

Searching for Safer, Healthier Digital Spaces

*A Review of Digital
Peacebuilding Initiatives*



**Search *for*
Common
Ground**

March 2024

About

This report is the fourth in a series developed by Search for Common Ground (Search) with financial support from Meta. Omar Salem and Limou Dembele of Search's Strategy Alignment Team led the research design and data collection for this study with the invaluable coordination support of Aya Abu Sitteh, Dominick Tsuma, Durga Pulendran, and Ibrahim Ag Amadou. This report was authored by Omar Salem and edited by Kaila Dorsey, Lena Slachmuislder and Limou Dembele.

Acknowledgements

Many former and current participants in Search's digital peacebuilding programs kindly gave their time to provide their views for this study. Civil society leaders and Search staff members also sacrificed precious time during interviews with the research team. We are grateful for their willingness to generate new insights to support Search's mission and the larger peacebuilding field.

How to cite this report

Omar Salem,
"Searching for Safer, Healthier Digital Spaces,"
Search for Common Ground (April 2024).



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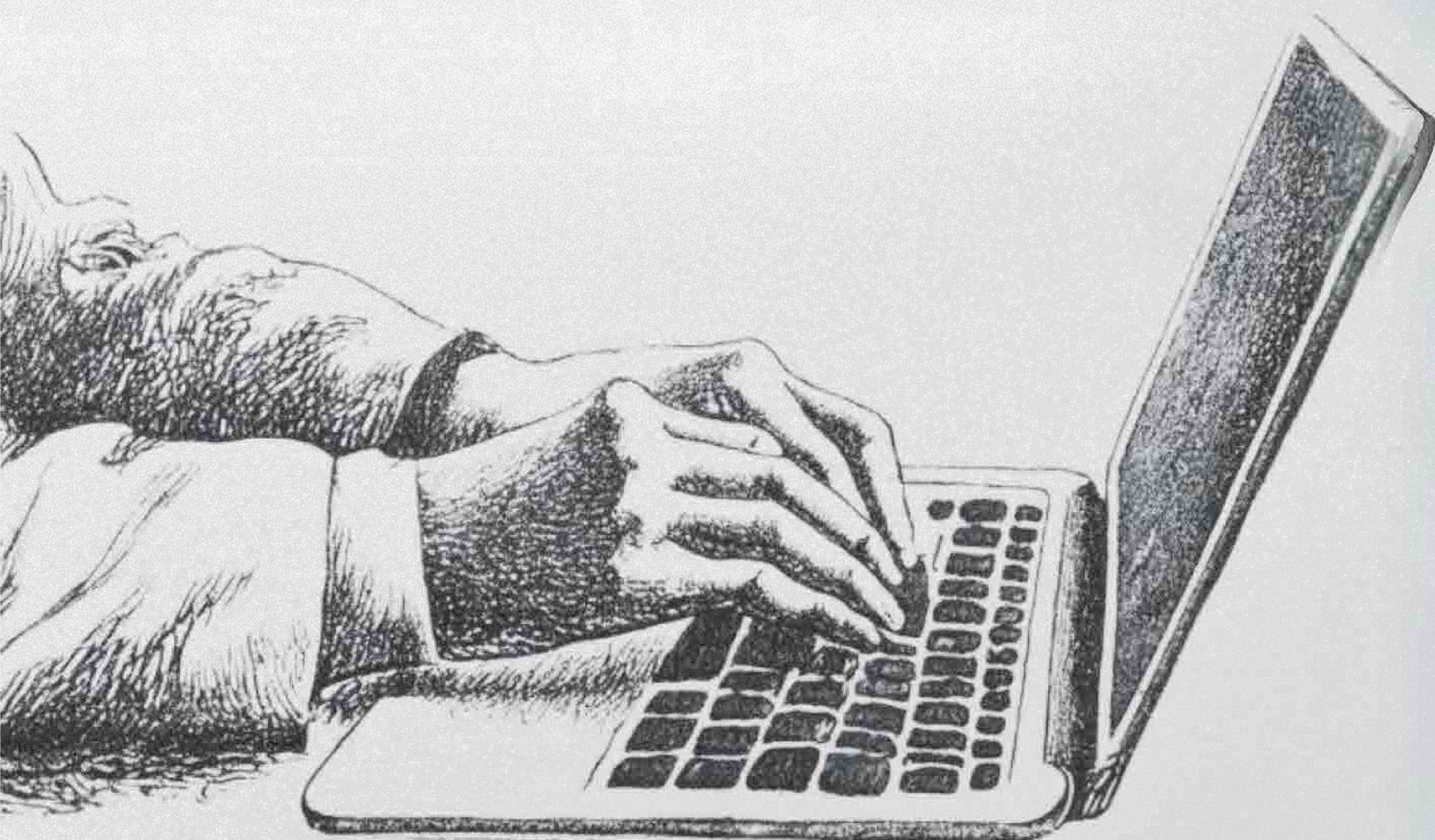
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Introduction

Search for Common Ground (Search) is the world's largest dedicated peacebuilding organization. For decades, Search has worked in conflict-affected communities to prevent and stop violence through a variety of tools which have culminated in the Common Ground Approach, a peacebuilding method and mindset which bridges divides to create peaceful solutions to shared problems, build trust in institutions, and empower individuals with agency to enact meaningful change where they live, and promote social cohesion within communities. Over the years Search has specialized in approaches that leverage media such as radio and television to reach target audiences. In recent years, the organization has been more intentional about digital and online spaces, delving deeper into the realm of digital peacebuilding. Search has since implemented a number of digital peacebuilding projects, and it now has a technical support team dedicated to digital peacebuilding with efforts led by the Executive Director of Digital Peacebuilding.

Throughout these digital peacebuilding projects, Search wanted to understand if and how its initiatives were able to catalyze constructive agency among social media users, to contribute to healthier online experiences. Search's executive director for digital peacebuilding said that they "sought to measure to what degree our initiatives moved participants away from a space of apathy, self-doubt, or fear towards protecting themselves and others in their digital experiences." She went on to add that because of "the upsurge of online polarization risks triggering real-world violence, we also sought to measure to what degree people's narratives of change included them inciting inclusion, belonging, empathy and mutual understanding." She emphasized that "building trust online was a critical outcome we sought to measure." This report examines these hypotheses in more depth.

