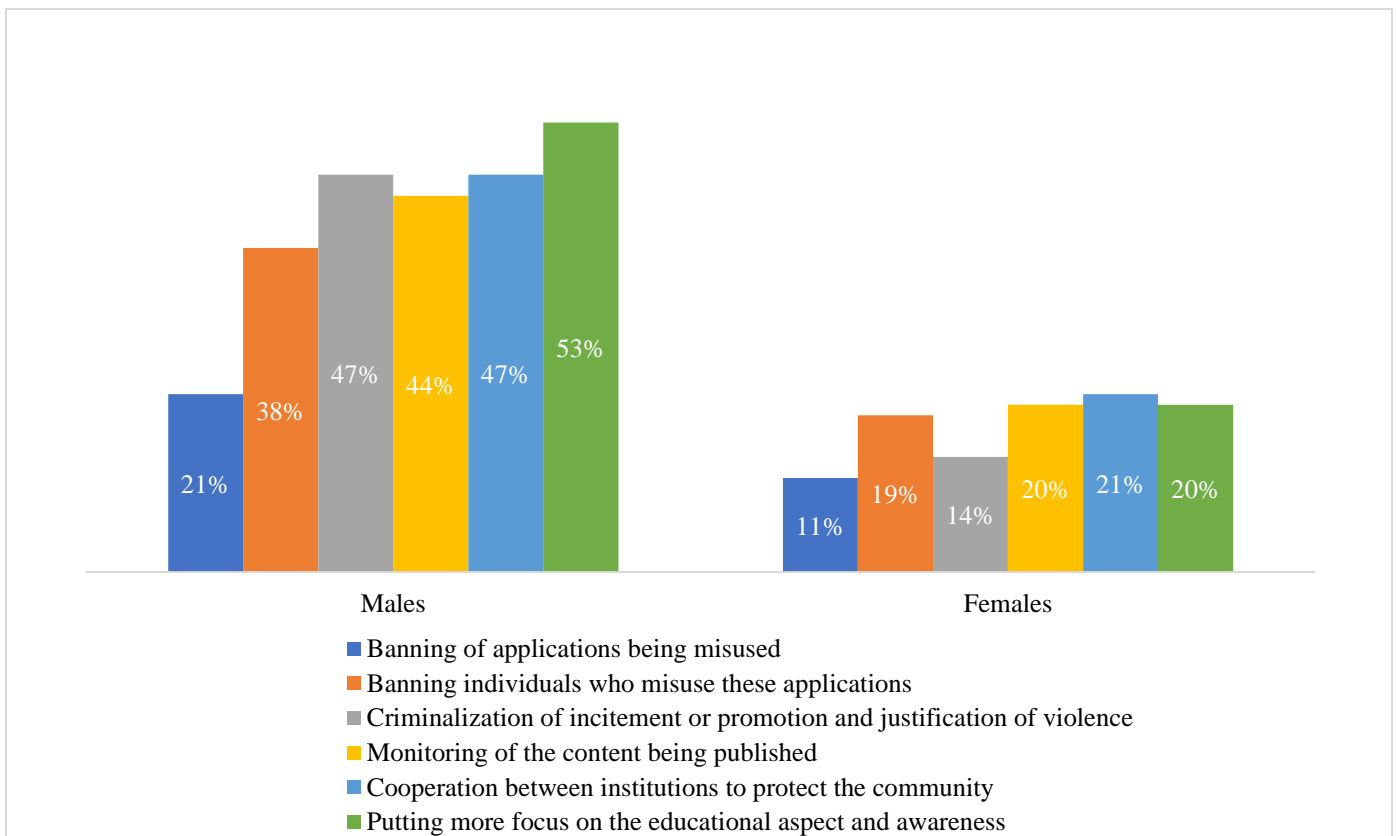


Question 9: What are the best measures to combat digital extremism?

