



## Full length article

## Why do people lie online? “Because everyone lies on the internet”

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined online deception across four different online venues (i.e., social media, online dating, anonymous chat rooms, and sexual websites) in a sample of 272 U.S. adults (average age = 32.22 years) recruited through Amazon's MTurk. Few of the participants (16%–32%) reported that they were or would be always honest across these sites, and even fewer (0–2%) suspected that others were always honest in these different online venues. In terms of types of lie, most (55–90%) believed that others were at least *sometimes* lying about their age, gender, activities, interests, and appearance across the four online venues. Ninety percent expected others to lie at least sometimes about their appearance (most expected lie type) and 55% expected others to lie at least sometimes about their gender (least expected lie type). However, although they expected people to lie more about their gender on sites with more anonymity and invisibility (like anonymous chat rooms and sexual websites), they expected equal rates of lies about appearance across all four websites, even on sites where users provide pictures and have shared acquaintances. Moreover, perceptions of others' lying behavior on the venue were more significant predictors of own lying behavior than any of the personal characteristics we measured (i.e., Machiavellianism, psychopathy, extraversion, or internet addiction). The importance of mutuality was further reinforced by qualitative comments that showed that, in addition to lying to look more attractive or for privacy or protection concerns, some people lie “because everyone lies on the internet.”

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## 1. Introduction

“Online is different, online is just a fantasy. You can be make believe, you can be a happily ever after, you can put aside your shitty life, your crappy job, your family that doesn't care, your flabby belly, your lungs that would give out if you jogged half as much as you say you do, and you can be perfect. You can have the dream. You can have happy. You can be funny and talented and kind and warm or snarky. You are free to just let go.”

Anonymous woman, 45

In 2012, Notre Dame football player Manti Te'o's name shot to the top of the media headlines, not just because of his football skill—he was a Heisman Trophy finalist that year—but also because of a much-followed story that emerged surrounding his girlfriend, Lennay Kekua, and a bizarre series of events that preceded her

alleged death from leukemia. The media stories that followed included the unveiling of a string of lies told by a male acquaintance of Te'o's, who had invented the persona of Lennay Kekua and engaged in a multi-year online romantic relationship with Te'o (e.g., Mascia, Aradillas, Breuer, Dodd, & Shenfeld, 2013). The revelation that Lennay was not real, and that Manti Te'o had been “catfished”, marked a sharp shift in American culture—a collective realization that this ever-evolving virtual network that helped us build connections and create knowledge was also being used to lie and deceive. The veil of anonymity had been temporarily lifted, revealing an opportunity for deception on a level that many had never imagined.

Although this very public event propelled catfishing into the national spotlight, extreme cases of online deception have been highlighted in the research literature for more than 20 years (e.g., Feldman, 2000; Joinson & Dietz-Uhler, 2002; Van Gelder, 1991). Moreover, numerous researchers have shown that deception is quite common across a variety of online venues, such as social networking sites, chat rooms, discussion boards, virtual reality interfaces, and online dating websites (e.g., Buchanan & Whitty, 2014; Caspi & Gorsky, 2006; Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2011;

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Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012; Jøn, 2010; Warkentin, Woodworth, Hancock, & Cormier, 2010; Whitty, 2002). Accordingly, internet users are generally quite suspicious of others' honesty online (e.g., Caspi & Gorsky, 2006; Hancock & Woodworth, 2013; Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Walther, 1996; Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001).

Although a number of researchers have examined trust and honesty on the internet, only a few (e.g., Toma, Jiang, & Hancock, 2016) have contrasted self- and other-honesty online, and no known studies have considered how these assessments of online lying (self vs. other) vary across different types of online venues. Therefore, in this study, we examined self-honesty and perceptions of others' honesty across four online venues (i.e., social networking, online dating, chat rooms, and sexual communication websites), the individual characteristics (i.e., psychological characteristics and internet experience/addiction) that predict self-honesty online, and people's stated motivations for lying online in a sample of U.S. adults.

### 1.1. Lying on the internet

A key aspect of online virtual communities is the development of trust (Blanchard, Welbourne, & Boughton, 2011; Henderson & Gilding, 2004). However, because of the internet's distinctive features (e.g., limited cues and transcendence of geography), trust is a common concern among many internet users, and many recognize that the internet is a prime medium for deceit (e.g., Caspi & Gorsky, 2006; Hancock & Woodworth, 2013; Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Walther, 1996; Walther et al., 2001). Thus, over the past two decades, researchers have been exploring the prevalence, correlates, and motivations for online deception.

