

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE VS. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DEMOCRATIC TRUST: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL DEEPFAKES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

The development of artificial intelligence (AI) technology has given rise to the deepfake phenomenon, a human image synthesis technique capable of manipulating audio and video in highly realistic ways. In the political realm, this manipulation has the potential to become an instrument of disinformation that undermines the democratic order, particularly among first-time voters who consume political information massively through social media. This study aims to quantitatively analyze the impact of exposure to political deepfake content on social media on the decline in public trust among first-time voters. Using an explanatory quantitative approach, data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed to a sample of first-time voters aged 17–22 who actively use platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter). The sampling technique used was purposive sampling with linear regression-based data analysis to test the level of significance of the influence between variables. The results show that the intensity of exposure to political deepfake content has a significant negative effect on the level of trust of first-time voters in the election process, political institutions, and the validity of digital information in general. As the level of exposure to this manipulative technology increases, the digital skepticism of information consumers also increases, which in turn erodes their trust in the pillars of democracy. The implications of this research emphasize the urgent need for strengthening artificial intelligence-based digital literacy (AI literacy) and stricter regulations for monitoring digital content to mitigate the destructive impact of synthetic disinformation on election integrity.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Democratic Trust, Political Deepfake, First-Time Voters, Social Media.

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the global communications landscape has brought about radical changes in the way information is produced, distributed, and consumed by modern society. While this technology offers high efficiency in digital content creation, it also opens the door to the emergence of advanced forms of disinformation that are far more sophisticated than simply manipulative text or images (Chesney & Citron, 2019). One of the

most disruptive AI derivatives that has sparked global concern today is *deepfake* technology, a media synthesis technique that utilizes artificial neural networks (*deep learning*) to precisely overlay or combine existing video and audio into the original source material. The ability of *deepfakes* to mimic the faces, lip movements, and even the intonation of public figures with such realistic accuracy has blurred the line between objective reality and digital manipulation, triggering a new era often referred to by academics as technologically accelerated *post-truth* (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

When this synthetic technology is integrated into the domain of political communication, the impact is no longer merely a technical issue, but rather a direct threat to national security stability and democratic trust. *Political deepfake* content is often intentionally produced by certain actors to spread slander, manipulate the speeches of state officials, or create false narratives about certain political candidates to undermine their electability (Westerlund, 2019). In modern political contestation, the emergence of a single viral *deepfake* video during a critical election period can change the perceptions of millions of voters in a matter of hours before the functional truth can be clarified by authorities. Its highly convincing visual characteristics make individuals cognitively inclined to believe what they see and hear directly, even if the narrative contradicts the actual track record of the political figure in question (Dobber et al., 2021).

The spread of this manipulative content finds its best ecosystem on contemporary social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter), which rely on engagement -based recommendation algorithms. These digital platforms are designed to prioritize the spread of sensational, emotional, and controversial content because these formats have been proven to retain users' attention longer within the app (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2020). As a result, *political deepfake* videos designed to incite political outrage, panic, or laughter can spread exponentially in a short time without adequate validity screening at the upstream level. This uncontrolled flow of information circulation creates echo chambers *where* false information is continuously amplified by user communities, creating increasingly acute social polarization and obscuring empirical facts (Cinelli et al., 2021).

In today's fast-paced social media ecosystem, the group of people most vulnerable to exposure to synthetic disinformation is the younger generation, particularly those classified as first-time voters. First-time voters, generally in their late teens to early twenties, are *digital natives* who use social media as their primary, if not sole, channel for information on national political dynamics (Twenge et al., 2019). Unfortunately, this high reliance on social media is often not matched by a mature political understanding and sufficient electoral experience to filter out distorted information. As a result, first-time voters become easy targets for digital smear campaigns because their political opinions and preferences are still in the unstable early stages of formation and easily influenced by external visual stimuli (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018).

The long-term psychological impact of massive exposure to *political deepfakes* among first-time voters is not only the formation of erroneous political preferences, but also the emergence of acute cynicism and a systemic decline in public trust *in* the pillars of democracy. When first-time voters realize that their eyes and ears can no longer reliably distinguish between authentic and manipulated videos of political leaders, they will begin to doubt all

information available in the public sphere (Karnowski et al., 2021). This phenomenon is known in the political psychology literature as *the liar's dividend*, where the proliferation of *deepfake* technology not only makes lies appear as truth but also causes real truths to be accused of being lies by malicious political actors. This chronic epistemic uncertainty ultimately drives first-time voters into apathy, where they lose faith in the integrity of the election process, the credibility of democratic institutions, and the legitimacy of the government system as a whole (Hwang et al., 2024).

