

Tackling Online Gendered Disinformation: Youth Guide

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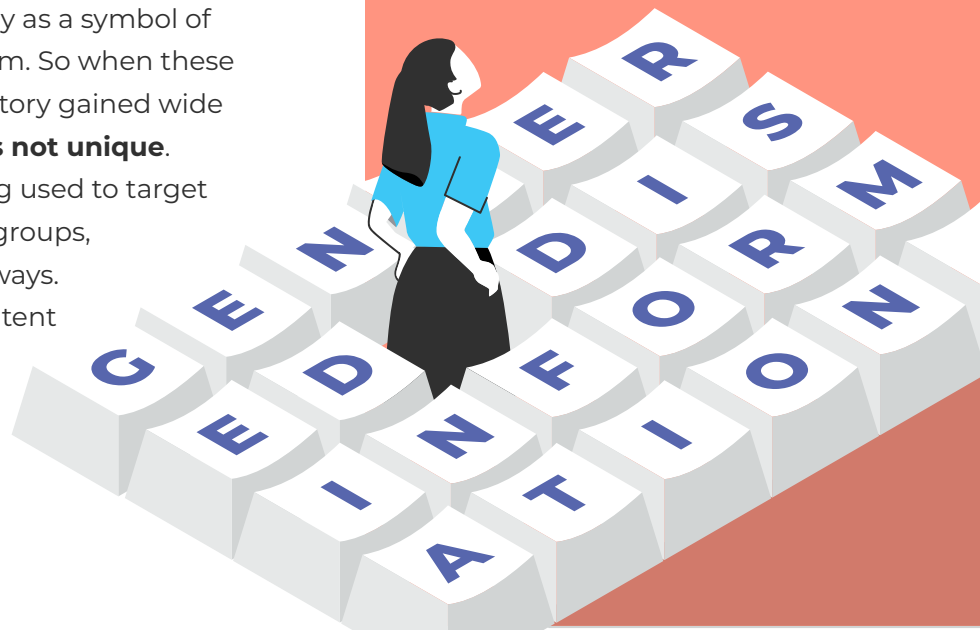
CASE STORY: TAYLOR SWIFT AND THE DANGERS OF DEEPPFAKES



Content advisory: This section discusses an incident involving disturbing and sexually explicit AI-generated images. While no graphic content is shown here, the topic may be upsetting or uncomfortable for some readers. Feel free to pause or skip this section if needed.

In January 2024, sexually explicit AI-generated images of Taylor Swift began circulating across social media, particularly on the platform X (formerly Twitter). These were **deepfakes**: digitally altered images created using Artificial Intelligence to make it look like someone did or said something they never actually did. One of the images was viewed over **47 million times** before it was eventually taken down ([BBC.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-67444444), 2024).

Taylor Swift is not only a major public figure in music and business – she’s also recognized by many as a symbol of confidence, independence, and feminism. So when these manipulated images targeted her, the story gained wide attention. **But what happened to her is not unique.** Increasingly, this kind of content is being used to target women, girls and other gender diverse groups, often in deeply abusive and sexualized ways. Right now, the majority of deepfake content online is sexually explicit, and it overwhelmingly targets women and girls, often without their knowledge or consent ([BBC.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-67444444), 2024).



While many spoke out in support of Taylor Swift, others dismissed the incident as part of the reality of being a celebrity, or minimized it by pointing out that the images were “fake.” But this raises an important question: Does the fact that something is digitally created make it any less of a violation if it was shared without consent?

**Now imagine this happening to someone you know.
Or to you. Would the reaction be different?**

Would it make you want to understand more about how these technologies are being misused to cause harm? Would you want to know what makes people do something like this? It turns out that this is an example of something called gendered disinformation. When false or harmful information, or fake media, about women or specific gender identities is spread online, it’s an example of technology-facilitated violence.

Sadly, these kinds of incidents are far from rare. In 2023 alone, Canada’s national tip line for reporting child sexual exploitation, **Cybertip.ca**, received nearly **4,000 reports of deepfake images involving youth** ([Canadian Centre for Child Protection](#), 2024). Many of these were created and circulated without the person’s knowledge.

The truth is, this isn’t just about celebrities. It’s part of a larger trend where emerging technologies, such as AI, are being used to amplify gender-based violence and disinformation online. So now that we know this isn’t a one-off, we need to ask:

What are you going to do to empower yourself and your communities to tackle online disinformation?



WHAT IS GENDERED DISINFORMATION?

