This report examines the intersection of cybercrime, focusing on the impact of deepfake sexploitation on women in digital environments in the United Kingdom.

Introduction

This case study critically examines the intersection of inequality, marginalisation, and cybercrime, focusing specifically on the phenomenon of deepfake sexploitation targeting women in digital environments in the United Kingdom. This report's purpose is to explore how emerging technologies, when misused, exacerbate existing gender inequalities, reinforcing patriarchal structures within virtual spaces. By analysing the socio-technical dynamics of deepfake creation and dissemination, this study highlights the challenges these offences pose for victims, legal systems and platform governance. Furthermore, this report investigates the motivations behind perpetrators, the structural disempowerment of women online, and the relative ineffectiveness of current legislative and technological interventions. By drawing on rational choice (RCT), general strain (GST), feminist and labelling theories, the study applies a multi-theoretical framework to provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamics.

This report is structured into four key sections: a literature review synthesising critical debates and technological developments, a detailed case analysis examining the experiences of stakeholders including victims, platforms and perpetrators, a theoretical application to interpret the underlying drivers of the phenomenon, and a policy implications section, which proposes the Legislation, Education, and Platform Framework (L.E.P. Framework) to address current gaps backed by evidence. Throughout this structure, the report demonstrates how emerging crime trends like deepfake sexploitation challenge traditional conceptions of crime, victimisation, and justice, necessitating new theoretical and policy responses. The broader aim is to contribute to discussions on safeguarding rights, promoting digital resilience, and ensuring that technological advances do not reinforce systemic inequalities.

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Literature Review

i. Technological Developments

Facial imitation technologies first emerged in the 1990s, though early renderings suffered from low resolutions and the "uncanny valley" effect, making synthetic content easily identifiable (Bregler, et al., 2023; Masood, et al., 2023; Tinwell, 2014; Tolosana, et al., 2020). Recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and deep learning (DL), following the development of Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) by Goodfellow et al. (2014), have transformed this landscape. GANs simulate human cognition, allowing for the creation of hyper-realistic images by redefining low-quality inputs (Holdsworth & Scapicchio, 2024; Sze, et al., 2017). Complementary innovations such as neuromorphic computing, which mimics brain-like architectures, further accelerate this realism (Mehonic, 2020; 2022). These technological shifts have enabled the proliferation of deepfakes, including their malicious use in the form of non-consensual pornographic content, as first observed on Reddit in 2017 (Maddocks, 2020), signalling a new era in synthetic media misuse (Farid, 2022; Van der Sloot & Wagensveld, 2022).

ii. Gendered Harms and Structural Inequality

Willard (2005) defines cyber abuse as "the intent to harass with harm electronically", while Citron (2014) highlights its volitional nature, differentiating it from mere online commentary. Gender-based violence persists affecting boundless numbers of women, with recent decades projecting that one-third face such abuse in their lifetime however exact figures remain dark

(UN Women, 2024; Veletsianos, et al., 2018). Although deepfake technology has legitimate uses in education, media, and healthcare (Caporusso, 2021), its misuse of gendered abuse reflects enduring patriarchal structures (Cockel, 2024). The rise of user-friendly platforms such as 'DeepFaceLab' has democratised access to these tools, lowering the technical threshold required to create synthetic sexual content (Github, 2024), increasing risks of gender-based digital violence including revenge porn, impersonation and privacy violations (Busacca & Monaca, 2023; Laffier & Rehman, 2023; Shakil & Mekuria, 2024) reinforcing the perception that female bodies are digitally manipulable commodities (Chesney & Citron, 2019). Cockel (2024) notes that deepfake sexploitation reinforces longstanding misogynistic norms, objectifying and hypersexualising women, often leading to significant psychological distress (European Parliament, 2021; Europol, 2022; Karasavva & Noorbhai, 2021). Ajder et al. (2019) confirm this disproportionate impact, with 98% of deepfake pornographic content featuring women, and 100% of victims in these cases being female. Furthermore, these videos have over 300 million likes and contain over 4,000 non-consensual celebrities (Badshah, 2024; Security Hero, 2023).