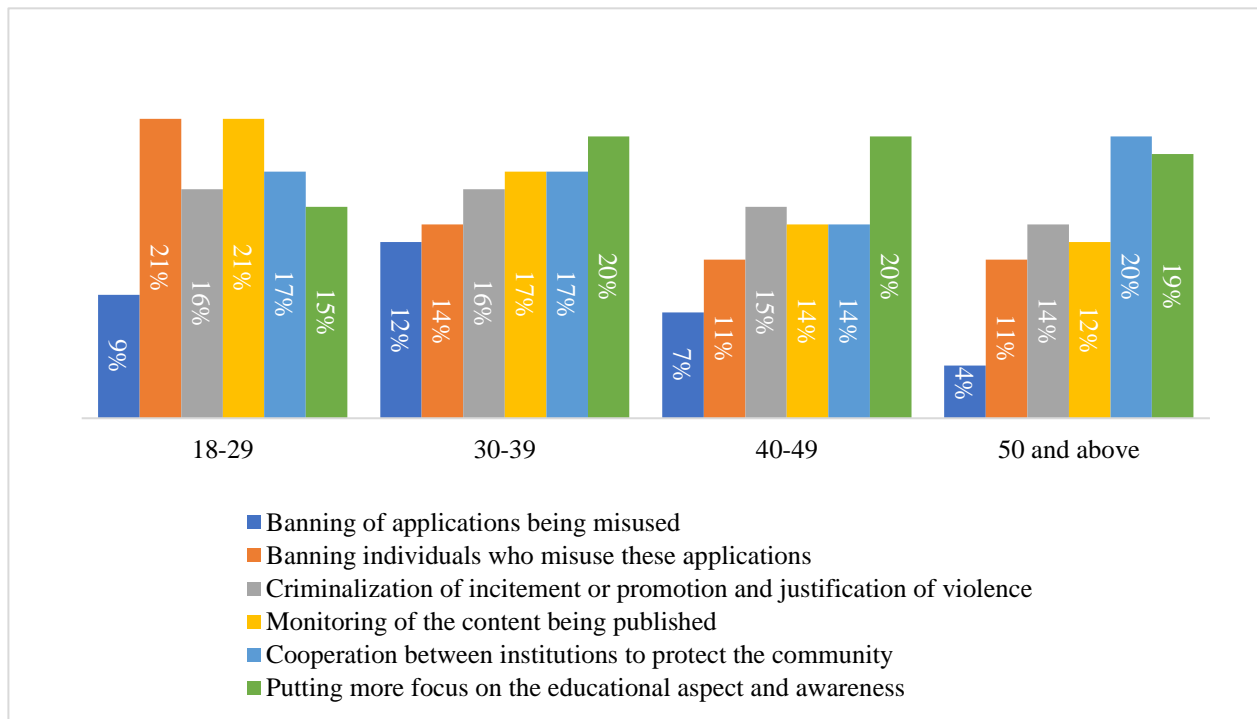
This question was asked to identify the best measures to combat digital extremism in the opinion of respondents. The results showed that 73 percent of respondents believed “putting more focus on the educational aspect and awareness” was the best measure. “Cooperation between social/educational institutions to protect the community against the threat posed by these applications” ranked second, as it was perceived as the best measure by 68 percent of respondents.



