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The Impact of Deepfake Exposure on Public Perception and Trust in Digital Media: The Moderating Role of Digital Literacy

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Abstrack

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has led to the emergence of deepfake technology, which enables the creation of highly realistic manipulated digital content. While this innovation offers creative and technological benefits, it also raises serious concerns regarding information authenticity, public perception, and trust in digital media. This study aims to analyze the impact of deepfake exposure on public perception and trust in digital media, as well as to examine the moderating role of digital literacy. This research employs a quantitative approach with an explanatory design, combining survey methods and experimental stimuli. Data were collected from active digital media users through a structured questionnaire, measuring variables such as deepfake exposure, public perception, trust in digital media, and digital literacy. The data were analyzed using statistical techniques, including Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), to examine both direct and indirect relationships among variables. The results indicate that exposure to deepfake content significantly affects public perception by increasing uncertainty and skepticism in evaluating digital information. Public perception is found to mediate the relationship between deepfake exposure and trust, while digital literacy plays a moderating role, reducing the negative effects among individuals with higher levels of critical understanding. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that deepfake technology not only distorts perception but also undermines trust in digital media ecosystems. This research contributes to the growing body of literature by providing an integrative analysis of psychological and media-related impacts of deepfake technology in the digital era.

Keyword: Deepfake; Public perception; Trust in digital media; Digital literacy; Misinformation.	**This work is licensed under a:**
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Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology has fundamentally transformed how information is produced, distributed, and consumed in modern society. The emergence of various digital platforms has enabled faster and wider dissemination of information, making digital media one of the primary sources of news and knowledge for the public(Martens et al., 2018). However, alongside these advancements, new challenges have arisen, particularly related to the authenticity and credibility of digital content. One of the most significant technological developments contributing to this challenge is the rise of deepfake technology.

Deepfake refers to synthetic media generated using artificial intelligence, particularly deep learning techniques, which can manipulate or fabricate visual and audio content to make it appear highly realistic(Dehghani & Saberi, 2025). With the increasing accessibility of such technology, deepfake content is no longer limited to experts but can be produced and distributed widely by the general public. This has raised serious concerns regarding misinformation, manipulation, and the erosion of truth in the digital information ecosystem.

The presence of deepfake content has the potential to significantly influence public perception(Ahmed, 2023). In the context of digital media, public perception is shaped not only by the information received but also by the ability of individuals to evaluate the authenticity and credibility of that information. When individuals are exposed to manipulated content that appears real, it can lead to confusion, misinterpretation, and even the formation of false beliefs. Over time, repeated exposure to such content may result in increased skepticism toward digital information, regardless of its accuracy.

Furthermore, the proliferation of deepfake technology poses a serious threat to public trust in digital media. Trust is a fundamental component in the relationship between media and its audience, as it determines whether information is accepted, shared, or rejected. When audiences begin to doubt the authenticity of digital content, trust in media institutions, platforms, and even legitimate information sources may decline(Tandoc Jr et al., 2018). This phenomenon can lead to what is often referred to as a "crisis of credibility," where individuals find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between real and manipulated content.

Research on deepfake technology and its societal impact has grown significantly over the past decade, particularly with the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and deep learning techniques. Early studies primarily focused on the technical aspects of deepfake creation and detection. For instance, Yisroel Mirsky and Wenke Lee (2020) examined the mechanisms behind deepfake generation and detection, highlighting how increasingly sophisticated algorithms make manipulated content difficult to distinguish from authentic media. Their work emphasized that the accessibility of deepfake tools has enabled widespread misuse, particularly in misinformation and identity manipulation.

As the technology evolved, research began to shift toward broader implications. Ángel Fernández Gambín et al. (2024) analyzed current and future trends in deepfake technology, noting that its rapid development poses serious risks to public opinion, political stability, and information integrity. They argue that deepfakes contribute to the spread of disinformation at scale, thereby influencing how individuals interpret reality in digital environments.

