



Everyday deception or a few prolific liars? The prevalence of lies in text messaging



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ABSTRACT

With the recent and dramatic changes to communication patterns introduced by new information technologies it is increasingly important to understand how deception is produced in new media. In the present study we investigate deception production in text messaging, focusing on how often people lie, about what and to whom. This study uses a novel data collection method that allows for the examination of individuals' communication records at the message level, which may provide a more accurate account of deception behavior than diary or survey methods. We find that the majority of our participants practiced deception in text messaging. Although lying was a relatively infrequent occurrence for the majority of our participants, there were a small number of prolific liars who told a disproportionately large number of lies using this medium. Additionally, we found some support for the argument that deception occurs less frequently in closer relationships, and we observed how the micro-coordination goals of text messaging change the properties of deceptive text messages relative to face-to-face lies.

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1. Introduction

Research on deception has examined both the production and detection of lies in a variety of contexts. To date, far more work has focused on detection of deception relative to production. A recent meta-analysis of detection research included 206 studies and over 24,483 judges (Bond & DePaulo, 2006). In contrast, the number of studies focusing on production questions, such as how often people lie, about what, and to whom, is much smaller and numbers in the dozens of studies rather than hundreds. This asymmetry between detection and production work is problematic given the importance of deception in communication, with some scholars arguing that deception is one of the most significant human phenomenon in communication (Miller & Stiff, 1993).

Addressing questions around deception production, including how often people lie, about what, and to whom, has become even more important with the recent and dramatic changes to communication patterns introduced by new information technologies. As these new forms of communication increase in popularity we must

advance our understanding of how deception takes place in these new media. In the present study we examine deception production in text messaging, which is becoming one of the dominant forms of interpersonal communication, with 72% of American adult cell-phone users sending and receiving text messages (Purcell, Entner, & Henderson, 2010), producing over 184 billion text messages per month in the US (CTIA, 2012).

In the context of text messaging we tackle three research questions that have emerged in the limited deception production literature. The first question is concerned with how often individuals lie, including how different media may affect the prevalence of deception (e.g., George & Robb, 2008; Hancock, Thom-Santelli, & Ritchie, 2004; Whitty, Buchanan, Joinson, & Meredith, 2012). A debate has recently developed over the regularity with which individuals produce lies in everyday communication. Early diary studies suggested that deception is a regular occurrence, with most people lying at a rate of once or twice a day on average (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). More recent findings, however, have cast some doubt on how to interpret results from these diary studies. A key concern is that averaging the frequency of lies across participants obscures a skewed distribution of deception rates. Rather than everyone lying on a daily basis, this view argues that a small number of people account for a disproportionate share of the observed deception, with the majority of people telling relatively few lies

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(Halevy, Shalvi, & Verschuere, 2014; Serota, Levine, & Boster, 2010). In the present study we examine how often people lie in text messaging, and we seek to also address this larger debate about deception prevalence.

A second question in the deception production literature is the content of lies. Very limited work has examined the characteristics of lies in everyday communication. In their seminal work on lie production, DePaulo and colleagues content analyzed hundreds of lies to produce a taxonomy about the content (e.g., about a fact, feeling, accomplishment, explanation or action), orientation (e.g., self- or other-oriented) and the form of lies (e.g., outright, exaggerated or subtle), and while some work has explored these characteristics in lies told across different media, it remains unclear how communication technology might influence the content of lies. How do socio-technical factors, such as the frequent coordinating of social interactions in text messaging or the fact that it leaves a record (Birnholtz, Guillory, Hancock, & Bazarova, 2010; Ling & Yttri, 2002), affect the content of lies?

The third question is concerned with to whom people lie most. For example, a common research question has been whether people lie more or less to close relational contacts compared with distant contacts. The research to date is surprisingly mixed, with some empirical results suggesting that people lie less to close communication partners, perhaps due to the importance of trust in such relationships (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998), while other studies suggesting the opposite pattern, perhaps due to increased concerns with the feelings and opinions of close partners (Metts, 1989). Given that text messaging tends to involve mostly people with whom one has shared contact information, such as friends, romantic partners and family, does deception frequency vary across relational closeness in text messaging?