Feminist criminologists argue that cyber abuse reflects broader patriarchal structures, where digital spaces become extensions of gendered domination (Almenar, 2021; Ariani, et al., 2023; Tanck, 2024). Online harassment, especially against women, functions to reinforce men's relative power and restrict female participation (Baraket & Shnabel, 2020). Tichenor (1999) argues that violence against women serves to reproduce broader gendered inequalities. Feminist criminology provides a crucial framework for understanding these dynamics, highlighting how digital environments perpetuate offline patriarchal structures. Deepfake sexploitation reflects not merely technological misuse but a continuation of broader societal norms that subordinate women and commodify their identities.

iii. Gaps and Theoretical Debates

Despite growing awareness, significant gaps remain in academic literature and policy disclosure. Furthermore, while the literature broadly condemns deepfake sexploitation, there is debate regarding the most effective interventions. Citron and Franks (2014) advocate for stronger legal mechanisms and criminalisation, whereas some scholars caution that overreliance on legal frameworks may obscure underlying gendered dynamics, inadvertently promote censorship and risk infringing rights to freedom of expression (Henry & Powell, 2016; McNally, 2022).

Additionally, unresolved debate surrounds the efficacy of AI detection tools, watermarking and content labelling. While these measures have offered preventative measures in countries including the European Union (EU) and China (Block, 2024; Metselaar, 2025), critics argue they fall short in preventing victim harm (Hwang & Oh, 2023; Kira, 2024; Liang, et al., 2023; MacKenzie, 2023; Madiega, 2023). As such further scope exists for the prevention of harm to these vulnerable groups and this subsequent case study will assess the current issues in a deeper scope to ascertain the true levels of proliferation against women suffering deepfakes and sexploitation.

Case Study

This report examines the intersection of cybercrime, focusing on the impact of deepfake sexploitation on women in digital environments in the United Kingdom.

Key Stakeholders

i. Marginalised Communities

Women constitute the primary targets of deepfake sexploitation, with global trends revealing gendered patterns of harm. In South Korea, women face social restrictions that worsen the trauma of non-consensual deepfakes (Umbach et al., 2024) whilst in India, societal norms that devalue female autonomy surrounding deepfakes heighten vulnerability to abuse (Singh, 2023). Journalist Rana Ayyub was personally victimised after criticising the governmental response to a gang rape case (Ayyub, 2018; Brieger, 2021), leading to a pornographic deepfake circulating over 40,000 times through WhatsApp. Australian activist Noelle Martin also discovered thousands of manipulated pornographic content of herself, demonstrating her motivations to damage her reputation (Martin, 2021). Recently, nonconsensual deepfake pornography of Taylor Swift circulated widely on X (formerly Twitter) (Rahman-Jones, 2024; Saner, 2024), prompting temporary search blocks but raising questions about protections for non-celebrities (Riedl & Newell, 2024). These cases reveal how any woman with an online presence can be targeted (Karasavva & Noorbhai, 2021). Scholars advocate for platform accountability and stronger detection, reporting and removal systems (Montasari, 2024), as women remain structurally disempowered in digital spaces lacking adequate protections.

ii. Platforms and Developers

Technology platforms and developers are integral to circulations and moderations of deepfake content (Reisach, 2021). Platforms including Reddit, Telegram and X employ varying content moderation strategies (Morrow, et al., 2022; Seering, 2020). However, systems often operate reactively, disproportionately affecting the coherence of responses (Gongane, et al., 2022; Kikerpill, et al., 2021). Free-roam search engines further the exacerbate the issue (McGlynn, et al., 2024); despite investments in AI-based detection, high-quality deepfakes often evade tools due to increased sophistication (Gongane, et al., 2022; Manoharan & Sarker, 2022). Moderation decisions frequently prioritise financial imperatives over social conditions and user protections, as shown by Reddit's delayed deepfake ban following media scrutiny (Gamage, et al., 2022; Kikerpill, et al., 2021). Labelling theory suggests that failures to quickly and effectively remove synthetic sexual content reinforce victim stigmatisation (Attrill-Smith, et al., 2021; Becker, 1963; Bothamley & Tully, 2017; Mckinlay & Lavis, 2020), supporting arguments that platforms must bear responsibility (Oxford Analytica, 2025). Reactive governance leaves women exposed to ongoing psychological and reputational harm which lacks any real scope for effective long-term policy change.