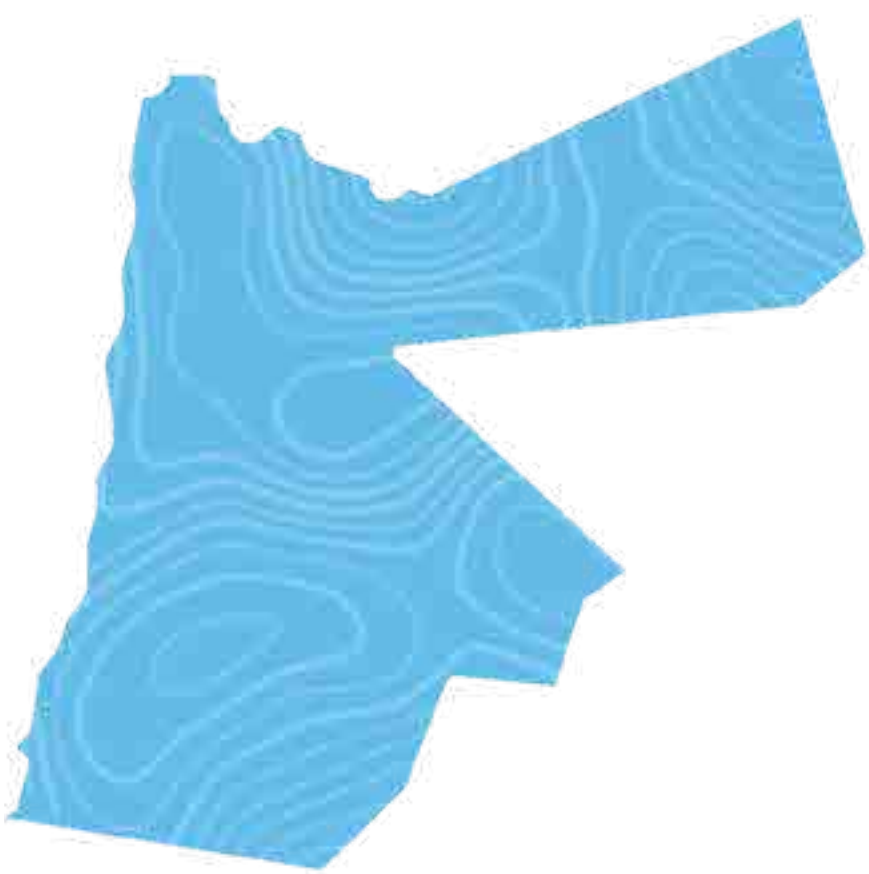
This report also builds on the findings of the study Community Stewards and Social Cohesion in Digital Spaces which highlights the crucial role of community stewards in fostering healthy online environments. These stewards, often volunteers, manage and moderate online groups, playing a pivotal role in promoting social cohesion and addressing issues like misinformation and hate speech. This report builds on those findings with survey and interview data from digital peacebuilding program participants and civil society members. The study tests Search's hypotheses that digital peacebuilding can move participants away from apathy, can induce participants toward empathy and inclusion, and can build trust in online and digital spaces. The report will refer to these concepts in short as Search's digital peacebuilding hypotheses. Subsequent sections will examine each hypothesis based on available literature and primary data collected by the research team from various geographic and cultural contexts.



Project Selection

For this study, the research team reviewed several key digital peacebuilding projects in Kenya, Sri Lanka, Jordan, and Mali. Each country presents similar challenges with digital and online spaces but offer unique contexts in which digital peacebuilding tools could be adapted and applied.

▶ Jordan



Jordan's "**Hakkerha: Tech Camp**" initiative engaged young Jordanians to counter misinformation and disinformation. This project aimed to harness the creativity and technical skills of youth to develop innovative solutions to digital misinformation, emphasizing the potential of entrepreneurial and private sector involvement in peacebuilding efforts. By focusing on the intersection of technology, innovation, and peace, Search Jordan's approach highlights the importance of adapting digital peacebuilding strategies to local contexts and the potential of youth as key actors in promoting digital literacy and resilience against misinformation.

▶ Sri Lanka



Search Sri Lanka's digital peacebuilding initiatives have been diverse, targeting women leaders, youth, and the broader community to counteract online hate speech and misinformation. The "Empowering Women Leaders" project aimed to provide women with digital skills and a platform for positive messaging, addressing the gendered nature of online hate. "Networks for Peace - Digital Heroes" focused on empowering youth to counter dangerous speech online, promoting digital stewardship among the younger generation.

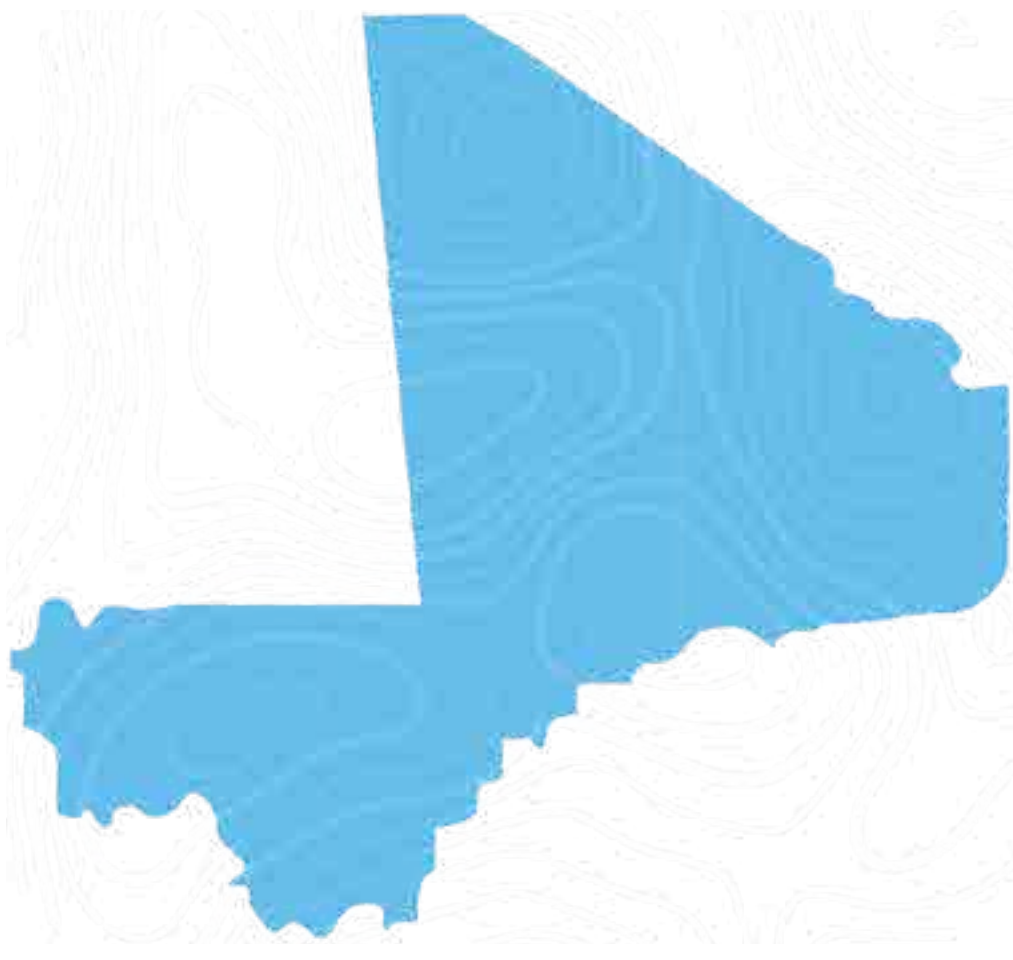
The "**We-Lanka**" project further focused on strengthening peace and reconciliation through capacity building in recognizing hate speech and promoting coexistence on social media. These initiatives collectively underscore the critical role of digital literacy enabling individual agency combined with community engagement in addressing the challenges posed by online hate speech and misinformation in Sri Lanka. By empowering different community segments with digital peacebuilding tools, Sri Lanka's projects illustrate a comprehensive approach to creating resilient communities capable of countering divisive narratives online.