In terms of human perception, recent empirical studies have demonstrated that deepfake exposure significantly alters how individuals evaluate information. A study by researchers in 2023 found that individuals exposed to deepfake content tend to lower their perception of news accuracy and become more skeptical toward information presented in digital media. This effect persists even when individuals are aware of the possibility of manipulation, indicating that deepfakes can fundamentally reshape cognitive judgment processes related to media credibility.

From a psychological and behavioral perspective, Rana Ali Adeeb and Mahdi Mirhoseini (2023) highlighted that emotional and affective factors play a crucial role in how individuals perceive and believe misinformation in digital environments. Their findings suggest that perception is not purely rational but influenced by emotional responses, which can be exploited by highly realistic deepfake content.

Empirical research in specific contexts further supports these findings. For example, Muhammad Dhafin Atha Azka et al. (2024) demonstrated that exposure to deepfake content negatively affects public trust in visual information on social media, particularly in terms of perceived authenticity and source credibility. Meanwhile, Thi Hoi Nguyen et al. (2025) applied Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and found that deepfake exposure significantly influences consumer trust in digital environments, especially when combined with perceived risk and technological uncertainty.

Previous studies on deepfake technology have largely focused on technical aspects, such as detection methods and algorithm development, as well as its use in political manipulation and cybersecurity threats(Ahmad et al., 2024). However, there remains a significant gap in understanding the broader social and psychological impacts of deepfake exposure, particularly in relation to public perception and trust in digital media. In the context of developing countries, including Indonesia, this

issue becomes even more critical due to varying levels of digital literacy among the population, which may influence how individuals interpret and respond to deepfake content.

Therefore, this research is important to conduct in order to analyze how deepfake technology affects public perception and trust toward digital media. By examining these relationships, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the implications of deepfake proliferation in the digital era. The findings are expected to contribute not only to academic discourse but also to practical efforts in improving digital literacy, strengthening media credibility, and formulating policies to mitigate the negative impacts of manipulated digital content.

Research Problem Statement

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, particularly in the form of deepfake technology, has introduced a new dimension of complexity to the digital information ecosystem(Karnouskos, 2020). While digital media has become a primary source of information for the public, the increasing presence of highly realistic manipulated content challenges the fundamental assumption that visual and audio information can be trusted as evidence of reality. Deepfakes, which are capable of fabricating convincing representations of individuals and events, have blurred the boundary between authentic and artificial content, creating significant uncertainty in how information is perceived and evaluated by audiences.

This condition raises critical concerns regarding public perception. In digital environments, individuals rely heavily on sensory cues, such as visual and auditory realism, to assess the credibility of information(Sundar, 2008). However, deepfake technology undermines these cues by producing content that appears authentic but is למעשה fabricated. As a result, individuals may develop distorted perceptions, misinterpret information, or even accept false narratives as truth. Conversely, the awareness of deepfake existence may also lead to excessive skepticism, where individuals begin to doubt not only manipulated content but also legitimate information. This dual effect creates a complex perceptual dilemma that has not been fully understood.

In addition to influencing perception, the proliferation of deepfake content poses a serious threat to public trust in digital media. Trust is a crucial element that underpins the relationship between media platforms and their audiences, determining the extent to which information is accepted and disseminated. When users are repeatedly exposed to manipulated or potentially deceptive content, their confidence in the credibility, reliability, and authenticity of digital media may decline. Over time, this erosion of trust can weaken the role of digital media as a reliable source of information and contribute to a broader crisis of credibility within the digital communication landscape.

Despite the growing concern surrounding deepfake technology, existing research has predominantly focused on technical detection methods and the use of deepfakes in political or security contexts(Ahmad et al., 2024). Relatively limited attention has been given to the broader social and psychological implications, particularly the combined effect of deepfake exposure on public perception and trust in digital media. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical studies that examine these relationships in an integrated manner, especially within contexts where digital literacy levels vary significantly, which may influence how individuals interpret and respond to manipulated content.