Some legislative frameworks have shifted expectations. Under the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), large platforms must proactively detect and remove non-consensual deepfake content (European Commission, 2025). Reports show improved compliance (TikTok, 2025). Australia's Online Safety Act (2021) mandates removal within 24 hours, achieving a 70% success rate (Commission, 2023). While some platforms are combining AI detection with human oversight (Sunkari & Srinagesh, 2024), this technological 'arms race' introduces challenges of scalability, training data bias, and human-moderation burnout (George & George, 2023). Moderation technologies offer promising tools but are inconsistent with enforcement, failing to centre victims' experiences (Nahias & Perel, 2021). Effective moderation must balance technical efficiency and social accountability to enhance the protections of women in online spaces which now can be rendered as insufficient.

iii. Perpetrators

Perpetrators' motivations for disseminating non-consensual deepfakes are complex, combining psychosocial and rational decision-making (Bashir, et al., 2024; Hall & Hearn, 2019; Lowry, et al., 2013). Offenders frequently frame actions as revenge, rooted in narratives of infidelity, emasculation or loss of control (Fitness, 2001; Hall & Hearn, 2019; O'Hara, et al., 2020). These "manhood acts" seek to reclaim dominance within hegemonic gender structures (Berlin & Rollero, 2025; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). GST reinforces how gendered pressures and perceived emasculation contribute to targeting women (Hay & Ray, 2020; Merton, 1938; Parti & Dearden, 2024).

From RCT perspectives offenders are seen to follow on from Bentham's Utility Calculus whereby pleasure vs pain is balanced before deciding to commit crime, for RCT it would argue that such decisions are designed to maximise the utility by creating such deepfakes (Bashir, et al., 2024; Lowry, et al., 2013; O'Hara, et al., 2020).

Feminist theories argue that such abuse reflects a digital ecosystem historically shaped by patriarchal bias (Eikren & Ingram-Waters, 2021; Rosser, 2005; Wajcman, 2010). Deepfake dissemination is thus a calculated pursuit rooted in rational, gendered, and socio-cultural justifications, necessitating criminological and gendered violence frameworks.

iv. Legal Responses

This report examines the intersection of cybercrime, focusing on the impact of deepfake sexploitation on women in digital environments in the United Kingdom.

Current legislation on non-consensual deepfake pornography in the United Kingdom (UK) is regulated by the Online Safety Act (OSA) (2023), which bans the distribution of sexual deepfakes, enhancing measures to safeguard women (Ajder, et al., 2019; Wagner & Blewer, 2019), revising previous legislation that inadequately addressed synthetic media, *mens rea* issues, and 'consent' definitions (Gillespie, 2015; Henry & Powell, 2016; Kira, 2024; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017). In January 2025, the UK government announced a new offence under the Data Bill, criminalising the creation of sexually explicit deepfake images without consent (Ministry of Justice, 2025a), introducing penalties of up to two years imprisonment (Ministry of Justice, 2025b).

However, OSA provisions act only after harm occurs and depend heavily on platform moderation (Henry & Powell, 2016; Kikerpill, et al., 2021; Kira, 2024), which is ineffective on encrypted apps (Andrey, et al., 2021; Mink, et al., 2024; Patil & Chouragade, 2021). Platforms retain limited obligations (MacKenzie, 2023), despite Ofcom's expanded regulatory role under the OSA (GOV.UK, 2025; Ofcom, 2025). In contrast, China mandates ID authentication for deepfake software, mandatory consent for likeness use, and content labelling (Block, 2024; China Law Translate, 2022; Geng, 2023; Hu & Liu, 2024; Łabuz, 2023). The EU also require deepfake labelling (Metselaar, 2025). South Korea criminalises both viewing and possessing of non-consensual deepfakes (Buja, 2016; Krkic, 2025; Schuldt, 2024; Smith & Brake, 2024), increasing prosecution rates (Ick-jin, 2025; Ji-hye, 2024). Compared to these models, the UK's strategy remains reactive, lacking full lifecycle protections and preventive measures.

Only 10% of individuals feel confident in their ability to detect a deepfake (Ofcom, 2024), although people are overconfident (Köbis, et al., 2021). Formal educational interventions remain inadequate (See Appendix 1), though evidence suggests training improves deepfake detection (See Appendix 2). Broader resilience is hindered by cognitive, emotional and media literacy limitations (Das, et al., 2021; Diel, et al., 2024; Weerawardana & Fernando, 2021).