► Kenya



In Kenya, Search's digital peacebuilding focus has been on leveraging digital tools to foster peace and prevent election-related violence. The initiative “**Uchaguzi Bila Balaa**” trained individuals to counter misinformation and disinformation, particularly around election periods. By equipping local communities with the skills needed to identify and debunk false information, the project mitigated the risks of electoral violence. This initiative reflects a broader effort within Kenya to integrate digital literacy into peacebuilding processes, emphasizing the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration, including civil society organizations (CSOs), in creating safer digital environments. The project's success points to the potential for digital interventions to contribute significantly to peace in politically sensitive contexts.

► Mali



In Mali, the “**Tabale Kunkan!**” project embraced a similar multi-stakeholder approach, preventing rumors and hate speech through collaboration between state actors, civil society, and local communities. This initiative emphasized the importance of verified, credible information in fostering social cohesion and preventing conflict. By creating platforms for dialogue and information verification, the project aimed to build trust within communities and between citizens and the state. Mali's experience underscores the significance of community-based approaches to digital peacebuilding, demonstrating how local knowledge and engagement can enhance efforts to create safer digital environments.

► Global Perspectives on Digital Peacebuilding

In addition to exploring the outcomes of the above-mentioned projects, the research team conducted interviews with civil society leaders throughout Asia and Africa who had participated in various training sessions on digital peacebuilding, including through programs implemented in partnership with Meta. The perspectives of these civil society actors from a diversity of countries in Africa, Asia and North America, are included throughout this report.

The initiatives selected for this study span a period beginning in 2018, with several of them having concluded and others still ongoing. This enabled a cross-section of views from respondents who participated several years ago as well as current participants. Each country's initiatives offer unique insights into the varied applications of digital peacebuilding strategies, reflecting the importance of contextual understanding, stakeholder collaboration, and targeted interventions in leveraging digital tools for peace. Through these diverse approaches, the projects contribute to the broader goal of creating safer, healthier digital spaces, where communities are equipped to counter misinformation, hate speech, and online violence, fostering a more inclusive and peaceful digital discourse.

Methodology

In partnership with the relevant Search country teams, the research team collated a database of 923 participants in the aforementioned peacebuilding projects. The research team disseminated a survey digitally to all 923 participants, available in Arabic, English, French, Sinhala, Swahili and Tamil. The research team received 113 responses, a 12% response rate. These 113 participants who responded to the survey are referred to throughout the report as “survey respondents” or “respondents.”

Additionally, the research team conducted interviews with peacebuilders and civil society leaders who were trained by Search on digital stewardship. The research team conducted seven such interviews in English and French. Civil society leaders from [Burkina Faso](#), [Central African Republic](#), [Jordan](#), [Kenya](#), [Lebanon](#), [Mali](#), [Niger](#), [Rwanda](#), and [Uzbekistan](#) participated in semi-structured interviews about their experiences being trained on digital peacebuilding, about their experiences or insights on digital peacebuilding in their contexts, and about outcomes of digital peacebuilding they have personally experienced or witnessed in their work.