In a seminal study, Donath (1998) outlined four types of online deception: trolling, category deception, impersonation, and identity concealment. Catfishing or scamming, as described in the examples above, would fall into the category of impersonation, and empirical studies show that these extreme forms of online deception are not uncommon. For example, Buchanan and Whitty (2014) found that 16% of the online daters in their European sample had been fooled by a scammer (i.e., someone who created a fake profile using stolen pictures). However, there are also subtler types of impersonation that can occur online, such as category deception, where one assumes a different social role than his actual self (e.g., gender switching or age deception) and identity concealment, where one hides parts or all of his true identity (Donath, 1998). Additionally, some may engage in misrepresentation, or presenting oneself in an idealized way (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001; Utz, 2005). These subtler forms of category deception are reported much more commonly than outright impersonation. For example, Whitty (2002) found that many participants in her chat room sample (from 18% to 62%, depending on their gender and type of lie) had lied about their age, occupation, education, income, and gender. Meanwhile, in Caspi and Gorsky's (2006) study, 45% lied about their age, and 27% lied about their gender on discussion boards. Online daters are also likely to lie: 51% of the online daters in Whitty's (2008) study admitted to misrepresenting themselves online with regard to their looks, relationship status, age, weight, socio-economic status, or interests.

Researchers have also found a self-other asymmetry with regard to honesty in online contexts, with participants noting that others are more dishonest than they are (Toma et al., 2016; Whitty, 2008). For example, in Whitty's (2008) study, online daters reported that others misrepresented themselves more than they did with regard to their traits and interests. Meanwhile, participants in Toma et al.'s (2016) study expected others to be lying more than they were, especially via online mediums like instant messaging and email.

This reported asymmetry may not reflect reality; instead it could just be a reflection of individuals' motivation to preserve their self-integrity (Steele, 1999) or a tendency to see their own lies as justifiable (Gordon & Miller, 2000). However, self-other asymmetry might also be related to widespread suspiciousness about others' honesty online (e.g., Caspi & Gorsky, 2006; Hancock & Woodworth, 2013; Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Walther, 1996; Walther et al., 2001).

In terms of the types of lies people tell online, some types of lies are more common than others. For example, internet users tend to lie more often about their age than their gender (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006; Whitty, 2002). More relevant to the current inquiry, different online venues are associated with different rates and types of online lies. Major categorical lies (e.g., age and gender) seem to occur more frequently on sites where there is more anonymity and invisibility, like chat rooms, than on sites where there may be a possibility or goal to meet the other person, like online dating sites or social networking (Warkentin et al., 2010; Whitty, 2002, 2008). There are a number of theoretical reasons for why this variability might occur.

First, Suler (2004) described several components of online inhibition (e.g., dissociative anonymity, invisibility, and dissociative imagination) that could lead to varied levels of disinhibition across different online venues. In terms of anonymity, if no one knows who you are and it is difficult (or impossible) to track you down, it gives a license for behavior that may not be socially acceptable or consistent with one's offline self. In support of this, researchers have found that online daters, who likely have a goal of meeting their chat partners, misrepresented themselves online only slightly in terms of weight, height, and age (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008), and men who thought they would meet their online dating target engaged in less exaggerated self-presentation than those who did not think they would meet their dating target (Guadagno et al., 2012). Additionally, some websites, like anonymous chat rooms, allow for more invisibility than others (e.g., social media websites), and more invisibility translates into greater opportunity for category deception, like lying about age or gender (see also Warkentin et al., 2010). Finally, some websites (e.g., online gaming, fantasy websites, role-play websites) actually encourage people to assume characters and enact fantasies that are completely dissociated from their offline worlds (e.g., Jøn, 2010; Suler, 2004).

Second, according to Interpersonal Deception Theory (IDT; Buller & Burgoon, 1996) deception is a dynamic process, dependent on features of the situation, such as relational features (e.g., relationship and familiarity with dyadic partner) and context (e.g., interactivity of the medium). In terms of relational features, most researchers have found that people are more likely to lie to those who are relationally distant than those who are relationally close (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001; DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Whitty & Carville, 2008). Meanwhile, in terms of context, Warkentin et al. (2010) found that people were more likely to lie about demographic information and interests on the sites with fewer warrants (i.e., connections between the user's offline and online life; Walther & Parks, 2002) than on sites with more warrants. More specifically, people were more likely to lie in chat rooms and forums, where names, photos, and known acquaintances were uncommon, than in social networking, where these warrants were nearly ubiquitous.

Finally, according to George, Giordano, and Tilley (2016), perceptions of others' lying behavior online is a complex process. Building upon Prominence-Interpretation Theory (PIT; Fogg, 2003), which states that our perceptions of the credibility of websites is based on our assessments of the prominence and reputation of the site, George et al. (2016) proposed an expanded version—

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