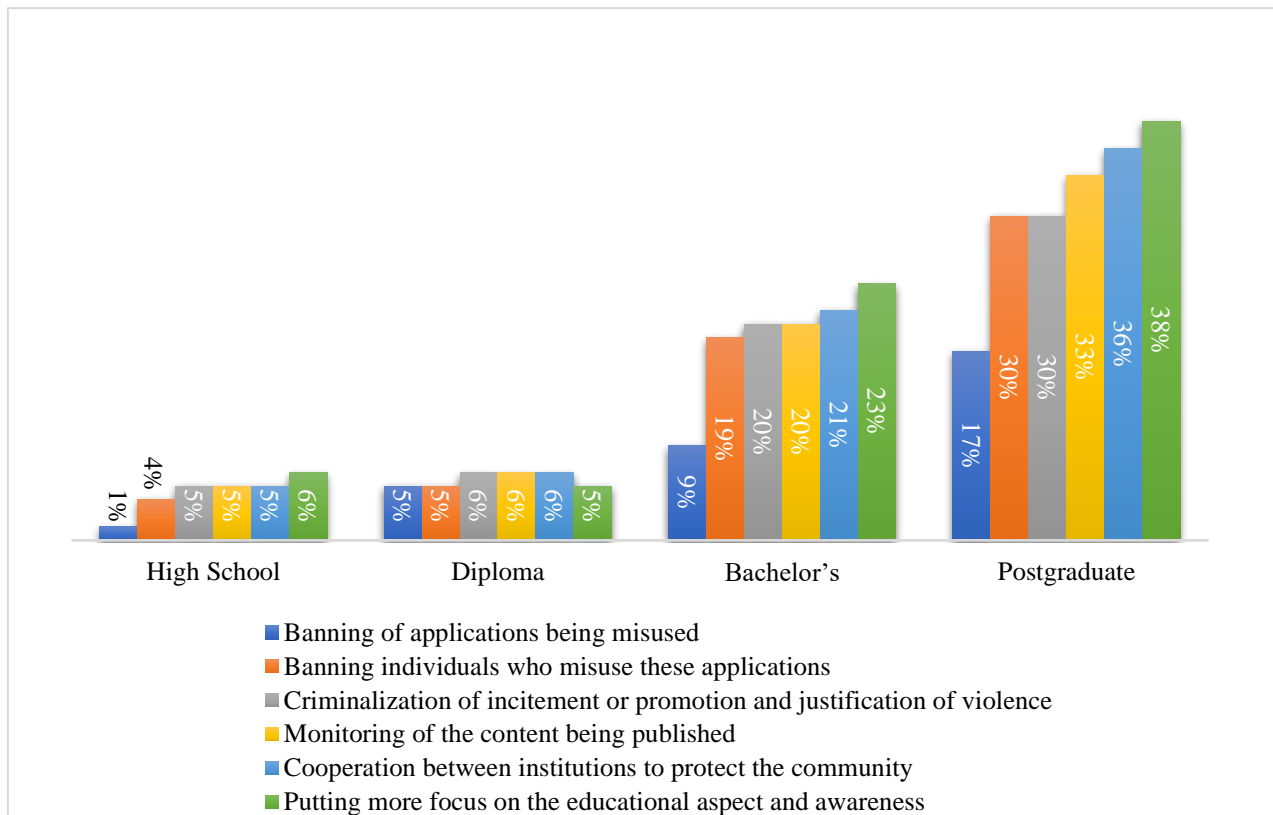
Results related to the best measures to combat digital extremism varied by gender, with 53 percent of male respondents thinking that “putting more focus on the educational aspect and awareness” was the best way. On the other hand, 21 percent of female respondents believed that “cooperation between social/educational institutions to protect the community” was the best way forward. For male respondents, “cooperation between social/educational institutions to protect the community against the threat posed by these applications” and “criminalization of incitement or promotion and justification of violence” shared the second position, each being chosen as the best measure by 47 percent of them. On the other hand, “putting more focus on the educational aspect and awareness” ranked second among female respondents, as 20 percent of them believed it was the best measure.



As far as age groups are concerned, the results showed that respondents aged 18-29 ranked two measures as the best ones to combat digital extremism - “monitoring of the content being published via these applications and platforms” and “banning individuals who misuse these applications and platforms to promote extremism.” They were chosen as the best measure by 21 percent of respondents in this age group. “Putting more focus on the educational aspect and awareness” was the best measure in the opinion of two age groups: 30-39 and 40-49, with 20 percent of each group believing so. The best measure for respondents aged 50 and above was “cooperation between social/educational institutions to protect the community against the threat posed by these applications,” as 20 percent of them were of this opinion.



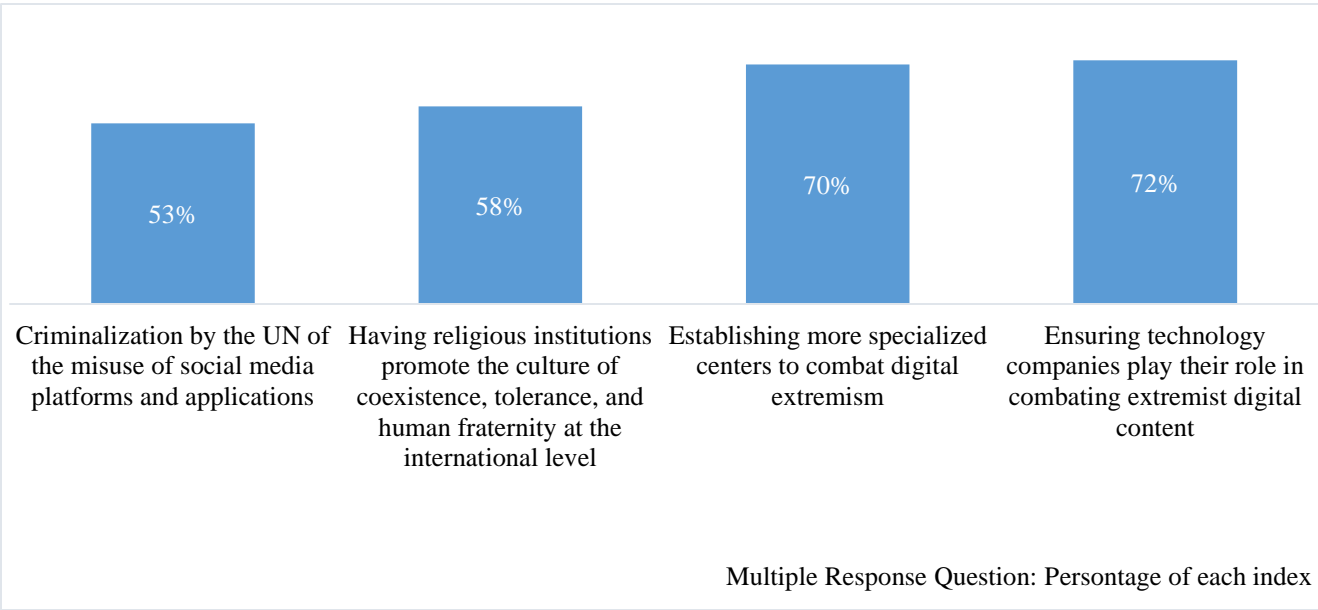
In terms of the education level, the results revealed that respondents holding postgraduate and bachelor’s degrees shared the opinion that greater focus on the educational aspect and awareness was the best measure to combat digital extremism, with 38 percent and 23 percent of them, respectively, thinking so. “Cooperation between social/educational institutions to protect the community against the threat posed by these applications” ranked second, chosen as the best measure by 36 percent and 21 percent of them, respectively.



