Self Curation, Social Partitioning, Escaping from Prejudice and Harassment: the Many Dimensions of Lying Online

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ABSTRACT

Portraying matters as other than they truly are is an important part of everyday human communication. In this paper, we use a survey to examine ways in which people fabricate, omit or alter the truth online. Many reasons are found, including creative expression, hiding sensitive information, role-playing, and avoiding harassment or discrimination. The results suggest lying is often used for benign purposes, and we conclude that its use may be essential to maintaining a humane online society.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

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Keywords

Lying online; privacy; digital identity; online communities

1. INTRODUCTION

Lying and other forms of deception are as fundamental to human interaction as discourse itself, amounting to as much as a third of interpersonal communications by some accounts [3, 1]. By deception, we refer to not only the standard connotation of a deliberate attempt to mislead others, but to a much larger class of activities characterised as "any conveyance of information that does not reflect the entirety of known truth" [2]. Deliberately included in such a definition is the construction of personas or identities meant to represent one's self with attributes different from one's own.

The benefit of studying such deception in the context of social interaction is that it illuminates the ways that people cope with the complexities of the social demands placed on them, within the contexts where they live and work [2]. In particular, understanding the use of lying and deception on the Web is important to develop an understanding of the kinds of social situations and their attendant complexities enabled by it [4].

In this paper, we present a summary of a survey-based study in which we sought to characterise the spectrum of lying and deception practices routinely used online. We are interested in the intent behind such behaviours, but do not examine the moral or ethical dimensions of such practices, as these can be highly subjective and grounded in particular personal philosophies. We find that while there are a wide range of reasons people use deception or identity protection online, few reasons for doing so are malicious (or comprised of "dark lies"); in fact, a majority of the reasons pertain to impression management, conflict avoidance, and in order to fit in to groups.

2. METHOD

We elicited responses via a multi-page web-based survey, comprising 12 sets of questions including 1 set of demographic questions, and 8 open-answer free responses, such as: i) Have you ever told lies or "untruths" online? Why? ii) Have you created any fictional personas? Participant recruitment was done in person at two events in London, at *ComicCon* and the *WebWeWant Festival*, and on-line via Twitter and Facebook.

Analysis of free-response questions was done using a *grounded theory* [5] approach; themes were identified across responses through a process starting with open coding process by each of three researchers separately, followed by a discussion process where themes were refined and combined. Multiple themes were permitted per entry. Once consensus was achieved on themes, all responses were re-coded against the final set.

3. RESULTS

Out of the $N = 500$ survey responses, 39% ($N = 198$) provided a gender; 50.2% responded female, 49.8% male, and 1% transgender. With respect to age, 59% responded, 91% were between 18–25, 7% between 26–35, and 2% 36+. The age distribution skew was likely the result of the young audiences at the two festivals; we discuss the potential implications of this distribution at the end of the paper.

In terms of frequency of lying ($N = 387$) responded, with N={163,167,37,16,4} responded 1 to 5, respectively. The question *How often do you think your friends lie on social media compared to you?* yielded $N = 386$ responses; the median response was 3, with ($N = 87$, 22%) responding they thought that their friends lied less than they did.

3.1 Reasons for Deception

A total of $N = 134$ responses were received for the question which asked people to explain whether they told lies or "untruths" online and to explain the circumstances. Nearly 25% replied that they had or did not lie or decieve online; the rest admitted to having, or performing some form of deception. Thematic coding of the remainder of the responses revealed 10 themes listed in Table 1, plus an extra for *yes*, a category standing for responses admitting participating in deception with no explanation.

The most prominent theme was **playup**, which corresponded to the rationale of wanting to be more appealing, interesting or attractive to others. Less common was the opposite reason, coded as **playdown**, in which participants distorted or omitted info to avoid attracting attention or concern. Th theme **privacy** encompassed a variety of privacy-related concerns. Distinct from this theme were those coded as **conform**, comprising situations was done in order to fit in, in particular to avoid harassment and discrimination. Another set of responses coded **soceng**, corresponded to deception used for "social engineering". A smaller
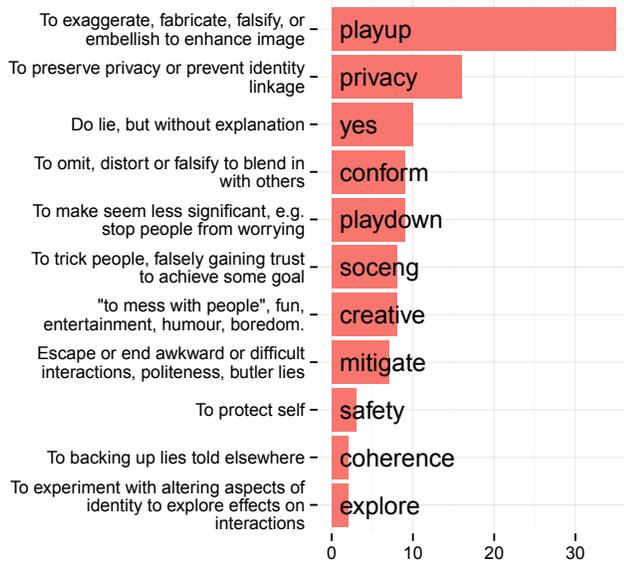
Figure 1: Q4: *Have you lied online and why?* — Frequency counts and tag descriptions. Responses which were unclear have been removed.

Figure 2: Q5b: *Have you created any fictional personas (e.g., characters,* alter-egos*) to use on social media?* — Frequency counts ($N = 267$) and tag descriptions. Responses which were negative or unclear have been removed.

category, **creative**, corresponded to deception or lies told for fun, humour, or "just messing about". Lies used to diffuse, or bring an end to, unwanted social situations we called **mitigate**. Meanwhile, **safety** corresponded to the responses describing omission or falsification to avoid compromising one's physical safety, or from potential litigation for potentially illegal activities.

3.2 Personas

A total of $N = 267$ responses were received for *q5b*, in which participants were asked if and why they had created any fictional personas for use on social media. 65% reported that they do not or never have; 5% responded in an unclear manner or described pseudonyms rather than personas. Respones are summarised in Figure 2, with common reasons being **creative** purposes ($N = 21$), or role-playing fictional **characters** ($N = 11$), e.g.:

(R44) I just role-play characters I like to escape from my everyday hell hole.

The next most common response ($N = 10$) was to experiment, including testing the reactions of others to different ages, genders or political views, or for self-exploration:

(R461) ...a member of a hate group whom I used as a kind of psychological experiment in empathy–by performing as a member of that group, I came to a fuller understanding of what compels their bigotry.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study found that people self-reported many routine kinds of lying, deception and omission strategies, reflecting a variety of needs and coping strategies for sustaining healthy, safe, and fun social interactions online. Only a small proportion of responses found deliberate attempts to socially manipulate others, while the vast majority corresponded to instances of trying to make oneself look good, maintaining separation among one's personal, professional and other social roles, fit in with others, avoid harassment, avoid causing others' worry, and to protect themselves from potentially harmful violations of privacy.

The fact that users must take active steps to circumvent the default behaviour of systems to maintain their online presence(s) suggests that current social media platforms have some way to go to provide a service that sufficiently affords the complex self-representation needs of users. The variety of benign and positive reasons users had for creating mistruths indicates that these representations should be supported in order to maintain vibrant online spaces.

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