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Languages

12%

Response Rate

113

Survey Respondents

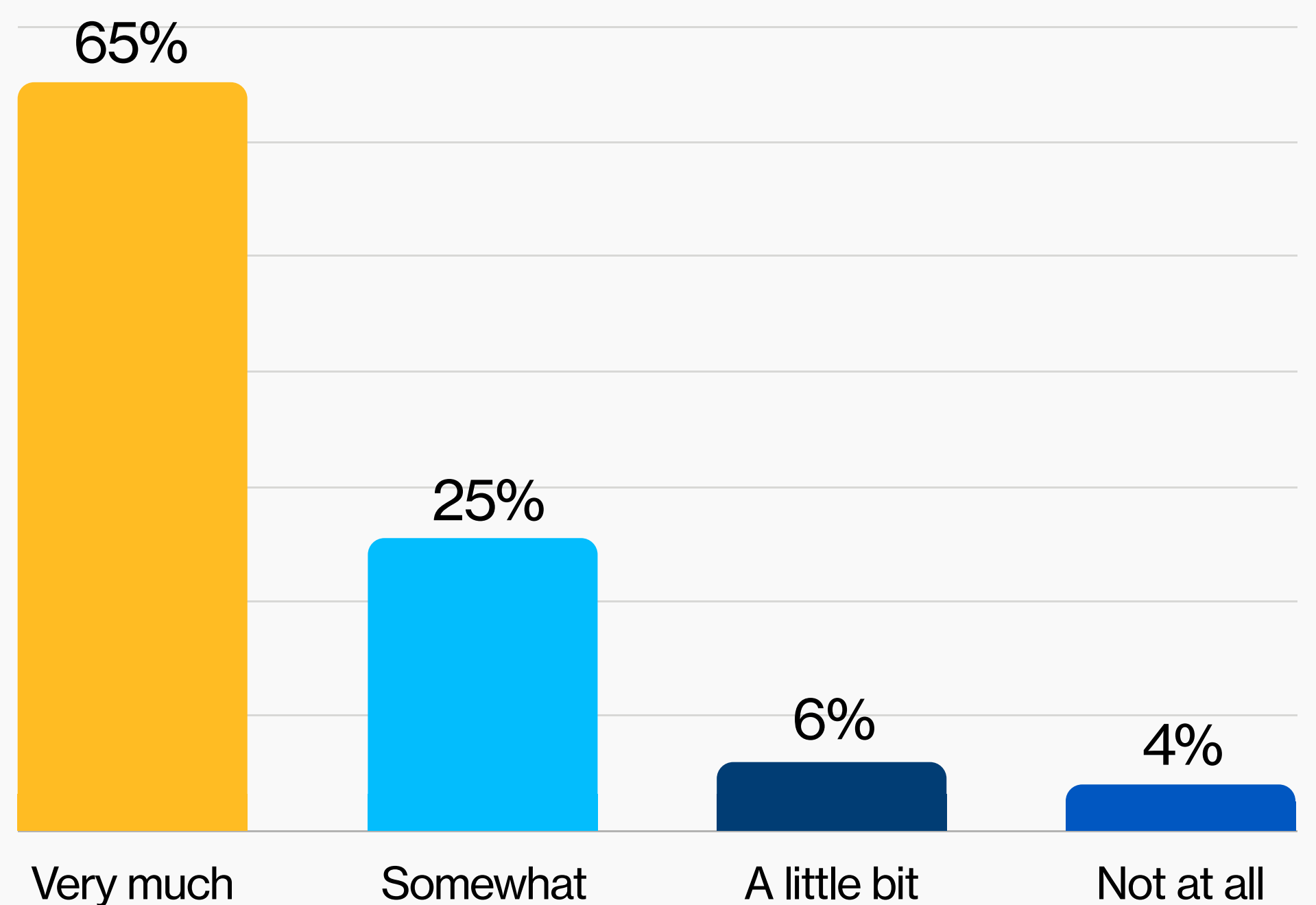


Findings

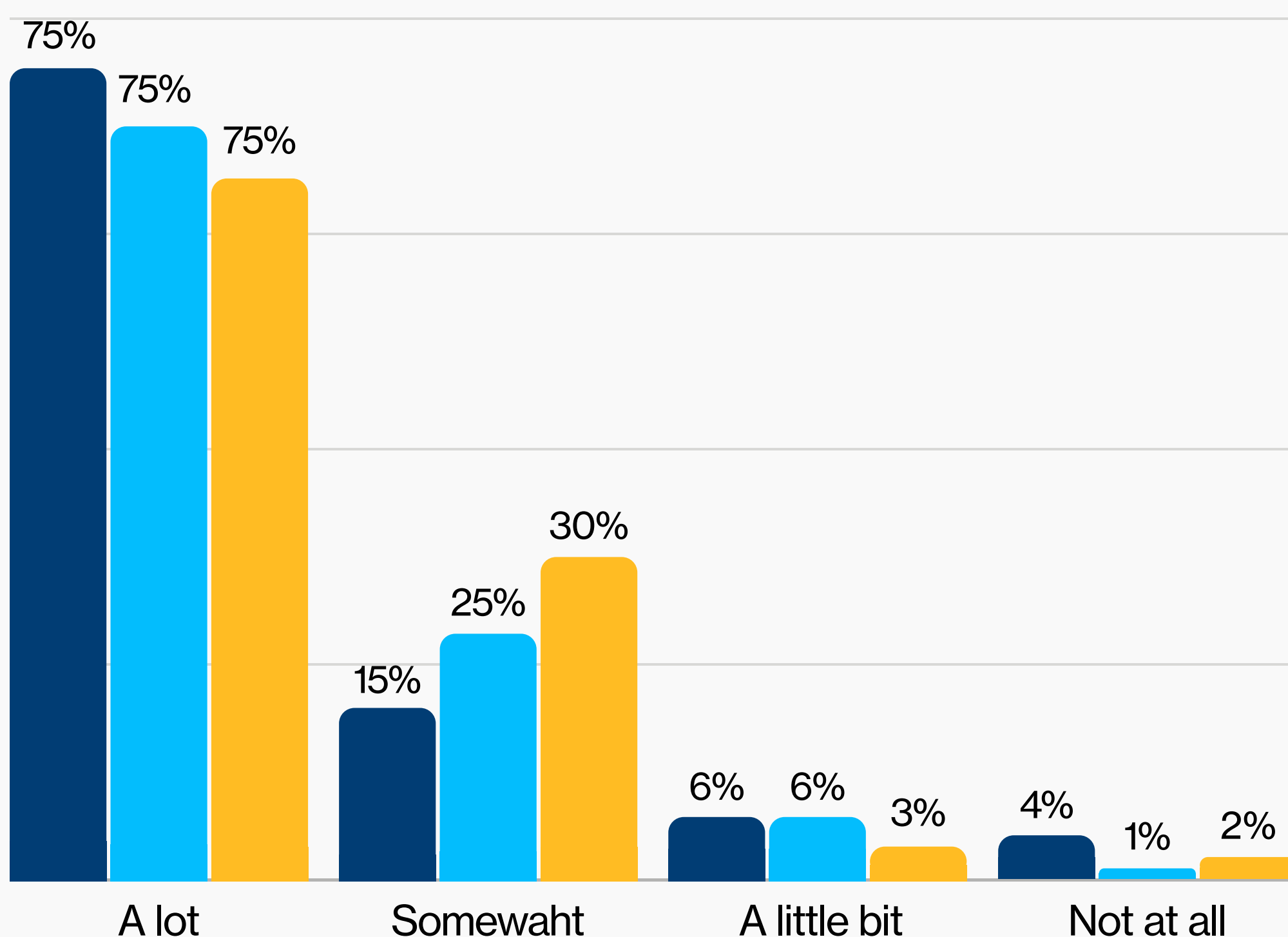
Improving Attitudes, Increasing Skills & Building Relationships.

The vast majority of survey participants indicate satisfaction with the project meeting its goals. This indicates that participants gained value in the design of Search's projects to improve attitudes towards digital spaces, enhance digital literacy skills, and strengthen online relationships. This introductory insight sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how these participants identify the type of change enabling them to foster a safer and more inclusive digital environment.

Did the project meet its goals?



Respondent experienced positive changes in **Attitudes, Skills & Relationships**



A majority of survey respondents reported experiencing positive changes in their attitudes toward digital and online spaces because of their participation in one of Search's digital peacebuilding initiatives. Three out of four respondents said the given program changed their attitudes "a lot." Many participants reported a more thoughtful approach to online engagement, emphasizing caution and empathy in their digital interactions. For example, one mentioned being "very careful with the words [they] use," indicating a shift towards more responsible communication and demonstrating that changes in attitude and behavior often correspond.

Similarly, most respondents noted that the program developed their digital and online skills and literacy a lot. A significant number of responses highlighted an increase in fact-checking and digital literacy skills, with participants learning to “fact check any information [they] read or receive.” These types of responses point to a greater ability among participants to discern and verify information accuracy before sharing, a behavior change predicated by skill building.

