Detecting Deceptive Communication through Computer Mediated Technology: Applying Interpersonal Deception Theory to Texting Behavior

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Abstract

Interpersonal Deception Theory (IDT) argues that deception is an interpersonal action, where people employ communication tactics to achieve various goals. Deception is a global concept, thus much investigation has been conducted to determine the roots of such deceptive behavior. Through I.D.T., deception is categorized as a dynamic process where both the sender and receiver need to be engaged in order for deception to be successful. Both individual and contextual differences have been identified in regards to deception and experiments have been conducted to solidify the role of deception within interactive and non-interactive situations.

In extension of IDT theory, a study was conducted to determine the degree to which undergraduate students engage in deceptive behavior via text messaging. Through a survey design, undergraduate students’ deceptive texting behaviors and deceptive detection traits were assessed. Results indicate that among undergraduate students, text messaging is an interpersonal form of communication which circumvents professionalism and power. Further, undergraduate students were much more likely to engage in deceptive texting with family and friends but did so with significantly less frequency in the organizational setting.

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**Literature Review**

Whether or not we would like to admit it, most individuals lie during the course of an average day. Through empirical research, Burgoon and Levine (2010) indicate that “as much as one quarter to one third of all conversations entail some form of deception” (p. 201). Infante, Rancer, and Avtgis (2010) support this argument citing that lying is so prevalent in today’s society, the average person tells a lie at least twice a day. Additionally, a national survey conducted by Patterson and Kim revealed that ninety-one percent of Americans lie regularly. Further a diary study of lying in everyday life, indicates that people tell between zero and forty-six lies on a weekly basis (Andersen, 2008). There is no denying that deception is a universal concept in today’s world in which many people find themselves guilty of participating in. In order to comprehend deception from a communication standpoint, the Interpersonal Deception Theory was constructed.

As defined by Infante et al. (2010), Interpersonal Deception Theory (I.D.T.) is “a theory of deception in interpersonal communication that bases its predictions about outcomes on the characteristics of the source, receiver, context, message, feedback, and channel” (p. 241). Deceivers constantly adapt in the way they communicate based on based on feedback and suspicions provided by the receiver in an effort to appear as credible as possible and avoid possible detection (Burgoon and Levine, 2010).

***Deception***

One of the foundational roots of Interpersonal Deception Theory stems from the concept of deception. According to Burgoon and Buller (1994), “Deception is a deliberate act perpetrated by a sender to engender in a receiver beliefs contrary to what the sender believes is true to put the receiver at a disadvantage” (p. 155). Deception is essentially a deliberate attempt to mislead others. Deceivers are creating a facade of information in a target’s mind by sending vague messages, neglecting truthful information, and changing the surrounding environment to establish deceptive frameworks (Buller & Burgoon, 1994). While deception can occur in any given context, three categorizations of deception have been identified: *falsification*, *concealment*, and *equivocation*. Falsification is to represent something in a false or fraudulent manner, concealment is the act of withholding information, and equivocation is the process of using ambiguous or unclear expressions. Falsification is the most widely used form of deception amongst close relationships. However, equivocation is considered the safer form of deception because it is the closest to the truth (Burgoon, Buller, & Rockwell, 2009). In a study conducted by Metts and Chronis (1986), falsifications were the predominant form of deception as forty-eight percent of the statements contained falsification components. Concealments were used less frequently, but still occurred in twenty-seven percent of the statements (Buller & Burgoon, 1994a).