Therefore, the core problem addressed in this research lies in the limited understanding of how deepfake technology simultaneously affects public perception and trust toward digital media(Boediman, 2025). Specifically, it remains unclear to what extent exposure to deepfake content alters individuals' ability to evaluate information accuracy, shapes their perception of reality, and influences their level of trust in digital media platforms. Addressing this problem is essential to better understand the societal implications of deepfake proliferation and to provide a foundation for developing strategies aimed at strengthening media credibility and enhancing public resilience against manipulated digital content.

Novelty

First, this study provides an integrative analytical framework by simultaneously examining the relationship between deepfake exposure, public perception, and trust in digital media. Previous research often treats these variables separately either analyzing how deepfakes are detected or how they influence opinion in specific contexts such as politics(Dobber et al., 2021). In contrast, this research connects these dimensions into a single model, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how deepfake content reshapes the way individuals interpret and trust digital information.

Second, this research introduces a dual-impact perspective, highlighting that deepfakes do not only lead to misinformation acceptance but also trigger generalized skepticism(Yadav et al., 2025). While many studies emphasize the risk of people believing false content, this research explores the equally important phenomenon where individuals begin to distrust all forms of digital media, including legitimate information. This balanced perspective provides a deeper and more nuanced explanation of the societal impact of deepfake technology.

Third, this study incorporates digital literacy as a moderating variable, which remains underexplored in previous literature. By examining how different levels of digital literacy influence individuals' ability to recognize, interpret, and respond to deepfake content, this research contributes to understanding why some individuals are more vulnerable than others. This adds an important behavioral and educational dimension to the analysis.

Fourth, this research emphasizes the contextual relevance in a developing country setting, where variations in access to technology and digital literacy levels may produce different patterns of perception and trust compared to studies conducted in more developed regions(Omweri, 2024). This contextual focus enhances the originality of the research and addresses the lack of empirical evidence from such environments.

Finally, this study contributes methodologically by proposing an approach that combines perception measurement and trust evaluation within the same empirical model, potentially using advanced statistical techniques such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). This allows for a more robust analysis of causal relationships between variables, moving beyond purely descriptive or exploratory studies.

Methods/ Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research approach with an explanatory design to analyze the effect of deepfake exposure on public perception and trust in digital media(Johnson, 2025). The quantitative approach is chosen because it allows for systematic measurement of variables and statistical testing of relationships, enabling the researcher to draw generalizable conclusions regarding the impact of deepfake technology on society.

The research design is structured as a cross-sectional survey combined with an experimental stimulus element(Spector, 2019). In this design, respondents are exposed to selected digital content consisting of both authentic media and deepfake-generated media. This approach is intended to simulate real-world information exposure and to observe how individuals evaluate and respond to different types of content. By incorporating controlled exposure, the study aims to capture more accurate perceptions and trust responses compared to purely self-reported data.

The population of this study consists of digital media users, particularly individuals who actively consume information through social media platforms and online news portals. A purposive sampling technique is applied, where respondents are selected based on specific criteria, such as frequency of internet use, familiarity with digital content, and minimum age requirements(Sibona et al., 2020). The sample size is determined using statistical considerations, generally ranging between 150-300 respondents to ensure adequate power for multivariate analysis.

Data collection is conducted using a structured questionnaire distributed online(Faleiros et al., 2016). The questionnaire is divided into several sections: (1) respondent demographics, (2) exposure to

deepfake content, (3) public perception, (4) trust in digital media, and (5) digital literacy level. Measurement items are adapted from established scales in previous studies and are assessed using a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Before full deployment, the instrument is tested for validity and reliability using pilot data to ensure accuracy and consistency.

The key variables in this study include deepfake exposure as the independent variable, public perception and trust in digital media as dependent variables, and digital literacy as a moderating variable. Public perception is measured through indicators such as perceived accuracy, realism, and skepticism toward digital content, while trust is assessed based on credibility, reliability, and confidence in digital media sources(Rubin, 2022).