The programs succeeded in catalyzing positive changes in respondents’ interpersonal relationships online, with 95% of respondents saying the program succeeded in changing their relationships “somewhat” or “a lot.” The qualitative

responses from participants suggest the initiative not only improved individual attitudes and skills but also built social networks and solidarity; “I got to know wonderful people,” one respondent from Jordan noted.

These attitude, skill and relationship changes are important evidence underpinning Search’s digital peacebuilding hypotheses; each type of change is linked to building empathy and mutual understanding, creating a sense of belonging, and developing agency. The subsequent sections explore how these changes in attitudes, skills and relationships led to positive behavioral outcomes in digital and online spaces and how outcomes in the digital realm have affected real-world change.

Shedding Apathy and Embracing Agency

▶ Lebanon

One peacebuilder who participated in digital stewardship training recalled becoming disillusioned with social media in the current era of misinformation and toxic online culture; her solution had been to stay away from social media entirely. After the training, she realized that how she was using social media was the issue. She reported that the training helped her recognize the potential for good she could share through social media and be more intentional about her time on her phone and social media. This was a common sentiment among participants in digital stewards training. They shared a renewed hope that social media could be a force for good.

This section explores how Search’s digital peacebuilding programs address apathy and promote agency. Levels of bystander apathy have been shown to be associated with greater levels of violence. More recently this has been shown to be the case with social media platforms as well. Recent literature examining socio-political apathy and social media echoes

the truism that apathy is a necessary precondition for evil to triumph. A study conducted by this research team in 2021 examining how people living in communities affected by violent conflict handle harmful online content, found that there were three non-mutually exclusive strategies for dealing with harmful content online.

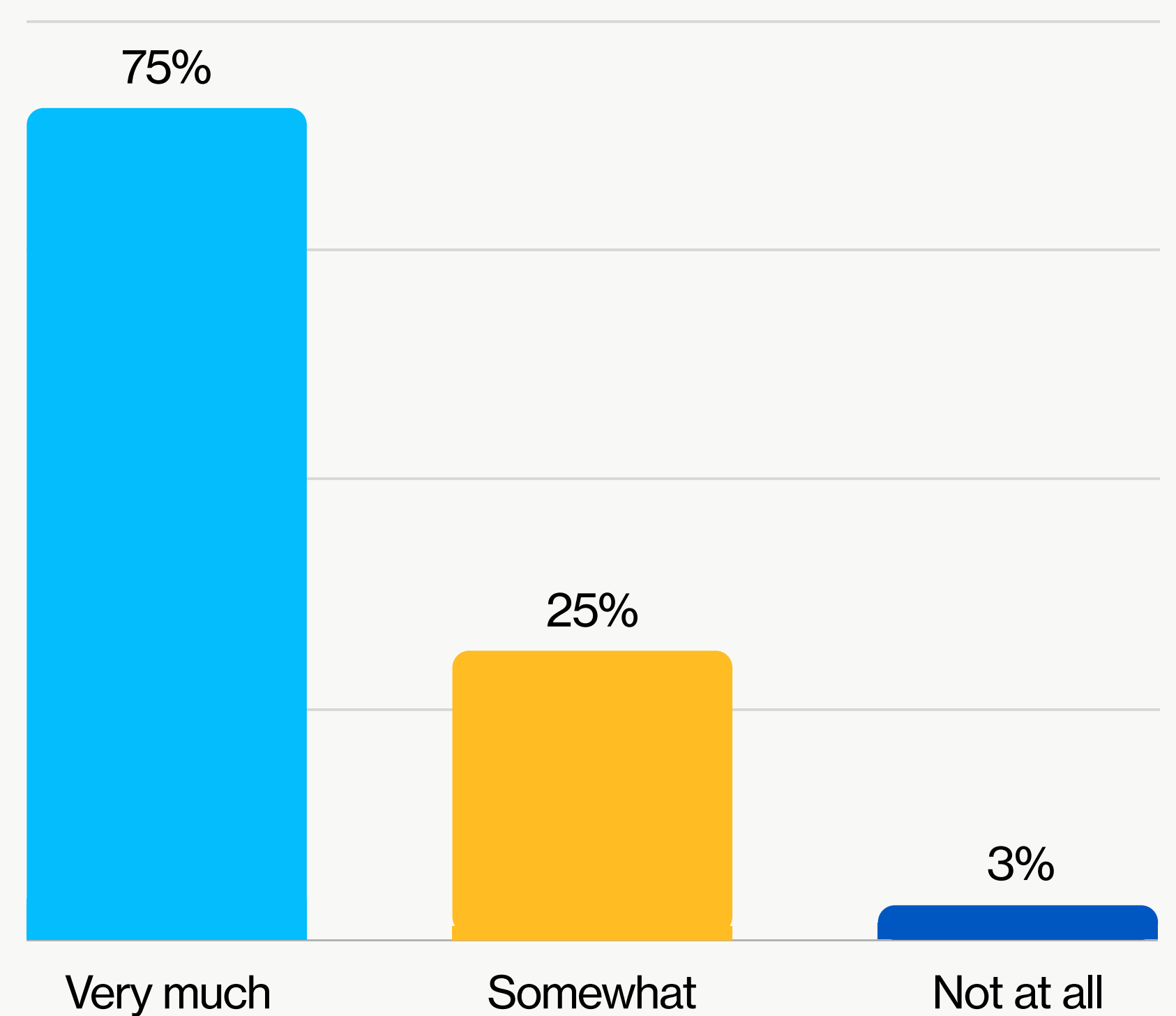
- One third of the participants indicated that they had directly engaged with those creating or sharing harmful content through commenting or direct messaging, either “fighting or talking-it-out.”
- Only one third of participants had used official reporting mechanisms to flag harmful content to moderators or social media companies-- regardless of the perceived severity of the harmful content.
- One third of the research participants chose some type of “exit strategy” (e.g. unfollowing or exiting the group) when encountering harmful online content.

Research participants were only likely to report harmful content or continue to attempt dialogue when the outcomes were immediately visible (i.e. the platform blocks the creator or the creator seems swayed through constructive conversation on the issue). To extrapolate: people who do not feel they have the ability to enact change--a sense of agency--are likely to become apathetic and leave these spaces altogether. The underlying premise behind many of these initiatives is that minimizing apathy and empowering users with a sense of agency is critical to creating safer, healthier digital and online spaces. This is why survey respondents were asked about the change in their sense of agency to act constructively online.

The majority of the respondents to the survey in this study indicate a positive shift toward increased agency in online spaces after they participated in a digital peacebuilding program. They report being more critical and thoughtful about the information they consume and share, taking on leadership roles, and feeling a sense of duty to contribute positively to their communities.