Originally, Burgoon and Buller (1994) argued that because deception is an interpersonal behavior, individuals will attempt to use numerous communication strategies and tactics to achieve success when deceiving others (Infante, et al., 2010). A large component of I.D.T. is the notion that to be a successful deceiver, individuals must control a deep consortium of information through multiple contexts. When dealing with this wide scope of information, “deceivers not only have to make strategic decisions as to what information to omit, avoid, or distort, but also make decisions as to the style with which the information is relayed” (Infante et al., p. 241). Additionally, through a fifteen year research program, Burgoon and Buller developed twenty-one different propositions for the Interpersonal Deception Theory, and those propositions are listed in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1 Propositions of Interpersonal Deception Theory**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Proposition 1 | Context features of deceptive interchanges that systematically affect sender and receiver cognitions and behaviors are the demands of the conversational task. |
| Proposition 2 | Relational features of deceptive interchanges that systematically influence sender and receiver cognitions and behaviors are familiarity and relationship valence. |
| Proposition 3 | Interactive contexts and positively toned relationships are associated with higher expectations that a sender is truthful. |
| Proposition 4 | The more receivers expect truthfulness and the more they are familiar with the deceivers or deceptive behavior, the less the deceivers fear detection. |
| Proposition 5 | Deceivers engage in both strategic and nonstrategic activities. |
| Proposition 6 | Interactive contexts heighten strategic activity and lessen nonstrategic activity over time. |
| Proposition 7 | Deceiving for self-gain prompts more strategic activity and nonstrategic behavior than deceiving for the benefits of others. |
| Proposition 8 | The more receivers expect truthfulness, the less deceivers are motivated to behave strategically. |
| Proposition 9 | Greater familiarity prompts more strategic and nonstrategic activity by senders. |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Proposition 10 | Skilled communicators display more strategic activity and less nonstrategic activity than less-skilled communicators. |
| Proposition 11 | Receivers are more likely to judge senders as credible when the context is interactive, when receivers have high truth biases, and when senders are skilled communicators. |
| Proposition 12 | Receivers are less likely to detect deception when the context is interactive, when receivers have truth biases, and when senders are skilled communicators. |
| Proposition 13 | Receivers are less likely to judge senders as credible when sender communicator deviates from expected patterns. |
| Proposition 14 | Receivers are more likely to detect deception when sender communication deviates from expected patterns, when receivers are familiar with sender information and behavior, and when receivers have strong decoding skills. |
| Proposition 15 | Suspicion evokes changes in both strategic and nonstrategic behavior by receiver. |
| Proposition 16 | Senders perceive suspicion when it is present such that (a) deviations from expected receiver behavior and (b) receiver behavior signaling disbelief, uncertainty, or the need for additional information increase sender perceptions of suspicion. |
| Proposition 17 | Suspicion evokes changes in both strategic and nonstrategic behavior by senders. |
| Proposition 18 | Deception and suspicion displays change over time. |
| Proposition 19 | Reciprocity is the dominate interaction adaptation pattern between senders and receivers during interpersonal deception. |
| Proposition 20 | Final sender credibility and receiver detection accuracy are functions of (a) final receiver cognitions, (b) receivers decoding skill, and (c) final sender behavioral displays. |
| Proposition 21 | Sender-perceived deception success is a function or perceived suspicion and final receiver behavioral displays. |

Infante, D.A., Rancer, A.S., & Avtgis, T.A. (2010). *Contemporary Communication Theory*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.

As described as the key assumptions and propositions of I.D.T., “interpersonal deception activates strategic behavior on the part of both the sender and the receiver” (Burgoon et al., 2009, p. 304). I.D.T. supports that deception is a dynamic process, where both the deceiver and the target play crucial roles in the deceptive act. Senders must exhibit a credible performance, and it is the target’s mission to decide the believability of the sender’s communication. As the dynamic interaction process evolves, the behavior of the sender and target evolve, as well, and the duo influences each other. This relationship is truly a transactional process where a great deal of information depends on the expression of feedback and the mutual influence between the parties involved (Burgoon & Buller, 1994). Through the interpersonal perspective of I.D.T., there is an emphasis on communication factors as proximal causes of behavior, and it tries to predict and elucidate the interactive dynamics of deception (Burgoon & Buller, 1994). The interaction between the sender and receiver promotes expectations and familiarity, which then guides behavior and judgments in the future. Primary assumptions in interpersonal encounters are that people tell the truth when placed in interpersonal interactions, and this leads individuals toward a truth-bias. The opposite effect comes into play when suspicious receivers may alter their communication patterns to deceive senders (Burgoon et al., 2009). While acknowledging the multifaceted field of deception, perception and interpretation play a central role when trying to uncover deceitful actions in an interpersonal context or relationship.

While deception has its own category of classifications, researchers have identified five separate deceptive acts people can employ during communication. *Lies* are statements which contain material that contradicts information of a truthful statement; *exaggerations* are statements in which the information is posed as an overstatement to the actual truth; *half-truths* are accounts that strategically omit truthful information; *secrets* are occasions when the deceiver remains quiet, even though he or she possesses vital information; and lastly, *diversionary responses* are reports which are extraneous to a current conversation or form of communication (Buller & Burgoon, 1994). Through deceptive communication, deceivers can beguile their targets through these outlets to be seen as the dominator of the current situation. However, the target plays a vital role in order for deceptive acts to be successful.

***Deceiver and Receiver Relationship***

In order for deception to be successful, the deceiver and receiver must play a critical role. Deception is referred to as a dynamic process: “senders and receivers monitor, control, and modify their messages, and mutually influence each other’s action” (Frank & Vasilyeva, 2006, p. 4). There are a number of distinct motives between the deceiver and target in order for deception to be viewed as a successful process (Buller & Burgoon, 1994). Interpersonal motives and objectives play a persuasive role in the deception process because every deceiver has his or her own reasoning for his or her conniving behaviors. Many of these interpersonal objectives stem from a self-serving context as deceivers strive to complete their devious strategies and tactics. Research has illustrated that the behavior and interpersonal intentions of liars depends on their motivation to succeed (Frank & Vasilyeva). Of those liars whose motivation is high and a sense of identity is at stake, deception cues will be more definite and pronounced. Additionally, it is proposed that deceiving for self-gain leads to strategic and non-strategic behavior, in comparison with deceiving for alternative benefits (Frank & Vasilyeva).

