

Australians who speak a language other than English at high risk for online abuse and harassment

Digital harms research

Our research found that while people who were born outside Australia were not at higher risk of experiencing or witnessing online abuse and harassment, people who were born in Australia but spoke a language other than English at home were at somewhat higher risk.

What did we do?

The RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre (DERC), incorporating the Digital Hostility and Disinformation Lab, conducted a survey of 2,520 everyday Australians who had experienced or witnessed digital harms in the past year.

What did we find?

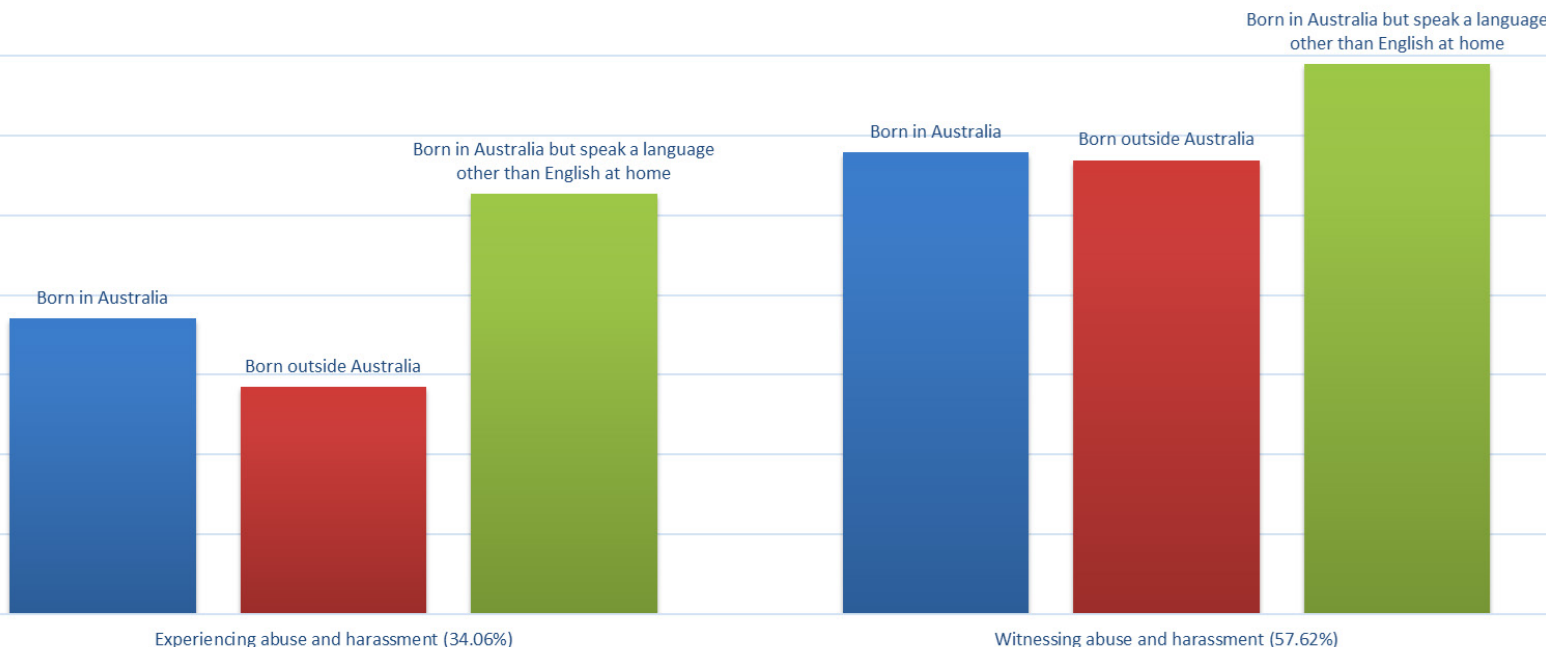
People born outside Australia were actually slightly less likely to experience or witness most digital harms (except encountering deepfakes) when compared with people born in Australia.

But when we looked at other demographic data such as language, we found that people who were born in Australia but spoke a language other than English at home were significantly more likely to both experience and witness online abuse and harassment.