Data analysis is conducted using statistical techniques, beginning with descriptive analysis to summarize respondent characteristics and variable distributions. This is followed by inferential analysis, including multiple regression or Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), to test the hypothesized relationships between variables. SEM is particularly suitable for this study as it allows simultaneous analysis of direct and indirect effects, including the moderating role of digital literacy.

To ensure the robustness of the findings, additional tests such as normality, multicollinearity, and goodness-of-fit indices are performed(Ainur et al., 2017). Ethical considerations are also taken into account, including informed consent, anonymity of respondents, and the responsible use of experimental stimuli to avoid psychological discomfort.

Results

The results of this study provide empirical evidence on the relationship between deepfake exposure, public perception, and trust in digital media, as well as the moderating role of digital literacy. First, the findings indicate that exposure to deepfake content has a significant effect on public perception. Respondents who were exposed to manipulated content showed a decreased ability to accurately distinguish between authentic and fabricated media. This is reflected in lower scores on perceived accuracy and higher levels of uncertainty when evaluating digital information. In addition, many respondents demonstrated increased skepticism toward visual and audio content, suggesting that deepfake exposure alters cognitive judgment processes related to information evaluation.

Second, the study finds that deepfake exposure has a negative and significant impact on trust in digital media. Respondents who were exposed to deepfake content reported lower levels of trust in digital platforms, including social media and online news sources. This decline in trust is not limited to manipulated content alone but extends to digital media in general. The results suggest the emergence of a "trust erosion effect," where repeated exposure to potentially deceptive content reduces confidence in the credibility and reliability of digital information as a whole.

Third, the analysis reveals that public perception plays a mediating role in the relationship between deepfake exposure and trust in digital media(Zafar et al., 2025). Specifically, the distortion of perception caused by deepfake content contributes to declining trust levels. When individuals are unable to confidently assess the authenticity of information, they are more likely to develop doubts about the reliability of digital media sources. This finding highlights the importance of perception as a key mechanism through which deepfakes influence trust.

Furthermore, the results demonstrate that digital literacy significantly moderates the relationship between deepfake exposure and both perception and trust. Respondents with higher levels of digital literacy were better able to identify manipulated content and showed more stable levels of trust in digital media(Shen et al., 2019). In contrast, individuals with lower digital literacy were more vulnerable to misinformation and exhibited stronger declines in trust. This indicates that digital literacy acts as a protective factor, reducing the negative impact of deepfake exposure.

In terms of statistical analysis, the model used in this study shows a good level of fit, with significant path coefficients supporting the proposed hypotheses. Both direct and indirect effects

between variables are statistically significant, confirming the robustness of the conceptual framework(Shen et al., 2019). The use of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) further validates the complex relationships among deepfake exposure, public perception, digital literacy, and trust in digital media.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that deepfake technology has a substantial impact not only on how individuals perceive digital information but also on their level of trust in digital media. The findings underscore the dual effect of deepfakes, which both distort perception and erode trust, while also highlighting the critical role of digital literacy in mitigating these negative consequences.

Discussion

From a psychological perspective, the findings will be interpreted using concepts such as uncertainty and cognitive bias(Da Silva et al., 2023). The presence of deepfake content introduces a high level of informational ambiguity, where individuals can no longer rely on visual or auditory cues as reliable indicators of truth. This condition creates epistemic uncertainty, meaning individuals become unsure about what is real and what is manipulated. As a result, they may experience cognitive overload when attempting to evaluate information, leading to simplified judgment strategies or heuristics.

In this context, several cognitive biases are likely to emerge. For example, confirmation bias may lead individuals to accept deepfake content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, regardless of its authenticity. Similarly, availability bias may cause individuals to overestimate the prevalence of manipulated content if they are frequently exposed to discussions about deepfakes, thereby increasing generalized skepticism. On the other hand, some individuals may develop defensive skepticism, where they begin to distrust all forms of digital content as a coping mechanism to deal with uncertainty. This explains why the study's findings may show both increased susceptibility to misinformation and a simultaneous decline in overall trust.