DISINFORMATION VS. MISINFORMATION

- **Misinformation** is untrue content that is spread by people who believe that it is true. Misinformation could be spread innocently, or to cause harm.
- **Disinformation** is untrue content that is spread by people who know that it is untrue. Disinformation is always spread knowingly and deliberately to cause harm.

Disinformation can be used to attack individuals or entire communities, making them feel unsafe or unwelcome in online spaces. Many people struggle to tell fact from fiction in the digital age. Algorithms push individuals toward content that reinforces their existing beliefs, creating “echo chambers” where disinformation flourishes. And, fake images and false information can spread “at the speed of cyber”.

WHY DOES IT SPREAD?

THE “STICKINESS” OF DISINFORMATION

Disinformation and misinformation can be spread in a lot of ways, but social media platforms are some of the most common pathways for it. This is because social media is designed in a way to grab peoples' attention and overwhelm them with repeated stories that may or may not be true. It is so easy to repost content and help it spread further and further even if you're only sharing it to claim it's “untrue” or “silly”. Some believe and share harmful content not because they want to hurt others, but because they don't realize they're being manipulated. **This is troubling because “repetition is sticky” and the more times you hear a story, the harder it is to resist believing it's true!**



Did you know? We're more likely to believe something we've seen multiple times - even if we know it's false. That's why repetition is such a strong tool for spreading disinformation.

US VS. THEM

Sometimes disinformation is used purposely to divide communities and increase polarization, pushing people into separate groups or emphasizing differences. This can make it harder to communicate well with each other and can promote conflict. When we are fighting about the truth of information, it makes it harder to get along together as a society and support one another. This is why it's important to practice communicating with people who have different opinions than your own and to think critically about the information you see online, so you can have a better chance of resisting its negative effects.

HOW DOES IT IMPACT PEOPLE?

When disinformation spreads it can make people question their abilities, limit their opportunities, or even cause them to fear speaking out, silencing their voices. Seeing negative stereotypes or false information about yourself or a community you are part of over and over can cause self-doubt, anxiety, and low self esteem. Individuals might start to question their skills or feel pressured to fit into certain expectations. For example, if you constantly hear that “women aren’t good leaders,” you might be less likely to put yourself forward for leadership roles at school or in your community - this hurts our capacity to function as a society. If you are repeatedly told that “people like you can’t do math”, you may give up on a particular career path before even starting and, as a result, society loses out on the wonderful contributions you could have made.

Gendered disinformation also affects how people treat each other, and can lead to more bullying, harassment or exclusion. This can make social media feel like an unsafe place.

TAKING ACTION

RECOGNIZE, UNDERSTAND AND RESIST DISINFORMATION

Awareness of gendered disinformation, and the ability to recognize it are the first steps in countering its impact. Knowing how disinformation may appear in our daily lives ahead of time actually helps to protect us from it! **If we learn how gendered disinformation works, what tricks are used, and why people spread it, we’re less likely to fall for it when we run into it online.** We’ll also be in a better position to help others resist its harms, and to be able to support them if they’ve been affected. We can create healthier, more equal online spaces for everyone by questioning and avoiding spreading disinformation when we see it and helping others in our communities to do the same.

Below are examples of how it appears in different contexts:

- **Fake stories** – Fake news articles or social media posts that attack women, especially those in leadership roles.
- **Non-Consensual Image Sharing** – When someone shares or threatens to share private photos without permission.
- **Manipulated images and videos** – Edited pictures or deepfake videos that make it look like someone said or did something they never did.
- **Fake Accounts and Impersonation** – Creating fake profiles to spread lies, harass someone, or damage their reputation.

- **Doxxing** – When someone shares private information (like a home address or phone number) online to intimidate or harm a person.
- **Harassment, cyberbullying and hate speech** – Online attacks that try to intimidate, humiliate, or silence women and girls.
- **Memes and satire** – Jokes or cartoons that disguise harmful messages about women as “just humor”.
- **Misinformation about gender roles** – Posts or comments claiming that women are naturally bad at specific tasks or in certain sectors like leadership, science, or sports.
- **Classrooms** – Comments or posts with the narrative that “girls are naturally less capable in math and science,” discouraging female students from pursuing STEM education or careers.
- **Sports** – Women athletes often face public scrutiny amplified through social media, including shaming, objectification, sexist language, and debates over who is deemed eligible to compete in women’s sports.

Can you think about other examples that you may have experienced or heard about?