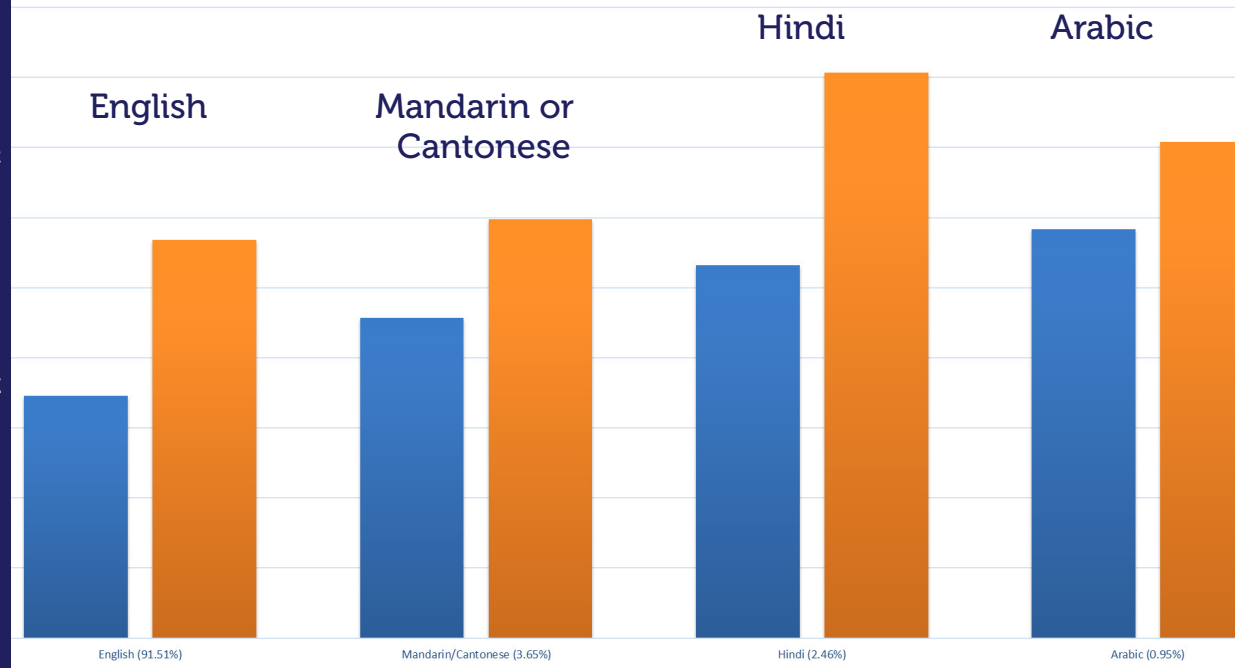
For people born in Australia, 37% of those who only speak English at home had experienced abuse on 3 or more occasions in the past year, while nearly 53% of those who also spoke another language experienced abuse.

Similar differential rates were found among those who experienced or witnessed doxxing, volumetric pile-ons and other digital harms.

Experiencing or witnessing digital harms: born in Australia but speaking a language other than English at home



People born in Australia but who spoke Mandarin, Cantonese, Hindi or Arabic at home were more likely than those born overseas, (and those born here who only spoke English) to be abused online or witness it in their communities.



What do these findings mean?

- People born in Australia but who speak other languages at home may be at higher risk of abuse, harassment, doxxing and pile-ons.
- This may be because as second- or third-generation migrants they participate in social media and on digital platforms as Australians with good command of the language, but may be more likely to be attacked for their contributions because they don't fit some extremist views of what an Australian should look and sound like.
- Anti-Indian and anti-Middle Eastern feeling in Australia has increased, and much of this is driven by extremist groups relying on disinformation and dog-whistling. This means attention not only to protests and in-person violence, but to how Australians of Indian and Middle-Eastern origin (and South East Asia) are experiencing social media.
- This research suggests a need for additional support for Australians who are not themselves migrants but the children and grandchildren of migrants, and for those who are multilingual, to protect from the serious negative effects of digital harms.

This summary brief was supported by the Australian Research Council Discovery Project, "Online Hostility in Australia Digital Cultures" (DP230100870), with research conducted by Rob Cover, Joel Humphries and Adnan Alamri.

The RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre (DERC) undertakes comprehensive research on the everyday lived experience of digital cultures, mobile media, platforms, workplaces and settings. Working with a wide array of partners and collaborators in Australia and internationally, we undertake people-centric data collection, design and analysis to help governments, industry and the community make sense of changing factors in our digital lives, including digital harms, AI, disinformation, emergent mobile technologies and online economies.