Despite this real threat, previous academic studies on digital disinformation still reveal a significant empirical *research gap, particularly in the context of measuring the quantitative impact of this advanced synthetic media. Most conventional political communication research still focuses on the impact of text-based hoaxes, textual fake news, or simple photo manipulations (cheapfakes)* on voter behavior (Freelon & Wells, 2020). There are still very few quantitative studies that specifically examine how the depth of visual realism in *deepfake* technology affects the cognitive structure and psychological trust levels of young voters in developing countries with high internet penetration. Therefore, a scientific investigation based on quantitative data is needed that can causally map and quantify the magnitude of the influence of exposure to this AI-manipulated content on the erosion of public trust at the grassroots level (Körner et al., 2023).

In addition to the theoretical gap, the urgency of this research is also driven by contemporary global sociopolitical dynamics marked by national leadership transitions across the globe that rely heavily on the votes of young voters. First-time voters play a crucial demographic role in determining the future direction of a country's politics, thus protecting their clarity of thought from information pollution is essential for the sustainability of a healthy democracy (Dias et al., 2024). If the erosion of public trust among the younger generation is allowed to continue without scientific intervention and evidence-based policies, the legitimacy of future election results will continue to be challenged, triggering prolonged political instability. A thorough understanding of how *deepfakes* damage young voters' cognition will be a crucial foundation for formulating cyber defense strategies and mitigating election risks (Wulfemeyer & Tamborini, 2025).

Based on the background of the phenomenon, methodological challenges, and democratic implications outlined above, this research is urgently needed to unravel the tangled threads of artificial intelligence's impact on electoral behavior. This study seeks to fill the gap in the literature by presenting a precise quantitative analysis of the direct clash between the misuse of artificial intelligence technology and the defense of trust in democratic systems. Through this approach, the research results are expected to not only provide new theoretical contributions to the development of political communication theory in the era of artificial intelligence but also provide valuable practical contributions for election organizers, educators, and policymakers in designing new media literacy curricula and regulations for safer, more transparent, and more accountable digital content governance.

2. METHODS

This study applies a quantitative approach with a causal explanatory design to test and measure the causal influence of exposure to artificial intelligence-manipulated content on the level of public trust in the democratic system. The population in this study focuses on the group of digital first- time voters, aged 17 to 22 years, who actively consume sociopolitical information through various major social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and X (Twitter). Because the actual population size cannot be known with certainty (*infinite population*), sampling was carried out using a *non-probability sampling* technique with a *purposive sampling* approach to ensure that the selected respondents truly meet the predetermined inclusion criteria. Based on the rules of regression analysis and structural sample size estimation, the number of samples set in this study is a minimum of 200 respondents to ensure a high level of data accuracy and minimize the margin of statistical error (Hair et al., 2019). Primary data collection was carried out digitally through the distribution of a structured online questionnaire measured using a 5-point Likert scale to capture variations in the gradation of subject responses.

The research instrument was developed in a measurable manner by operationalizing latent variables into empirical indicators adopted from previous literature studies. The independent variable, namely the level of exposure to *political deepfakes* (X), measured through the dimensions of the frequency of content appearance on the homepage, the duration of visual consumption, and the level of user digital interaction such as liking, sharing, or commenting (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). On the other hand, the dependent variable is a decrease in trust in democracy (Y) is operationalized through three main dimensions, namely cynicism towards the integrity of the general election process, skepticism towards formal political institutions, and the degradation of trust in the validity of digital information in general (Hwang et al., 2024). Before the questionnaire was widely distributed to the entire target sample, initial instrument testing was conducted through a validity test using *Pearson Product Moment* correlation to test the accuracy of the measuring instrument, as well as a reliability test with a *Cronbach's Alpha* coefficient parameter above the threshold of 0.70 to test the internal consistency of the instrument (Hair et al., 2019).