Digital abuse mirrors offline gender-based violence, limiting women's rights, participation online, and broader equality. Open access deepfake creation technology, combined with encrypted messaging services and weak platform governance, facilitates rapid and anonymous dissemination. Victims face major barriers in identifying perpetrators and removing content, particularly across uncooperative jurisdictions.

Theoretical Underpinnings

i. Rational Choice Theory

RCT posits that individuals commit crimes after weighing costs and benefits to maximise gain while minimising losses (Becker, 1968). The ease of accessing deepfake technology and limited legislative deterrence lowers the threshold for engaging in image-based sexual violence (Harper, et al., 2023; Karagianni & Doh, 2024). Fragmented international laws further enable rational offenders to exploit jurisdictional gaps (Phillips, et al., 2022).

However, RCT inadequately accounts for the gendered nature of deepfake offences, abstracting decision-making without addressing broader structures of misogyny (Akter & Ahmed, 2025;

Brieger, 2024). Thus, while RCT highlights motivations, it overlooks patriarchal power relations embedded in such offences (Edwards & Palermos, 2024).

ii. General Strain Theory

GST posits that individuals facing strain may resort to deviance as a coping mechanism (Agnew, 1985, 1992, 2001; Hay & Ray, 2020). Hay and Ray (2020) suggest online strains associated with marginalisation, rejection or perceived status deficits can lead to cyber offending, including deepfake abuse. Parti and Dearden (2024) emphasise that gendered strains, like entitlement and resentment, drive violence against women. GST reveals that some perpetrators externalise frustrations onto women via technological aggression (Akter & Ahmed, 2025). Nevertheless, GST's focus on individual psychological strains can obscure systemic inequalities and ideological motivations (Karagianni & Doh, 2024), and risks pathologising perpetrators without critiquing misogynistic norms (Brieger, 2024).

iii. Feminist Theory

Feminist theory critiques how deepfake sexploitation perpetuates systemic gender inequalities. Online spaces extend traditional male domination (Barker & Jane, 2016; Jane, 2016; Fladmoe & Madim, 2019). Mulvey's (1975) 'male gaze' is hyper-realised in deepfakes, where women's bodies are digitally exploited without consent. Brieger (2024) highlights that feminist communities frame victims as targets of systemic oppression, reinforcing the devaluation of female autonomy. Edwards and Palermos (2024) add that technologies are embedded within exclusionary histories. Akter and Ahmed (2025) caution that a feminist analysis must also consider intersections of race, class and sexuality, requiring continuous evolution to capture diverse victim experiences.

iv. Feminist Theories of Technology

Techno-feminism interrogates how technological design reflects gendered power structures (Edwards & Palermos, 2024; Wajcman, 2004). Deepfakes disproportionately harm women, demonstrating that technologies emerge from biased contexts (Karagianni & Doh, 2024). Brieger and Rolandsson (2024) argue that online feminist communities oscillate between constructionist optimism and determinist pessimism about technology's potential for change. While techno-feminists highlight structural issues, they sometimes underplay possibilities for counter-technological resistance, such as detection algorithms or feminist cyberactivism (Akter & Ahmed, 2025). Therefore, feminist theories must be open to technological subversion and resistance.

v. Labelling Theory

Labelling theory argues that deviance arises from societal reactions and imposed labels (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951). In deepfake sexploitation, victims face stigmatisation, secondary victimisation, and deterrence from reporting due to societal beliefs that blame them (Harper, et al., 2023; Phillips, et al., 2022). This reflects a broader rape myth (Burt, 1980; Henry & Powell, 2016). While labelling theory explains victim harm, it contributes little to understanding offender motivations, necessitating integration with broader feminist and sociological approaches.

This report examines the intersection of cybercrime, focusing on the impact of deepfake sexploitation on women in digital environments in the United Kingdom.

Policy Implications

The highlights urgent requirements for stronger legal, platform and educational interventions to combat deepfake sexploitation, particularly targeting the gendered harms facing women in the United Kingdom. Drawing on international best practices, The Legislation, Education and Platform Framework (L.E.P. Framework) to provide a robust, anticipatory response to this evolving threat.

