



“Love the Way You Lie”: Sexting deception in romantic relationships



Michelle Drouin*, Elizabeth Tobin, Kara Wygant

Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 3 April 2014

Keywords:

Sexting
Deception
Attachment
Gender
Computer-mediated communication

ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined the prevalence of lying during sexting in a sample of 155 young adult college students. More than one third (37%) of those who had ever had a committed relationship and approximately half (48%) of active sexters (i.e., those who had ever sent a sexual text message) had lied to their committed partners during sexting about what they were wearing, doing, or both. Most people (67%) lied to serve their partner in some way (e.g., make it better for their partner) but some (33%) lied to serve themselves (e.g., they were bored). Additionally, lying during sexting was much more common among women than men: 45% of women and 24% of men had lied during sexting with committed partners. When attachment characteristics were considered, attachment avoidance predicted lying during sexting among active sexters, even after controlling for gender. Therefore, lying during sexting, just like pretending orgasm in a face-to-face context, is more likely to occur among those with insecure attachments to relationship partners. We discuss the similarities and differences between sexual deception in face-to-face and CMC contexts and propose future directions for this research.

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1. Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) offers us the unique opportunity to stay in constant, nearly simultaneous contact with our social connections. However, there are downsides to CMC, as it is also characterized by physical distance, which may increase psychological distance (Anderson & Patterson, 2010) and decrease the social cues available for interpreting social stimuli (e.g., Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). For these reasons—the physical and psychological distance and absence of some social cues (e.g., facial expressions and tone of voice)—CMC may be an ideal platform for deception. This proposition aligns well with Hancock, Thom-Santelli, and Ritchie's (2004) model, which states that distribution (i.e., physical distance), synchronicity, and lower recordability would increase the incidence lying behavior. Thus, certain aspects of CMC (e.g., text messaging or instant messaging) might be ideal for deception because, though recordable, these types of communication often take place between people who are separated by physical distance and may involve synchronous conversations, which are a breeding ground for spontaneous lies.

In this study, we examined the frequency of deception with regard to a CMC behavior that has become fairly popular among today's young adults—sexting. Recent studies have estimated that approximately two-thirds to three-fourths of young adults have sent sexual text messages (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Dir, Coskunpinar, Steiner, & Cyders, 2013; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013), and recent research has shown that they sometimes do so even when they do not want to (Drouin & Tobin, 2014). As face-to-face deception about sexual issues (e.g., pretending orgasm) among intimate partners is fairly common (e.g., Knox, Schacht, Holt, & Turner, 1993; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010; Wiederman, 1997), we expected that text messages would be used in a similar manner (e.g., pretending sex). Moreover, in line with research linking insecure attachment with deception (Cole, 2001; Ennis, Vrij, & Chance, 2008; Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, & Chun, 2010; Lopez & Rice, 2006), we expected that those who lied during sexting would be more likely to have insecure attachments with intimate partners.

1.1. Deception in romantic relationships

Deception is a common occurrence in everyday life. Some researchers have reported lying prevalence rates as high as one to two times a day and in 20–33% of interactions with others (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996); whereas others, such as Lippard (1988), report lower rates of lying (about 4 times per week). Regardless of how often they occur, most lies

* Corresponding author. Address: Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne, 2101 E. Coliseum Blvd., Fort Wayne, IN 46805, United States. Tel.: +1 260 481 6398.

E-mail addresses: drouinm@ipfw.edu (M. Drouin), jenkem01@students.ipfw.edu (E. Tobin), kwygant8@gmail.com (K. Wygant).

are characterized as “little lies” (p. 993; DePaulo et al., 1996) that serve to protect both the liar, target, or both. However, even if they serve a protective function, interactions containing lies have been rated (by liars) lower in intimacy and pleasantness, and lies also cause distress to liars (DePaulo et al., 1996). Thus, not surprisingly, lies have been shown to have negative effects on relationships (Cole, 2001; Peterson, 1996).

Although people tend to lie more to those who are relationally distant (DePaulo & Kashy, 2008), lying among romantic relationship partners is quite common (e.g., DePaulo & Kashy, 2008; Knox et al., 1993). Moreover, among intimate partners, some of this lying relates specifically to sexual issues (Knox et al., 1993; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010; Wiederman, 1997). In Knox et al.'s (1993) college student sample, more than 92% had told a lie to an intimate partner, and many of these lies involved false descriptions of a sexual experience (e.g., lying about an orgasm). In studies that have examined pretending orgasm specifically, researchers have found that the practice is fairly common. For example, nearly 60% of the college women in Wiederman's (1997) sample had pretended orgasm during intercourse. Meanwhile, in Muehlenhard and Shippee's (2010) sample, 28% of men and 67% of women who had experienced intercourse had pretended orgasm. Even more relevant to the present inquiry, 57% of men and 69% of women in Muehlenhard and Shippee's (2010) college sample indicated that they had pretended to be aroused or enthusiastic about a sexual act.