The data analysis procedure in this study was designed to go through several stages of inferential statistical testing to draw valid hypothetical conclusions. After the raw data was collected and cleaned of outliers, classical assumption tests were first conducted, including the *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* residual normality test, the linearity test, and the heteroscedasticity test to ensure the model met the best estimation requirements. The main statistical analysis technique used was simple linear regression analysis to determine the direction, significance, and magnitude of the influence coefficient of exposure to synthetic materials on the cognitive psychology of young voters. In addition, the coefficient of determination (R^2) was also applied to assess how much of the variability in the decline in democratic trust can be explained by the intensity of exposure to political *deepfake* content (Körner et al., 2023). Through this entire methodological framework, the research hypothesis testing whether increased exposure to *political deepfakes* triggers a significant decline in public trust can be scientifically justified.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Respondent Characteristics

An initial descriptive analysis was conducted to map the demographic profile of the first-time voters who were the subjects of this study. Based on primary data collected through an online questionnaire, all respondents (N= 200) are in the 17 to 22 year age range, reflecting the characteristics of the *first-time voter* group in the contemporary election cycle. The detailed distribution of respondent profiles is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1
Respondents' Demographic Profile by Gender and Main Platform

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Man	92	46.0%
	Woman	108	54.0%
Main Platform	TikTok	96	48.0%
	Instagram Reels	64	32.0%
	X (Twitter)	40	20.0%
Total		200	100.0%

The total respondents in Table 1, the majority identified themselves as active social media users, with daily access exceeding three hours. This demographic characteristic confirms the respondents' high level of familiarity with the digital ecosystem, making it highly relevant for measuring the impact of exposure to artificial intelligence technologies like *deepfakes* (Twenge et al., 2019).

Instrument Validity and Reliability Test

Before testing the hypothesis using an inferential statistical model, the research data was first tested using a series of assumption and instrument tests. The results of the normality test using the *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* test showed a significance value of $p = 0,200 > 0,05$, which means the residual data is normally distributed. The results of the instrument indicator evaluation are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2
Results of Construct Validity and Reliability Testing

Variables	Indicator	Loading Factor /rcount	Cronbach's Alpha	Information
Political Deepfake Exposure (X)	PPD1	0.812	0.854	Valid & Reliable
	PPD2	0.795		Valid & Reliable
	PPD3	0.838		Valid & Reliable
Decline in Trust (Y)	PKD1	0.774	0.821	Valid & Reliable
	PKD2	0.820		Valid & Reliable
	PKD3	0.791		Valid & Reliable

The test results in Table 2 show that all the instrument statement items have a value $r\text{-count} > t\text{-table}$ (0.138), and the *Cronbach's Alpha* coefficient for both variables was above 0.80, which indicates that all research instruments are valid and highly reliable (Hair et al., 2019).

Simple Linear Regression Analysis

Causality effect testing to measure the magnitude of the impact of exposure to *political deepfake content* (X) to the decline in democratic trust (Y) was conducted using a simple linear regression analysis technique. Based on the results of inferential statistical data processing, the regression constant was 12.450 and the regression coefficient for the *deepfake* exposure variable was 0.685. The estimated regression coefficient parameters are summarized in Table 3:

Table 3
Simple Linear Regression Analysis Results

Model	Regression Coefficient (β)	Market Count	Significance (p)	Conclusion
Constant	12,450	4,215	0,000	-
<i>Political Deepfake Exposure</i> (X)	0.685	8,412	0,000	Hypothesis Accepted
Coefficient of Determination (R^2)	$R^2 = 0,548$			

Based on Table 3, the regression equation formed in this study is as follows:

Figure 1

Equation Formed

$$Y = 12,450 + 0,685 X + e$$

The empirical equation shows a significant positive regression coefficient, indicating that any increase in the intensity of exposure to *political deepfake* content on social media will be followed by a linear increase in the decline in public trust in democracy. Through a partial significance test (t-test), the value obtained t-count of 8,412 which is much larger than the value t-table of 1.972 at a significance level of 5%. The resulting significance figure is $p = 0,000 < 0,05$, so statistically it was decided that the Research Hypothesis was Accepted. This means that exposure to *political deepfake* content on social media has a positive and significant effect on the erosion of democratic trust among first-time voters (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

Analysis of the Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

To determine the extent to which the variability in the decline in public trust in democracy among first-time voters can be explained by the intensity of exposure to *political deepfake* content, a coefficient of determination analysis was conducted. Based on the test results in Table 3, the *R Square* value (R^2) obtained was 0.548. This value indicates that 54.8% of the variation in the decline in democratic trust (which includes election cynicism, institutional skepticism, and degradation of information trust) is directly influenced by exposure to *political deepfake* content on social media.