These recommendations are based on evidence that current UK measures are fragmented, under-resourced and reactive. Without stronger anticipatory regulation, education and clear platform obligations, the gendered impacts of deepfake sexploitation will persist.

<u>Recommendation 1: LEGISLATION (L)</u>

➔ **Reevaluate the legislative restrictions through a multi-purpose regulation**.

- **Criminalise the Possession and Viewing of Non-Consensual Deepfakes**
    - Close enforcement loopholes and deter the demand.
    - Follow South Korea's legislation, criminalising production, distribution and possession, recognising the broader ecosystem of harm.
    - Be aware, penalising the possession and/or consumption of non-consensual deepfakes could infringe on civil liberties (McNally, 2022).
- **Mandate Identity Verification for Deepfake Creation Websites**
    - Limit anonymous perpetrators and facilitate tracing offenders.

  - ○ Following China’s regulation, improving offender accountability through mandatory name registration.
  - ○ Be aware that mandating real-name registration threatens freedom of speech and raises concerns regarding privacy (Li, et al., 2023).

Recommendation 2: EDUCATION (E)

➔ **Embed deepfake literacy into national resilience strategies.**

The gendered dynamics of deepfake harms show that women disproportionately suffer reputational, psychological, and social harms, often without awareness of their rights or protections.

i. **Establish public awareness campaigns on deepfake harms**

- Awareness campaigns would empower potential victims
  - ○ Deepfake training and awareness are beneficial (Appendix 1)

ii. **Implement a mandatory deepfake training course**

- Appropriated to schools (age-appropriate), universities and organisations
  - ○ Positive feedback-based training by Diel et al. (2024), see Appendices 3 and 4.

Recommendation 3: PLATFORMS (P)

i. **Require platforms to remove deepfake content within 24 hours**

- Rapid removal to reduce the visibility and spread of harmful material

  - ○ Adopt Australia's Online Safety Act (2021), requiring a 24-hour removal obligation
  - ○ creation of a statutory body within Ofcom to flag content and block searches.

ii. Require watermarking and provenance labelling of AI-generated content

- ● Labelling to support victims' claims and increase public awareness of manipulated content
  - ○ Follow China and the EU's mandating of watermarking AI-generated media
  - ○ Individuals can still remove or alter labels (Madiega, 2023).

iii. Implement a protective search architecture.

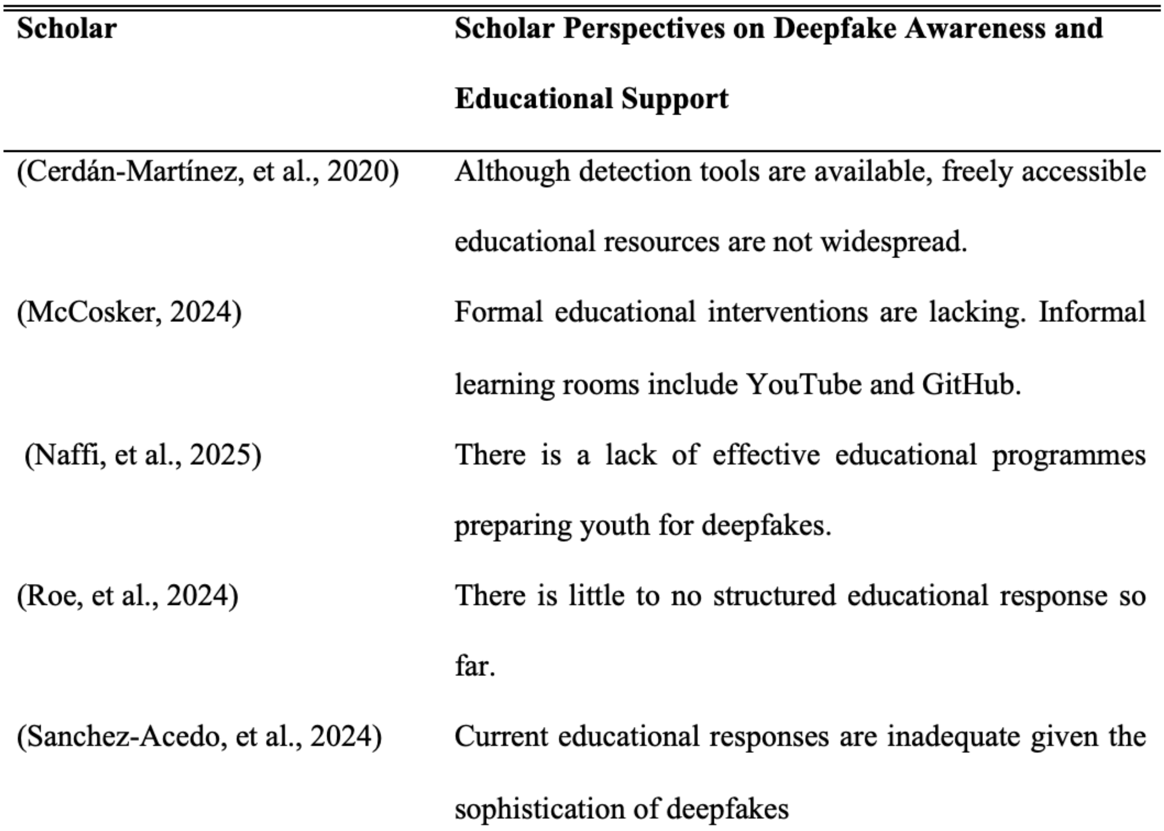
- ● Embed harm-reduction measures directly into the design of platform search engines limiting accessibility and visibility of harmful content.
  - ○ Following advice from McGlynn, Woods and Antoniou (2024)