17 of the respondents indicated an increase in knowledge and skills. Around 11 respondents reported positive behavioral changes in their digital interactions. Nine respondents expressed feelings of empowerment and influence. Six respondents mentioned taking on new advocacy and leadership roles.

Do you believe you can **make a positive impact** in digital and online spaces?



Respondents also indicated an increased sense of agency saying “I have the ability and know the tools,” “I can fact check any information,” “I can detect messages that can provoke hate.” The data indicate that respondents feel empowered by these programs saying “I have gained a lot of courage.” Respondents’ statements like “I have been able to shape the opinion of the community,” and “I feel it’s my obligation, call or duty” reflect a strong sense of personal empowerment. Respondents not only feel responsible for their actions but also feel capable of influencing others, which is a significant component of agency. This agency is especially apparent with responses like “I have made the community know the importance of peace” and respondents stating that they have become like “peace ambassadors” online.

▶ Jordan

The digital peacebuilding project Hakkerha incubated several digital initiatives while also providing them mentorship, learning opportunities, training on mis/disinformation, creating digital campaigns and some seed funding. One of the standout teams of the incubator began as a digital campaign designed to address mis/disinformation about health (especially women's health). After the project ended, the team received additional investments, strengthened their organizational structure and continued their work providing vital health information to their communities while also dispelling misconceptions about physical and mental health.

Survey respondents were asked to what extent they felt they have the ability to make a positive impact in digital and online spaces. 72% of respondents very much believe they can create a positive impact online. This underscores the notion that project participants left these training sessions and activities with a renewed sense of hope for the positive potential of digital and online spaces.

Many respondents report active engagements with digital platforms that not only provided personal benefits but also had a wider positive impact on their communities. These narratives suggest that individuals are moving away from apathy, engaging more with the content they encounter online, and utilizing digital tools to exercise personal agency in various forms.

Illustrative of this are comments from respondents about seeking out online education, demonstrating agency in taking initiative in their learning, directly countering apathy. Other respondents participated in digital campaigns on issues of global-level significance, suggesting a sense of global citizenship and empathy for communities beyond one's own neighborhood or country. Respondents mentioned instances where community issues like poor drainage or health services were addressed through social media campaigns showing a

collective movement from passive observation to active problem-solving. Many respondents highlighted the use of digital content to promote peace and verified information during tense election periods, demonstrating personal agency in times where misinformation could have led to conflict.

Leveraging a newly discovered, or rediscovered, sense of agency is an essential first step for individual participants to influence digital communities or groups, supporting the cultivation of inclusive online spaces with greater empathy and understanding. The following section explores the notion of inclusion, empathy and mutual understanding in online and digital spaces in more detail and what the experiences of peacebuilding practitioners and program participants has been in relation to these.

Inciting Inclusion, Empathy, Belonging, and Mutual Understanding.

The cultivation of inclusion, empathy, belonging, and mutual understanding within digital and online spaces is important for fostering safe and empowering spaces for all participants. Inclusion

ensures that diverse voices and perspectives are acknowledged and valued, enabling a rich tapestry of experiences that contribute to the collective wisdom of the community. Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, is the cornerstone of meaningful interactions, promoting compassion and supportiveness in digital communications. A sense of belonging emerges from these foundations, where individuals feel seen, heard, and valued, contributing to a robust sense of community cohesion and personal security. Mutual understanding further enriches this landscape, facilitating open dialogue, resolving conflicts, and building bridges across differences. Together, these principles serve as vital components for creating spaces that are not only safe but also enriching and inclusive, where every individual can thrive. This section explores how, and to what extent, Search's digital peacebuilding programs and their participants have catalyzed such concepts in digital or online spaces and how inclusion, empathy, belonging and mutual understanding have translated into real-world outcomes and action.

Several years after many of the activities examined by this study had concluded, most respondents indicated that they have taken action to influence their online communities as a

result of their participation. Interviewees corroborate this finding by underscoring the importance of their own digital peacebuilding training (in the Digital Community Stewards training program) in how they are designing new and ongoing peacebuilding initiatives. These civil society leaders made deliberate changes to deeply consider digital spaces as part of their more comprehensive peacebuilding interventions as a means of expanding inclusion, fostering empathy, creating a sense of belonging, and building mutual understanding with the real-world communities they engage.



▶ **Mali**

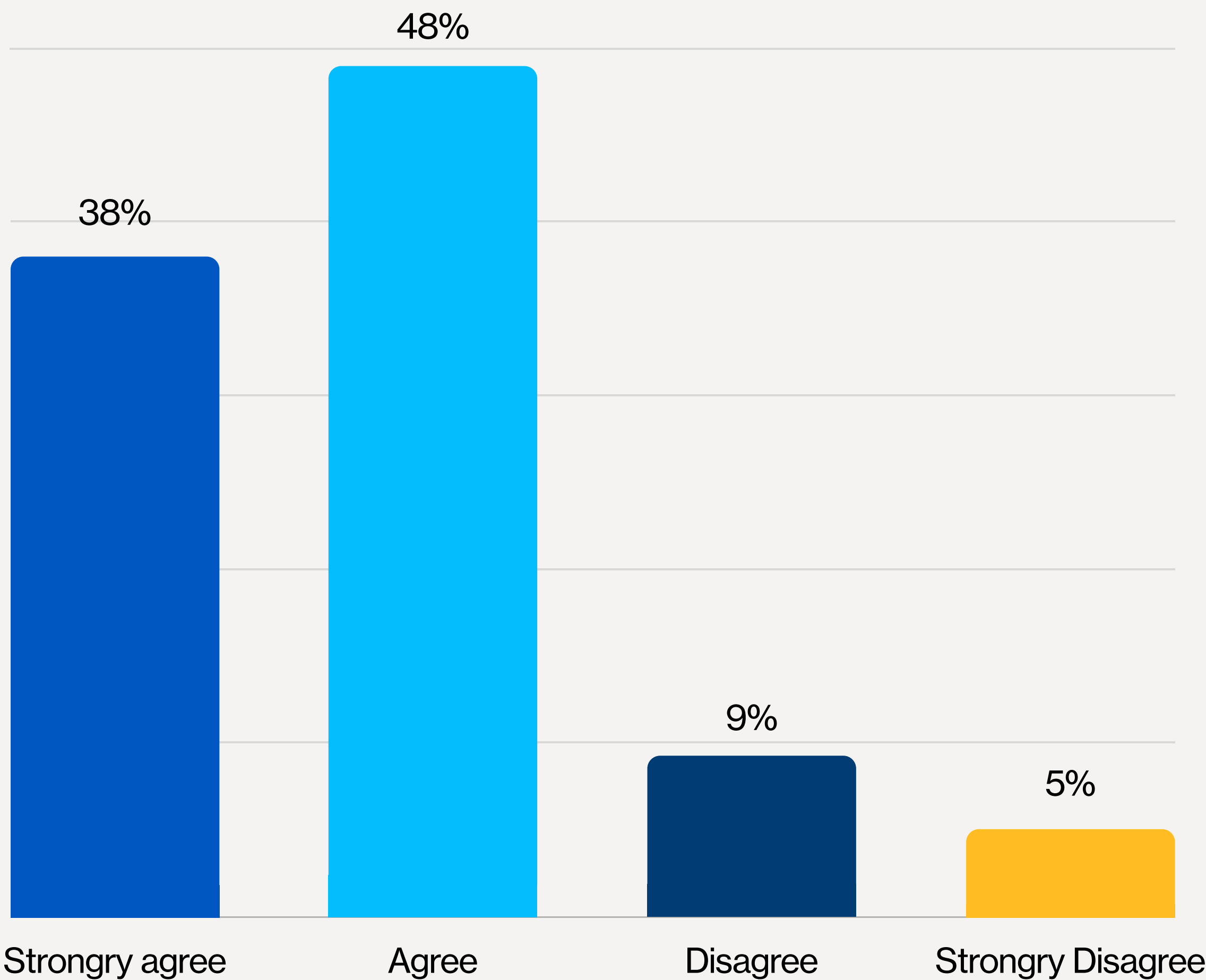
A woman who had participated in a Search training on mis/disinformation and fact checking had a very high-stakes opportunity to test her skills. A rumor spread on social media that armed groups had given the inhabitants of a small village 48-hours to flee or face death. Extreme panic ensued among the villagers, eventually leading to massive and abrupt population displacement in the area. The woman acted quickly to contact reliable sources and mount an effective campaign to dispel the rumour, calm panicking hearts, and allow the victims of the rumour to return home.