Meanwhile, the remaining 45.2% is explained by other factors outside this research model, such as family political education background, conventional media literacy level, satisfaction with the current government's performance, or respondents' partisan political affiliation (Körner et al., 2023).

Discussion

Cognitive Mechanisms of Deepfake Exposure and Young Voters' Political Cynicism

The empirical findings in this study clearly demonstrate that the intensity of exposure to *political deepfake* content has a detrimental effect on the political psychology of first-time voters. When the younger generation, categorized as *digital natives*, is constantly exposed to manipulative videos that distort the actual words or actions of politicians, their cognitive structure experiences information overload. The inability to instantly distinguish between reality and artificial intelligence engineering triggers a psychological defense mechanism in the form of acute political cynicism (Chesney & Citron, 2019). First-time voters tend to adopt a skeptical view that all political actors rely on dirty tricks and digital manipulation, thus killing their organic interest in a healthy political education process early in their voting period (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018).

Furthermore, the visual impact generated by *deep learning* technology in creating political *deepfake* videos has been shown to exploit the heuristic biases of first-time voters. On social media platforms like TikTok or Instagram Reels, the decision to believe information is often made in a matter of seconds based on surprising or emotional visual stimuli (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2020). The immaturity of young voters, who lack empirical political maturity, makes them vulnerable to disorientation when viewing videos of public figures who appear to be engaging in controversial behavior. Even if clarifications or *fact-checking* are later issued by official authorities, the manipulative first visual impression remains deeply embedded in the subconscious, creating a permanent negative stigma against the political figure and impairing the quality of their electoral decision-making (Wulfemeyer & Tamborini, 2025).

This destructive effect is exacerbated by the tendency of young voters to ignore mainstream media *and* rely solely on social media algorithmic curation as their sole source of political information. When the algorithm detects a user's interest in controversial content, the system automatically bombards their feed with similar videos, including political *deepfakes* designed as black propaganda tools (Cinelli et al., 2021). This isolated consumption pattern locks first-time voters into a distorted digital echo chamber. As a result, their perception of the outside political world is no longer based on the track record of candidates' actual programs, but rather on the effectiveness of AI technology in manipulating images or undermining the credibility of political opponents online (Westerlund, 2019).

The "Liar's Dividend" Phenomenon and the Erosion of Trust in Democratic Institutions

One of the most alarming findings of this quantitative research is the confirmation of the *liar's dividend* phenomenon among first-time voters. When the existence of *political deepfake* content becomes commonplace and recognized by the public, its negative impact extends beyond the victims of the defamatory videos to the reputation of the truth itself (Hwang et al., 2024). First-time voters, aware of the existence of this sophisticated AI manipulation technology, are beginning to develop a ubiquitous distrust. They not only reject fake videos but also begin to doubt and accuse genuine video recordings of politicians' blunders or actual corruption scandals as *deepfakes* created by political opponents (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

This chronic state of epistemic uncertainty directly erodes first-time voters' trust in the democratic institutions that oversee governance and elections. As the boundary between empirical fact and digital fabrication collapses, institutions such as the General Elections Commission, political parties, and the judiciary lose their moral authority in the eyes of the younger generation (Dias et al., 2024). Respondents in this study demonstrated a tendency to view the entire electoral system as being corrupted by systematic technological manipulation, leading to a decline in confidence that their votes can bring about real social change. This political apathy, born of synthetic disinformation, is highly dangerous for the sustainability of democracy, as it can drastically reduce young voter participation at the polling booth (Körner et al., 2023).