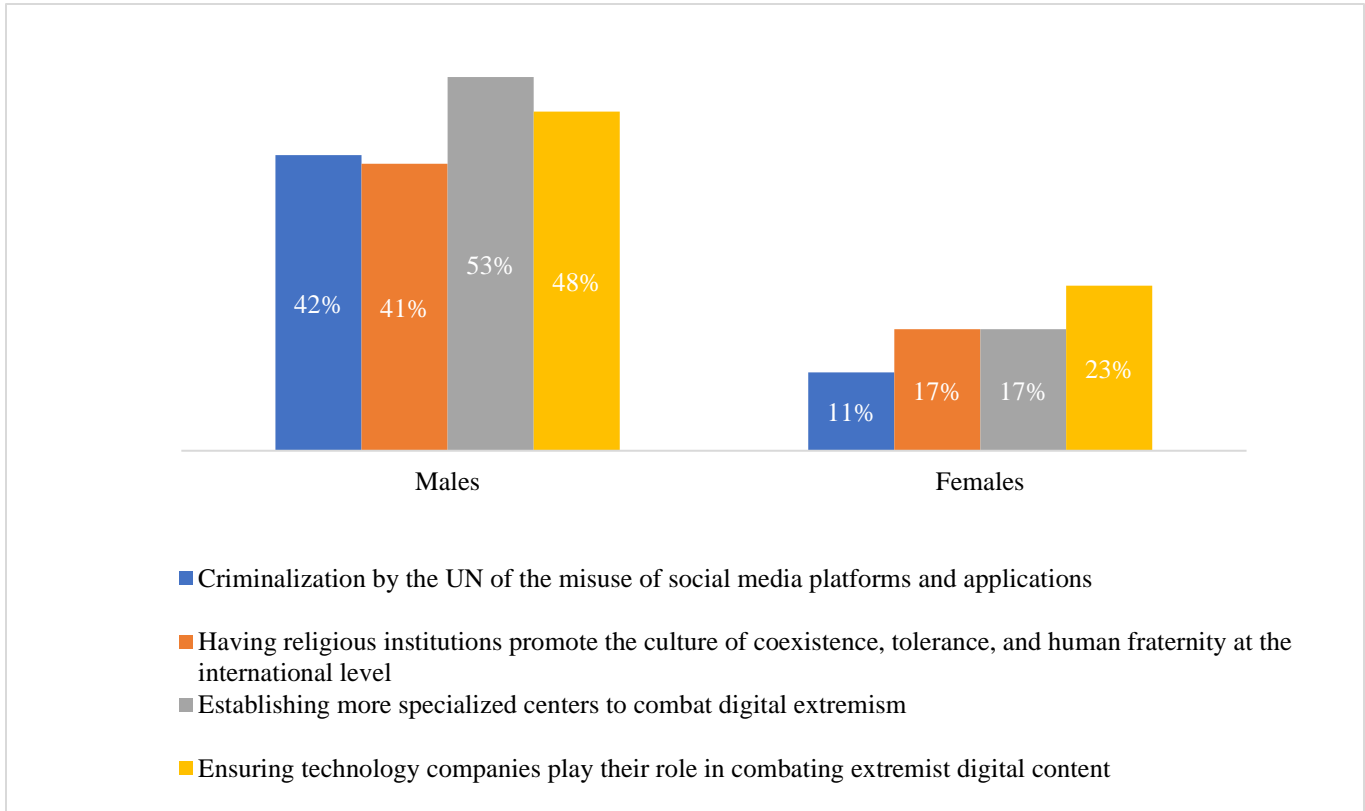


Question 10: How can the international community tackle digital extremism?