<u>Conclusion</u>

This report has illuminated the complex interplay between gendered inequality, emerging technologies, and crime in the context of deepfake sexploitation in the United Kingdom. The findings reveal that technological advancements in AI and deep learning, while offering societal benefits, have also been weaponised to reinforce longstanding patriarchal norms, with women disproportionately bearing the harms of digital violence. Through the application of RCT, GST, feminist and labelling theories, it becomes clear that offender motivations are deeply entangled with societal structures that commodify and subordinate women. Legal frameworks such as the Online Safety Act (2023) represent progress but remain reactive, fragmented and overly reliant on platform self-regulation, failing to provide anticipatory protections. The proposed L.E.P. Framework addresses these deficiencies through proactive legislation, mandatory digital literacy education, and stronger platform governance obligations. However, significant challenges remain regarding enforcement across decentralised and encrypted digital environments. The significance of this study lies in its demonstration that technological innovation must be critically examined through an intersectional lens to prevent the reproduction of offline inequalities in online spaces. Future research should explore the global dimension of sexploitation, intersectional impacts on women of colour, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalised groups, and the development of community-driven technological countermeasures. It is only through an integrated, feminist-informed approach that society can hope to confront the evolving threats of cybercrime while advancing the principles of justice, equity, and human dignity in digital environments.