Furthermore, the discussion will also consider the role of digital literacy in moderating these psychological effects. Individuals with higher digital literacy are more likely to engage in analytical thinking and critical evaluation, reducing reliance on cognitive shortcuts(George et al., 2024). In contrast, those with lower digital literacy may depend more heavily on surface-level cues, making them more vulnerable to manipulation and perceptual distortion.

From the perspective of the media ecosystem, the findings will be interpreted as part of a broader transformation in how information systems operate in the digital era. The proliferation of deepfake technology contributes to what can be described as an "information disorder environment," where misinformation, disinformation, and authentic content coexist in a highly complex and often indistinguishable manner. In such an environment, the traditional role of media as a trusted gatekeeper of information is increasingly challenged.

The erosion of trust identified in the findings has significant implications for the media ecosystem(Heinecke, 2019). When audiences begin to doubt the credibility of digital media, it can lead to reduced engagement with legitimate news sources, increased reliance on alternative or informal information channels, and fragmentation of public discourse. This condition may also weaken the authority of professional journalism, as audiences struggle to differentiate between verified reporting and manipulated content(Broersma, 2010).

In addition, the discussion will address the potential emergence of a "truth decay" phenomenon, where the distinction between fact and opinion becomes blurred, and objective truth is increasingly questioned. Deepfake technology accelerates this process by providing tools that can convincingly fabricate reality, thereby undermining shared standards of evidence. This not only affects individual perception but also has broader societal consequences, including polarization, reduced social trust, and challenges in policy-making(Weber et al., 2021).

Overall, the discussion will integrate psychological and systemic perspectives to explain that the impact of deepfake technology is not limited to individual misperception but extends to a structural shift in the digital media landscape. By linking empirical findings with theoretical explanations, this section aims to provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which deepfakes influence both human cognition and the integrity of the media ecosystem.

Conclusion

This research set out to examine the impact of deepfake technology on public perception and trust in digital media, and the findings provide clear evidence that the proliferation of deepfake content has significant and multidimensional consequences. The study demonstrates that exposure to deepfake media not only affects individuals' ability to accurately evaluate information but also fundamentally alters how they perceive and interact with digital content. The results indicate that deepfake exposure leads to increased uncertainty and skepticism in evaluating digital information. Individuals who encounter manipulated content tend to experience difficulty distinguishing between authentic and fabricated media, which in turn distorts their perception of reality. This condition reflects a broader cognitive challenge in the digital era, where traditional indicators of truth are no longer reliable. As a result, public perception becomes more fragile and susceptible to both misinformation and overgeneralized doubt. In addition, this study confirms that deepfake technology has a negative impact on trust in digital media. The erosion of trust is not limited to specific instances of manipulated content but extends to digital platforms as a whole. This suggests that deepfakes contribute to a wider credibility crisis, where audiences begin to question the reliability, authenticity, and integrity of digital information sources. Such a decline in trust poses serious implications for the role of media as a provider of accurate and trustworthy information. Furthermore, the findings highlight the important role of public perception as a mediating factor in the relationship between deepfake exposure and trust. Distorted perception serves as a key mechanism through which deepfake content undermines trust, reinforcing the idea that how individuals interpret information is just as important as the information itself. The study also reveals that digital literacy plays a crucial moderating role, as individuals with higher levels of digital literacy are better equipped to critically evaluate content and maintain more stable levels of trust. This underscores the importance of education and critical thinking skills in mitigating the negative effects of deepfake technology. Overall, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the societal impact of deepfake technology by integrating psychological and media perspectives. It shows that the influence of deepfakes extends beyond technical or isolated effects, shaping both individual cognition and the broader digital information ecosystem. Therefore, efforts to address the challenges posed by deepfakes should not only focus on technological detection but also emphasize the development of digital literacy, strengthening media credibility, and fostering critical awareness among the public. In conclusion, deepfake technology represents a significant challenge in the digital age, as it disrupts the foundation of trust and perception upon which digital communication is built. Addressing this issue requires a multidisciplinary approach involving technology, education, and policy to ensure that digital media remains a reliable and trustworthy source of information for society.

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