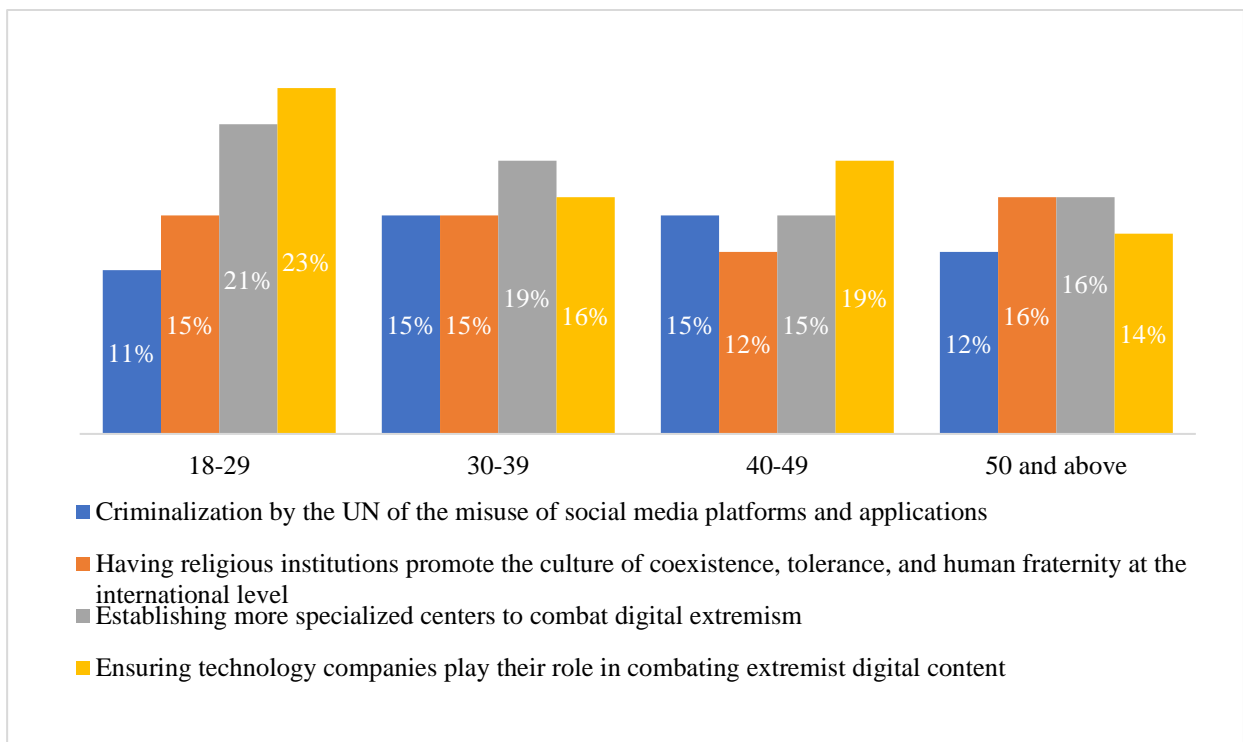
This question was meant to identify measures through which the international community can tackle digital extremism. As per the opinion poll, 72 percent of respondents believed that technology companies should play their role in combating extremist digital content. Seventy percent thought that the international community should establish more specialized centers to combat digital extremism, and 58 percent said that religious institutions should promote the culture of coexistence, tolerance, and human fraternity at the international level.



A majority (53 percent) of male respondents stated that the international community should establish more specialized centers to combat digital extremism, with 48 percent thinking that technology companies should play their role in combating extremist digital content. On the other hand, ensuring that technology companies play their part in combating extremist digital content was the top option chosen by female respondents, with 23 percent supporting this view.



In terms of age groups, ensuring that technology companies play their role in combating extremist digital content was the best measure in the opinion of respondents aged 18-29 (23 percent) and those aged 40-49 (19 percent). The other two age groups, 30-39 and 50 and above, agreed that the best way the international community can tackle digital extremism is by establishing more specialized centers to combat the menace, with 19 percent and 16 percent of them, respectively, supporting this opinion.



On the level of education, 40 percent of respondents holding postgraduate degrees thought the international community should establish more specialized centers to combat digital extremism. The best measure in respondents' opinion holding bachelor's degrees was to ensure technology companies play their role in combating extremist digital content, with 30 percent thinking so.

