

Fact versus Fiction: A Survey of the Varied Use of Untruths Online

ABSTRACT

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.4 [Information Systems Applications]: Miscellaneous;
D.2.8 [Software Engineering]: Metrics—*complexity measures, performance measures*

Keywords

Lying online

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 [5]. 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 by the “any conveyance of information that does not reflect the entirety of known truth” [3]. Deliberately included in such a definition, thus, 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 so often illuminates the ways that people cope with the complexities of the social demands placed on them, within the activities and social contexts they live and work [3]. Online, the use of deception can reveal both the needs and difficulties people have in conducting their interactions and curating their own identities across a large number of online spaces, whilst maintaining their privacy, reputation and roles throughout [10, 2].

Understanding the use of lying and deception online is important to the Web because so many of the social situations and complexities are either created or profoundly affected by the affordances of the technologies used as the channels for social interaction themselves [11]. Technologies that provide new affordances for social interaction, whether simply a new mobile chat app, online forum, or a new communica-

tions capability entirely, can fundamentally introduce new social situations and tensions in unanticipated ways. For example, the immediacy and ubiquity of wireless communications technology is thought to have made commonplace the use of *butter lies*, which are small lies invoked to avoid or take leave of interaction [9] without causing offence.

In this paper, we present a summary of a survey study in which we sought to characterise the spectrum of lying and deception practices routinely used online. Rather attempting to at all examine the moral or ethics behind such practices which can be highly subjective and grounded in particular personal philosophies, we seek merely to understand how such deception is used in online settings, and whether such behaviour varies across different social media channels. 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.

In the following sections, we first briefly review the literature on online deception and lying. Second, we briefly describe our methodology and present our results. In the final section, we discuss what we think our findings imply towards the needs pertaining to the web, in particular within the context of the increasing centralisation of social networks and rise of web identity assurance providers.

2. BACKGROUND

In [6], DePaulo et al. summarise some of historical social psychology literature on lying. In it, they lies are discussed in general classes; *everyday lies* of little consequence or regret, and *serious lies*, used typically to “hide transgressions”, ranging from misdeeds to betrayals of trust. Others use the term *white lies* to refer to a class of socially accepted lies, done for a perceived benefit to a social situation or the recipient, while calling the opposite *black lies*, that are generally perceived as the socially or morally reproachable, with *grey lies* existing somewhere in between [3]. In order to characterise the motivations behind lying, Buller and Burgoon derive three categories: *instrumental*, *relational*, pertaining to interpersonal relations, and *identity-related*, pertaining to reputation management [1].

Pertaining to online deception, a number of studies have compared online to offline lying practices. Hancock et al. [11] set out to settle the debate between *media richness theory*, which postulates that lying is more likely in richer interaction (with more and immediate feedback) interactions,

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against *social distance theory*, which frames lying to be more likely in social cue impoverished settings such as via e-mail, finding support for the latter in their experiments. Belkin et al. compared lying in e-mail to paper, finding that people were likely to lie on e-mail significantly more than in personal letters [14].

With respect to experimentation with self-representation, as predicted in Sherry Turkle’s seminal work about early digital spaces, *Life on the Screen* [16], many studies of on-line studies have confirmed that creating identities. For example, such studies have revealed frequency with which gamers assume the opposite gender in online play [13, 15, 17], assume widely different appearances in online virtual environments and massively multiplayer games [20], falsify age, height, weight and appearances in online dating sites [12, 8], and experiment with self-representation in on-line chat and discussion spaces [7, 19, 18] to name a few.

Most similar to the work presented in this paper, Caspi et al. [4] conducted a Web survey of Israeli internet users and found that, although a majority of participants believed that deception on the Internet was widespread, only a third ever reported deceiving others online themselves. Instead of open-ended responses, however their survey asked participants to select among a fixed set of possible personal attributes (age, sex, marital status, height, weight, etc.) and the reasons for doing so. We compare our results to theirs in Discussion.

3. METHOD

We elicited responses via a web-based survey, which we developed from scratch to facilitate use on mobile devices (tablets, phablets and smartphones). The survey comprised 12 sets of questions including 1 set of demographic questions, and 8 open-answer free responses (see Table I for a list of questions). Participant recruitment was done in person at two events in London, at *ComicCon* and the *WeWant Festival*, and on-line via Twitter and Facebook. In person, we distributed a fliers containing the URL to the survey, and posted the URL on visible locations where permitted. Two popular Internet celebrities, @TheTomSka and @DameWendyDBE helped by posting a link to the survey on their Twitter feeds.

Analysis of free-response questions was done using a *grounded theory* approach; themes were identified across responses through a process starting with open coding processes all open-answer questions by three researchers separately. Once an initial set of themes for each question was derived, themes were compared between researchers and a final set was derived. Then, all responses were re-coded against the final set of themes.

4. 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+. We did not expect the age distribution to be so skewed but 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.

Nearly all respondents were active social media users, although use of particular platforms varied significantly. Fig-

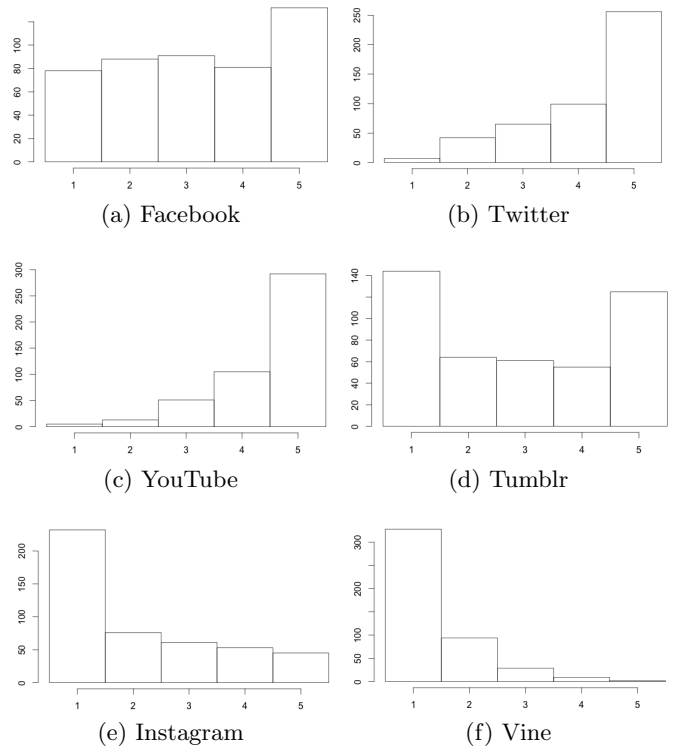


Figure 1: Self-reported use of social media, from 1 = Never to 5 = Several times a day.

ure 1 shows the self-reported likert scores per platform for 6 social media platforms.

5. DISCUSSION

6. LIMITATIONS

7. CONCLUSIONS

8. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

9. ADDITIONAL AUTHORS

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