Peer-reviewed literature on the effects of social media on individuals and communities have pointed to dangers for social cohesion. One study used a large sample of young adults in the U.S. and found a significant association between high levels of social media use and perceived social isolation. Another found that social media use by individuals was negatively correlated with perceptions of social cohesion in their neighborhoods. One seminal study asserts that “social media serves to limit the expression of identity by fragmenting users into disparate online identity-based communities that enforce in-group norms, amplify differences between groups, and inhibit productive dialogue, empathy, and understanding.” In short, the studies that give hope to those looking to build empathy, belonging and understanding are scant, if non-existent. Nonetheless, the data

collected for this study indicate there is hope to build empathy, belonging, and understanding in digital and online spaces.

Empathy involves understanding and sharing the feelings of others. Several respondents indicated an increased awareness of the impact of words and information on others. Respondents mentioning being “very careful with the words” they use and “avoiding using words that would feel diminishing to others” show an awareness of the potential harm their words can cause, which is a key component of empathy. Again, statements such as “I can detect messages that can provoke hate and provide appropriate information on how to prevent conflict” demonstrate an understanding of the emotional effect that digital content can have on a community.

I have taken action to **influence digital groups** as a result of participating in Search’s digital peacebuilding activities



The notion that these programs contributed to inclusion and a greater sense of belonging is evident in several responses as well. Respondents mentioned training youth in their community and sensitizing their friends and community on disinformation. These data also illustrate a sense of shared community goals indicating a greater sense of belonging.

Responses that mentioned addressing flooding and gender-based violence through online content illustrate the use of digital platforms for community activism and solidarity. Several individuals talked about participating in peace messaging campaigns, which helped de-escalate tensions and foster community harmony, reflecting a sense of responsibility towards maintaining social cohesion. Others mentioned sharing encouraging messages about women's leadership and empowerment representing a positive contribution to gender equality and the unique issues women face. Respondents mentioned engaging with community members or political allies to promote unity and shared culture, emphasizing the role of digital platforms in facilitating constructive conversations and mutual understanding.

► Kenya

A picture of a woman was shared with a list of men in the area with whom she had supposedly slept along with the claim that she tested positive for HIV. The post went viral in the small community in Coastal Kenya. A participant in Search's Resilience Africa initiative was able to quickly put the skills they gained during their digital peacebuilding training into action. They reverse-image searched the picture and found that it was a stock image of woman used in an advertisement. They demonstrated that the post was malinformation meant to hurt those men and divide the community. This digital steward was able to save the reputations--and lives--of the men targeted.

These responses collectively suggest that the majority of the individuals who engaged with Search digital peacebuilding programs felt compelled to act, either by sharing content, creating their own content, or taking inspiration from positive content to effect real-world change. The results from this sample of participants stand in contrast to the current state of literature at the nexus of social media, social cohesion, and conflict. Respondents indicate a shift towards embracing personal agency, with individuals using digital tools and platforms not just for personal gain but also for the betterment of their communities.

Building Trust Online

Trust is critical to creating safer and healthy online spaces. Search has invested in the idea that "change moves at the speed of trust." Trust in the context of digital and online spaces is related to the ability of participants to identify false, misleading, or malicious content.



► Burkina Faso

An influencer recalled a lot of information circulating on the web that was very difficult to verify. They didn't know how to verify it. They participated in the Woumtaaba project's training courses. They recalled an instance in which the rapid spread of a rumour about an arms cache in a city in north-eastern Burkina Faso led to fear and panick. This rumour turned out to be false, but it had already gone viral on social media platforms. The digital peacebuilding skills allowed this social media influencer to use the moment to teach others about misinformation and prevent potential escalation of violence.

For this study, survey respondents were asked to describe a time when they saw negative online/digital content create negative results in their community. The responses highlighted several challenges to building trust online, primarily around the misuse of digital platforms to spread misinformation, hate speech, and personal attacks. Issues such as fake social media accounts invading privacy, misinformation about vaccines, and the amplification of hate speech and cyberbullying underscore the negative impact digital content can have on individual well-being and community harmony. Incidents of fake news during elections causing community tension, and the spreading of rumors leading to real-world violence, illustrate the tangible dangers of unchecked digital content. Additionally, character assassination and the spread of divisive propaganda during politically charged periods reveal how easily trust can be eroded in online spaces. The respondents collectively point to the need for stringent measures in verifying online content, educating users about the consequences of spreading unverified information, and fostering a digital environment where respect and empathy prevail.