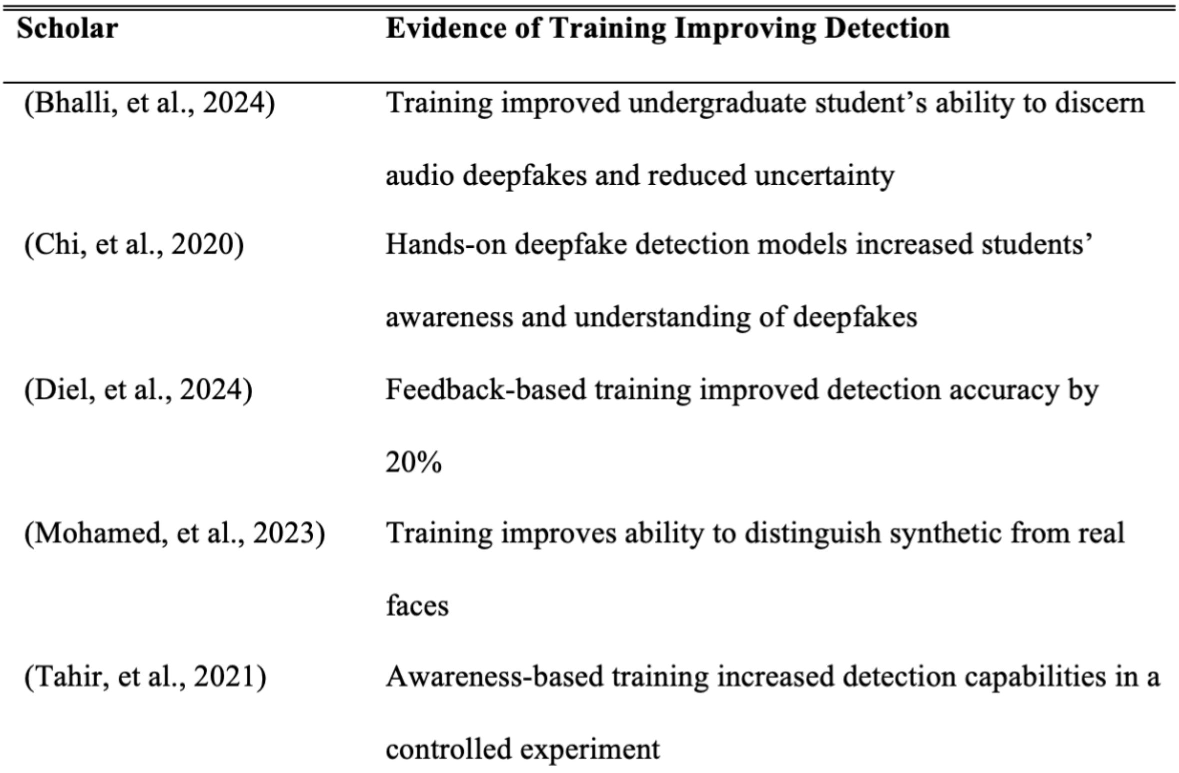
Appendices

Appendix 1: Formal educational interventions remain inadequate



Scholar	Scholar Perspectives on Deepfake Awareness and Educational Support
(Cerdán-Martínez, et al., 2020)	Although detection tools are available, freely accessible educational resources are not widespread.
(McCosker, 2024)	Formal educational interventions are lacking. Informal learning rooms include YouTube and GitHub.
(Naffi, et al., 2025)	There is a lack of effective educational programmes preparing youth for deepfakes.
(Roe, et al., 2024)	There is little to no structured educational response so far.
(Sanchez-Acedo, et al., 2024)	Current educational responses are inadequate given the sophistication of deepfakes

Appendix 2: Evidence that training improves deepfake detection.



Scholar	Evidence of Training Improving Detection
(Bhalli, et al., 2024)	Training improved undergraduate student's ability to discern audio deepfakes and reduced uncertainty
(Chi, et al., 2020)	Hands-on deepfake detection models increased students' awareness and understanding of deepfakes
(Diel, et al., 2024)	Feedback-based training improved detection accuracy by 20%
(Mohamed, et al., 2023)	Training improves ability to distinguish synthetic from real faces
(Tahir, et al., 2021)	Awareness-based training increased detection capabilities in a controlled experiment

Appendix 3: Mandatory Deepfake Training Course following feedback-based training (Diel, et al., 2024).

Training Characteristics and Implementation	Study Details	Schools (Age 11-18)	Universities	Workplaces
Study	Diel, et al. (2024)	Integrate training into media literacy courses	Embed as a mandatory learning outcome	Inclusion of deepfake awareness and impacts in cybersecurity training
Training Method	Immediate feedback after each attempt	Gamified app-based learning with instant feedback	E-Learning simulations with feedback loops	E-Learning simulations with feedback loops
Detection Improvement	20% improved in accuracy	Progressive levels, earn coins/points based	Certified credentials certificate	Certified credentials certificate

Appendix 4: Mandatory Deepfake Training Course, following feedback-based training, understanding and mitigating the limitations of the study (Diel, et al., 2024)

Psychological and Cognitive Considerations	Study Details	Schools (Age 11-18)	Universities	Workplaces
Negative Psychological Impact	Study found increased emotional distress and decreased confidence	Resilience training sessions and low-pressure incentives	Optional mental-health check ins post-training	Stress management workshops
Key Cognitive Outcomes	Awareness of deepfakes	Reinforce the dangers deepfakes pose, especially to women	Reinforce the dangers deepfakes pose, especially to women	Reinforce the dangers deepfakes pose, especially to women
Pedagogical Strategy	Learning through feedback fosters critical thinking	Class discussions on error recognition and harms to women	Seminars and Lectures on harms and consequences to women	Meetings and awareness campaigns on harms to women.

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