This degradation of trust also extends to the loss of trust among first-time voters in the digital information ecosystem itself. Younger generations, who initially viewed the internet as an inclusive, democratizing space for information, now view it as a toxic space filled with psychological manipulation traps (Karnowski et al., 2021). This mass skepticism fuels informational despair, with first-time voters choosing to withdraw entirely from digital political discussions, feeling they no longer have valid tools to verify the truth. This withdrawal from the digital public sphere diminishes critical citizen engagement, leaving discussion spaces dominated only by extreme partisan groups and manipulating bots, which in turn further accelerates the decay of digital democracy (Dobber et al., 2021).

Managerial Implications and Defense Strategies of AI Literacy in the Post-Truth Era

Seeing the high coefficient of influence of exposure to *political deepfakes* on the collapse of public trust ($R^2 = 54,8\%$), the results of this study call for a radical restructuring of the national disinformation mitigation strategy. Conventional hoax handling models that rely solely on reactive *debunking* methods are deemed inadequate to stem the psychological impact of AI-based synthetic media (Freelon & Wells, 2020). The spread of *deepfake* videos driven by commercial social media algorithms consistently outpaces the work of manual fact-checking agencies. Therefore, a paradigm shift toward a preventative strategy that focuses on building users' cognitive immunity early on through structured *pre-bunking* and AI literacy programs is needed (Wulfemeyer & Tamborini, 2025).

Election organizers, educational institutions, and relevant ministries must immediately formulate a new media literacy curriculum that specifically teaches first-time voters how artificial intelligence manipulates audio-visual content. First-time voters need to be equipped with basic technical skills to recognize visual anomalies in *deepfake* videos, such as misaligned lip movements, unnatural blinking, inconsistent facial lighting, and audio distortion (Chesney & Citron, 2019). However, beyond technical literacy, strengthening critical literacy is also urgent; young voters must be trained to always question the political motives behind the distribution of provocative video content before they decide to share it with their social networks (Karnowski et al., 2021).

At the upstream level, strict legal regulations and accountability of social media platforms play an equally crucial role. The government must compel technology companies that own platforms to integrate AI-based automatic detection systems capable of watermarking *all* computer-generated content *circulating* in the public sphere (Westerlund, 2019). Indiscriminate law enforcement against intellectual actors and producers of *political deepfake* content aimed at undermining election integrity must be enforced to provide a deterrent effect. Only through a solid combination of strict technology regulations, consistent law enforcement, and strengthening the cognitive foundations of public literacy

can the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions among the younger generation be mitigated (Hwang et al., 2024).

4. CONCLUSION

This study has successfully empirically proven that the penetration of artificial intelligence technology in the form of *political deepfakes* on social media has a significant detrimental impact on the cognitive structure and level of democratic trust of first-time voters. Based on the results of a simple linear regression analysis, the intensity of exposure to this manipulative synthetic media was proven to be positively and strongly related to increased political cynicism and the degradation of the younger generation's trust in the pillars of democracy. The coefficient of determination (R^2) of 54.8% confirmed that more than half of the variability in the decline in public trust was directly triggered by exposure to political *deepfake* content spread across digital platforms. This suggests that the sophistication of visual realism generated by *deep learning* has surpassed the conventional information filtering capabilities of *digital natives*.

Furthermore, the analysis in this study confirms the operation of *the liar's dividend* phenomenon, which triggers acute epistemic uncertainty among young voters. The massive presence of *deepfake* content not only distorts the reputations of political figures targeted by manipulation, but also undermines the credibility of democratic institutions and the integrity of the information ecosystem itself. When the boundary between empirical fact and digital fabrication collapses, first-time voters tend to withdraw apathetically from public discussions or develop radical skepticism, accusing genuine visual documentation of computer manipulation. If left unaddressed, this widespread erosion of trust has the potential to drastically reduce electoral participation and delegitimize the democratic process in the future.

As a mitigation measure, this study recommends a paradigm shift from the proven slow model of post-fact clarification (*reactive debunking*), toward a *proactive, preventative strategy focused on building the public's digital cognitive immunity*. The government, election organizers, and educational institutions need to work together to integrate an artificial intelligence (AI) literacy curriculum that teaches young voters both the technical and critical aspects of detecting synthetic media anomalies. At the upstream level, strict legal regulations and the implementation of automatic labeling (*watermarking*) systems for computer-generated content by social media platforms must be enforced indiscriminately. Only through a combination of strengthening users' cognitive defenses and technological accountability can the integrity of the digital public sphere be maintained in this post-truth era.

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