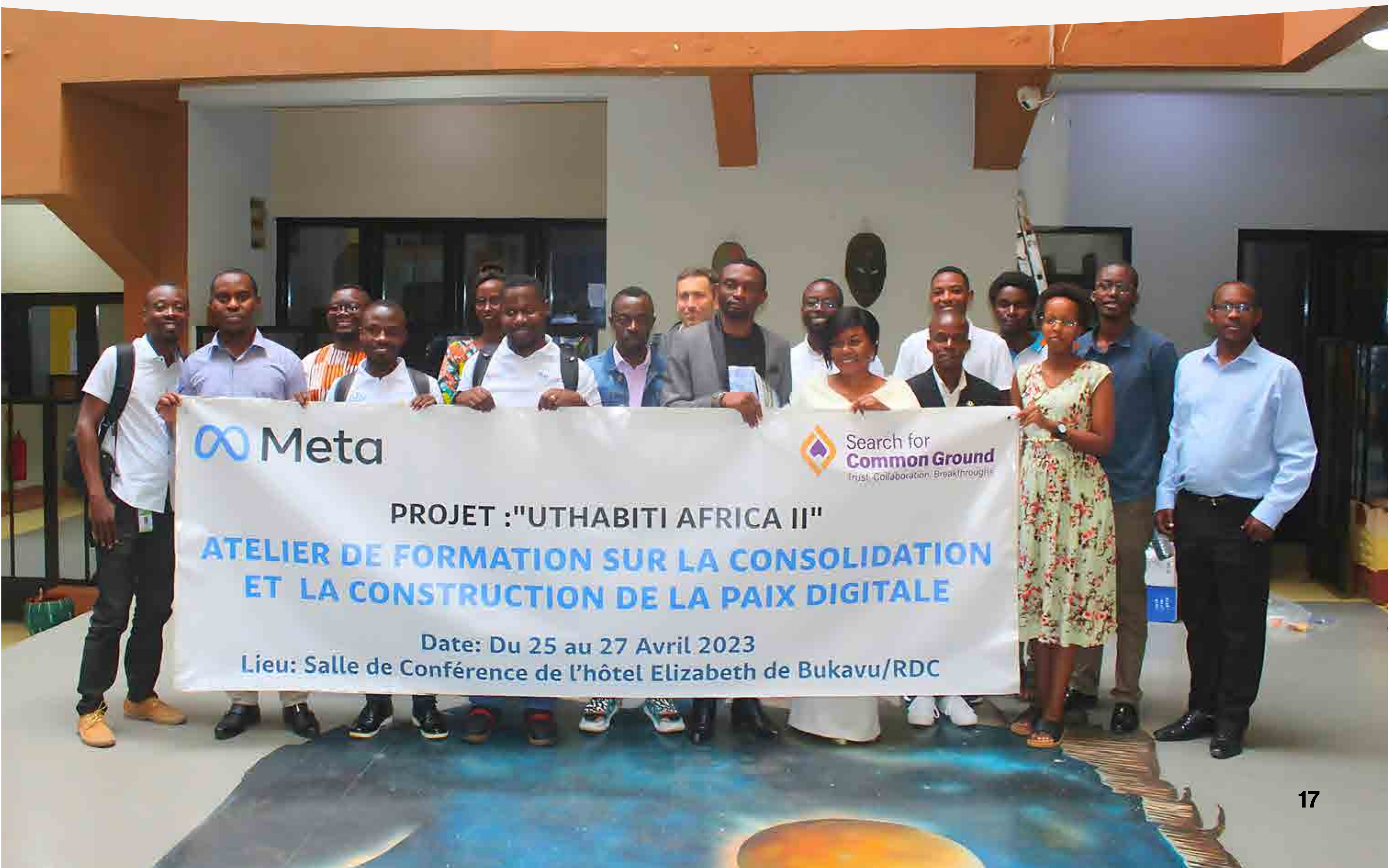
The diverse responses from participants offer a rich tapestry of experiences that highlight the potential for social media to foster communal and interpersonal trust. The statements vary widely, from specific instances of digital campaigns making a difference in community issues to expressions of personal change and observations of societal shifts towards peace and understanding.



Respondents mention digital campaigns' role in highlighting truths about pressing issues, such as the situation in Palestine underscoring social media's power to galvanize community action, raise awareness, and potentially foster trust among community members as they unite for common causes.

Seventeen survey respondents detailed how educational content, peace messages, and campaigns against hate speech had yielded positive results. For instance, during election periods, content promoting peace, verifying information before spreading it, and advocating for unity despite political differences have helped cool tempers and maintain peace. This suggests that deliberate, positive online engagement can build trust among community members by encouraging respectful discourse and shared values.

Respondents shared examples where social media facilitated direct community engagement on issues like flooding and health service problems, leading to quick responses from authorities or significant community support. Such interactions not only solve immediate problems but also build a sense of trust in the power of collective online action to effect real-world change. The role of online education in saving time, effort, and money, as mentioned by respondents, points to social media as a platform for empowerment. Additionally, the training of young digital rights champions and the increase in followers for peace-promoting social media accounts indicate that strategic education and advocacy efforts can expand influence and foster a community of trust online.



Conclusion and Recommendations

This report elucidates the pivotal role of Search for Common Ground's digital peacebuilding initiatives in fostering constructive agency among participants and contributing to healthier online experiences. The findings reveal that through a variety of innovative projects across different contexts, Search has impacted attitudes, skills, and relationships in digital spaces, steering communities away from apathy and towards empathy, inclusion, and trust. However, to amplify the effectiveness of digital peacebuilding efforts, the following recommendations should be considered:

Enhance Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking: Given the success of educational content and training in improving online interactions, it's imperative to expand digital literacy programs. These should not only focus on identifying misinformation and hate speech but also on critical thinking and ethical online engagement, to equip individuals with the skills to navigate digital spaces responsibly.

Foster Community-Led Moderation: The crucial role of community stewards in managing online groups suggests the need for more community-led initiatives. Training and supporting a broader base of digital community stewards can help in moderating discussions, addressing misinformation promptly, and maintaining the integrity of online spaces. Search's online **Digital Community Stewards Training** program is one such avenue for making training more accessible. The tool **Bridgebot** developed by Search and TangibleAI is an example of how artificial intelligence can assist individuals have more constructive engagements in digital communities.

Strengthen Partnerships and Communities of Practice for Wider Reach: Collaboration with tech companies, civil society organizations, government institutions, legal regulatory bodies, and educational institutions can enhance the scope and impact of digital peacebuilding projects. By leveraging the expertise and reach of these partners, Search can extend its influence, ensuring that its initiatives benefit a wider audience. These audiences and partners can form communities of practice to share ideas, problem solve, and collate learning with the common aim of contributing to a global culture of peace and trust online.

Through targeted efforts in these areas, digital peacebuilding can continue to evolve as a powerful tool for creating more inclusive, empathetic, and trusting online communities. As this report highlights, the foundation laid by Search's initiatives provides a strong basis for future endeavors in digital peacebuilding, with the potential to significantly shape the landscape of online interactions for the better.

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