Because of the physical distance between partners, deception during sexting would involve little more than using written words to convey orgasm, enthusiasm, or arousal. In fact, contrary to pretending orgasm in a face-to-face context, one need not even be involved in sexual activity to pretend orgasm via sexting. Instead, one could be sitting at home in flannel pajamas, watching television, and pretending to be wearing something sexy or doing something sexual. This ability to control self-presentation is a key feature of the internet (McKenna & Bargh, 2000) and would allow individuals to present more idealized versions of themselves during computer-mediated activities, like sexting. Presumably, presenting an idealized version of oneself might benefit a romantic relationship, but why else might people lie about sexting to relationship partners? Researchers have suggested that lies in general may serve a protective function, as they may help people avoid conflict or trauma in their relationships (Lippard, 1988; Marelich, Lundquist, Painter, & Mechanic, 2008; Metts, 1989). Additionally, lies also might help to serve others as in the case of altruistic or other-serving lies (DePaulo et al., 1996; DePaulo & Kashy, 2008; Kaplar & Gordon, 2004). With regard to lies pertaining to sex specifically, Muehlenhard and Shippee (2010) found that people pretended orgasm most often to end sex (not relevant to present inquiry) or because “they wanted to avoid negative consequences (e.g., hurting their partner's feelings) and to obtain positive consequences (e.g., pleasing their partner)” (p. 552). In each of these relevant examples, lies were told to serve the partner and could therefore be classified as other-serving lies.

At present, no known studies have examined the prevalence of deception via sexting; therefore, a goal of this exploratory study was to examine the prevalence of lying during sexting with committed relationship partners. Because sexting utilizes text or instant messages, which can be done simultaneously and when one is physically removed from one's partner, we expected that people would lie during sexting. Additionally, for those who did lie during sexting with partners, we wanted to examine whether their motivations for doing so were self- or other-serving. As those who pretended orgasm in Muehlenhard and Shippee's (2010) study were likely to do so to benefit or protect their partners, we expected that most sexting lies would also be other-serving. In sum, based on the extant literature, we expected:

H1. People would lie during sexting with committed partners.

H2. The motivations for lying during sexting would be mostly other-serving.

Further, researchers have shown rather consistently that men and women do not necessarily differ in the frequency with which they lie, but they do differ in the ways they tell lies or their motivations for doing so (DePaulo, Epstein, & Wyer, 1993; Lippard, 1988). More specifically, in contrast to men, women lie in a warmer, protective way and more often do so in an effort to support relationship partners (e.g., DePaulo et al., 1993; Lippard, 1988). Thus, women are more likely to lie in a way that serves others (DePaulo et al., 1996). Because we hypothesized that motivations for lying during sexting would mostly be other-serving, we expected:

H3. Women would be more likely than men to engage in sexting lies with committed partners.

1.2. Attachment and deception

Warm and responsive caregiving gives rise to secure attachments, allowing children to develop a positive sense of self and others. In contrast, when caregiving is harsh or neglectful, children may develop insecure attachments and a negative sense of self or others (Bowlby, 1973; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). According to attachment theorists, these early experiences are carried forward as working models for future, adult relationships (e.g., Bowlby, 1973; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In adult relationships, those higher in attachment anxiety may have a more negative view of self, and those higher in attachment avoidance may have a more negative view of others. As a result, those high in attachment anxiety fear losing romantic partners and have an intense desire for closeness and intimacy, whereas those high in attachment avoidance fear and avoid dependence and intimacy and exhibit a strong desire for self-reliance (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Perhaps because of their negative perception of self and/or others, those with insecure attachments may be more dishonest (i.e., tell lies) or inauthentic (i.e., not represent their true selves) in their relationships. An increasingly wide body of research has emerged supporting this view (Cole, 2001; Ennis et al., 2008; Gillath et al., 2010; Lopez & Rice, 2006). Cole (2001) showed that both attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety predicted deception in romantic relationships; however, attachment avoidance was a stronger predictor of deception. More recently, Lopez and Rice (2006) found that both attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety were negatively related to authenticity in relationships (unacceptability of deception); again, the relationship was stronger for attachment avoidance. Other researchers have examined attachment characteristics with regard to the types of lies that people tell. For example, Ennis et al. (2008) found that within romantic relationships attachment anxiety was related only to frequency of altruistic lies; however, attachment avoidance was significantly related to self-serving and other-serving lies. Similarly, Gillath et al. (2010) examined four different types of authenticity and found that attachment avoidance was more strongly (negatively) related than attachment anxiety to *authentic behavior*, which is acting in alignment with one's own beliefs and not just appeasing another person, and to *relational orientation*, which is acting in a genuine (non-fake) way in relationships with others.

Considered together, these studies suggest that avoidant attachment is the dimension most strongly related to lying in romantic relationships, particularly for lies that are self- or other-serving, contradicting authentic behavior and relational orientation. However, no known studies have examined whether those high in avoidant attachment are also more likely to lie within *sexual situations* with their partners (e.g., pretending orgasm) in either

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