While understanding these questions regarding deception production in text messaging is important given the incredibly widespread use of text messaging in human communication, text messaging may also offer some important advantages over other media for capturing deceptive behavior. An important, and acknowledged, limitation of both diary and survey studies for examining the frequency of deception prevalence is that they require accurate recall of lies told during conversations over a given time period. This is problematic given that people tend to have surprisingly poor memory for their own conversations. In one study (Stafford & Daly, 1984), participants were asked to converse with a partner for seven minutes and then recall their conversation after a short distractor task. On average, individuals were able to remember only a small fraction, about ten percent, of the content of their conversations. In fact, individuals were more likely to remember their partners' conversation contributions than their own. As such, diary studies, and especially surveys that ask participants to recall their conversations over the last 24 h, are subject to serious recall errors and biases.

In the present study we leverage the digital record left by text messaging to reduce the dependency on participant memory (see also Birnholtz et al., 2010; Hancock et al., 2009). Text messaging systems allow users to review their previous texts to a communication partner. We use these communication histories to remind participants of their actual conversational contributions. While memory is still involved in recalling whether one lied or not, we believe that this method of reviewing communication histories will yield more accurate results than diary studies or surveys. Analyses reported here build on a partial analysis of this data set, described in Reynolds et al. (2013).

1.1. How often are deceptive text messages produced?

The first area we explore in the production of deceptive text messages is the rate at which these types of messages are pro-

duced. Surprisingly, Serota et al. (2010) note that there have been relatively few studies that directly address the rate of production of deceptive communication. From these few studies, moreover, two very different understandings of deceptive behavior have emerged. On the one hand, some have argued that lying is an integral component of communication and social interaction, and as such, people tell lies on a regular and everyday basis (DePaulo et al., 1996; George & Robb, 2008; Hancock et al., 2004). This view is based on theories of self-presentation, which argue that people seek to present themselves in the best possible way to others (e.g., Goffman, 1959). When it is not possible to present oneself in a positive light truthfully, deception is a strategy that people often employ in order to cultivate a more positive impression and possibly cast a more positive light on others or one's relationship with them as well (DePaulo et al., 2003). Given that this is such a fundamental goal for people when interacting with others, deception should be an ordinary, everyday occurrence for most people.

To test this hypothesis, DePaulo et al. (1996) conducted diary studies examining patterns of deception among both students and non-students in face-to-face, telephone, and written interactions. Both groups of participants were asked to keep a record of their social interactions (that lasted for at least ten minutes or included a lie told by the participant) for seven days, and to record any lies told during those interactions. To aid with memory concerns, participants were encouraged to take notes following their interactions, and their interaction and deception records were to be updated at least once per day. In the student sample, 76 of 77 participants reported telling at least one lie over the seven-day period, with an average of 1.96 lies per day. In the non-student sample, 64 of 70 participants reported telling at least one lie over the seven-day period, with an average of 0.97 lies per day. As such, they concluded that lying is a common and everyday event for individuals.

Several other studies have followed this initial research with diary studies that also include multiple media, including telephone, messaging and email (George & Robb, 2008; Hancock et al., 2004; Whitty et al., 2012). Hancock et al. (2004) examined the frequency with which deceptive messages were produced during face-to-face, telephone, instant messaging, and email interactions. They also found that deception was a commonplace event, with participants reporting an average of 1.6 lies per day and deception occurring in 26% of interactions. George and Robb (2008) explored deception during face-to-face, telephone, instant messaging, email, or text messaging communication and used PDAs (rather than paper forms) to record interactions. In their two samples, they found that participants lied between 1.11 and 1.96 times per day, on average. The findings from both of these studies support DePaulo et al.'s (1996) assertions about the commonplace nature of deception in everyday interactions.

Recent work, however, has questioned the interpretation of these results, drawing on the principle of veracity, which notes that people may try to avoid situations involving deception because, unlike telling the truth, engaging in deception requires justification (Bok, 1999). Therefore, they argue that most people should lie infrequently. Serota et al. (2010) speculated, however, that some individuals may have especially honest demeanor that makes it easier for them to get away with lying and who therefore lie more than average. They referred to this small group of people as "prolific liars" who skew the average values reported by prior diary studies (Serota et al., 2010).

To examine this prediction, Serota et al. (2010) asked individuals (student and non-student samples) to recall the number of lies they had told in the last 24 h, and they also re-analyzed data from the DePaulo et al. (1996) and George and Robb (2008) studies. Like prior work, these survey studies found that, on average, people lie

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