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AND OTHERS

To use an analogy, **it is much easier to help someone before they fall into a river than it is to pull them out when they are already downstream.** Disinformation works the same way! Building awareness of what gendered disinformation looks like and why it’s harmful before it’s encountered is much easier than trying to convince someone who already believes in the “fake news” that they may be wrong.



Some things you can do to empower others and contribute positively to online spaces include:

1. Understand that online spaces and digital tools can be amazing resources if used thoughtfully.
2. Recognize and resist disinformation when you see it in your own life and feed. Stop the spread with you!
3. Share what you know with others to help them be on the lookout for disinformation before it reaches them.
4. Create inclusive spaces on and offline where people can feel supported and practice communicating with others who have different lived experiences.
5. Model positive online practices like checking sources and thinking critically about information for your friends, family and communities.
6. Diversify who you follow so you aren't trapped in an "echo chamber" where you only see ideas or opinions that already match your own.
7. Support those who may be targeted by gendered disinformation by helping them connect with trusted networks and resources like family members, teachers, youth workers, or online services.



MY DIGITAL ACTIONS CHECKLIST

- I pause before sharing posts, especially if they seem emotional or extreme.
- I check where the content came from and whether it seems trustworthy.
- I report harmful or sexist content when I feel safe to do so.
- I talk to friends about what we see online, not just what's funny or viral, but what feels off or untrue.
- I take breaks from social media when it starts to feel overwhelming.

IT'S OK TO STEP AWAY!

Conversations about gendered disinformation can sometimes be uncomfortable and may have you feeling a range of emotions. **A lot of disinformation – on social media especially – is designed to cause fear, anger or confusion so it can gain traction.** It's important to recognize when it's having a negative impact on your own health and wellbeing so you can take a step back or seek support. It can be exhausting to constantly be educating others or handling harmful content in your online spaces. Action against disinformation is a team effort and that means it's not your job to fight every battle!

Cyberbullying and gendered disinformation can feel overwhelming, but there are people and organizations ready to support you. By speaking up, we help make the internet a safer place for ourselves and others.

If the situation is serious, such as threats or ongoing harassment, you can also report it to:

- NeedHelpNow.ca,
- Cybertip.ca,
- the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (Protectchildren.ca),
- ProtectKidsOnline.ca,
- NeedTalk.ca,
- or even local police if necessary.



REFLECTING ON YOUR ONLINE WORLD

Now that you've reached the end of this guide, reflect on the following:

One thing I learned that surprised me: _____

One way I can create safer online spaces: _____

One person I want to talk to about this: _____

Glossary

The digital world is constantly evolving. **Use the space below to add new terms and concepts you encounter as you deepen your understanding of this topic.**

Word	Definition
Echo chamber	A space, often online or on social media, where people only hear ideas and opinions that match their own. Because everyone shares similar views, different perspectives are rarely seen or considered. This can make someone's beliefs feel more true or more popular than they really are.
Misinformation	Untrue content that is spread by people who believe that it is true. Misinformation could be spread innocently, or to cause harm.
Disinformation	Untrue content that is spread by people who know that it is untrue. Disinformation is always spread knowingly and deliberately to cause harm.
Doxxing	When someone shares private information (like a home address or phone number) online to intimidate or harm a person.
Deepfake videos	Fake videos created with artificial intelligence (AI) to make it look like someone is doing or saying something they never did. These are often used to spread false, damaging information about women.
Gendered disinformation	False or misleading information designed to harm people based on their gender. It can take many forms, from online harassment, controlling behaviours, and manipulated images to false narratives that undermine the credibility of women and gender-diverse individuals.

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The Community Safety Knowledge Alliance (CSKA) is a non-profit applied research organization that supports governments, police, public health and human service leaders in developing, implementing and assessing new approaches to enhancing community safety and well-being service delivery and outcomes. Over the past decade, CSKA has conducted interdisciplinary research and engaged with change-makers on some of Canada's most pressing social issues, including intimate partner violence, youth radicalization to violence, cybersecurity, food security, drug policy, human rights-based policing, and community reintegration initiatives. CSKA maintains an active posture on issues such as disinformation and artificial intelligence to support adaptive responses to these emerging challenges.

Sapper Labs Group (SLG) conducts research to understand the methods and impacts of disinformation and influence campaigns and networks and as input to the development of processes to support effective countermeasures. SLG is supported by global partners and a comprehensive intelligence sharing network. The goal of SLG is make the world a better safer place in line with objectives around: countering foreign interference and influence, countering radicalization and extremism, supporting human rights and other activities involving capacity building related to information integrity.