Humans are strategic creatures who “influence, plan, scheme, and strategize” when engaging in deceptive behavior (Andersen, 2008, p. 298). As individuals become engrossed in their strategic deceptive cues, they are ultimately striving toward concealing their deception. Deceivers can achieve this sense of deceitful, strategic communication through the following techniques: uncertainty, vagueness, nonimmediacy, reticence, withdrawal, and disassociation (Buller & Burgoon, 1994). According to Andersen (2008), deceivers are concerned with “appearing credible, allaying receiver suspicions, minimizing their responsibility for deceit, and avoiding unpleasant consequences if deception is detected” (p. 299). Those individuals who are more manipulative and sociable as people, as well as, those who are deeply concerned with their self-presentation, are known to tell more lies because they want to protect their sense of face during an interactive process.

***Individual Differences***

Through the field of deceptive communication, there are several individual differences as to how people enact deceptive behaviors. Between the deceiver and receiver, a sense of expressiveness can change at an interpersonal level. Individuals who are dominant, extroverted, and exhibitionistic typically display fewer anxious behaviors and a greater sense of skill during deception when compared to people lower in these traits. Additionally, when honing in on individual factors of expressiveness, those who are animated in the body, face, and voice are major factors in disguising deception, which also differs among individuals. Another individual difference of deception includes the aspect of one’s appearance. Research has demonstrated that when compared to mature looking individuals, people with more of a “baby-face” were deemed as more truthful, regardless as to or not they whether were lying. Because women are thought to be more baby-faced than men, women are generally thought to be more trustworthy and less likely to deceive others (Andersen, 2008). Moreover, another individual difference in deceptive behavior is manipulativeness, where differing research has been reported. Research on Machiavellian individuals, also known as manipulators, has shown an inconsistent relationship with deception. However, research conducted by Buller and Burgoon (1994) reported some differences of deceptive skills among high and low rated Machiavellians. Through this research, high Machiavellians were “found to compensate manipulatively during deception” by exaggerating eye contact and increasing the frequency of other nonverbal behaviors (Andersen, 2008, p. 288).

Anxiety is another factor which differs among people who engage in deceptive behavior. Those individuals who are high in public self-consciousness are instantly targeted for being suspected of illustrating deceptive actions. These individuals display a myriad of deceptive cues, some of which include: less verbal frequency, less eye contact, fewer gestures, and an increased amount of emotional reactions (Andersen, 2008). Furthermore, a person’s age, experience, and nonverbal ability affect how individuals engage in deceptive behavior. Deceptive skills, strategies, and tactics can be learned over time, thus as individuals age, they have a greater opportunity to adapt new skills and practice different deceitful strategies. Also, recent studies have found that those individuals who participated in nonverbal behavior training acted in a more convincing manner and were more deceptive in their tactics toward children and adults (Andersen, 2008). While several prominent personal differences of deceptive behavior have been uncovered, there are multiple contextual factors that may alter the displays of deceptive behaviors and cues.

***Contextual Differences***

Research indicates that contextual variations may alter the exhibition of deception cues. The relationship between the deceiver and receiver plays a crucial role in how deceptive cues and messages are communicated toward one another. Andersen (2008) reported deceivers act differently among their friends than they do with strangers. Strangers tend to decrease the amount of eye contact they use during deception. However, friends increase their amount of eye contact which may suggest the nonimmediacy aspect of deception may be a deceptive strategy relevant to strangers. Additionally, deceivers are more expressive and not as formal when beguiling friends as opposed to strangers.

Another context variation of deception stems from the degree of interaction between the two parties. The results of studies conducted by Buller and Burgoon looked at the difference noninteractive and interactive contexts of where deception occurs. It was concluded that “deceivers are nonimmediate, uninvolved, overaroused, negative, and impaired communicatively, but that in interactive contexts, deceivers behave more strategically” (Andersen, 2008, p. 290). Based on this information, within an interactive context, nonimmediacy, nervousness, and arousal are all controlled by the deceiver, which can result in an unnatural performance.

Interpersonal Deception Theory and its many facets has been tested in myriad studies in order to gather as much information as possible to arrive at distinct conclusions about the twenty-one propositions of the theory. Even though multiple of IDT aspects have been tested and numerous experiments have been conducted, plenty of questions still remain unanswered and answering these questions can help fuel the initiative to future deception research. One concept that does not have concrete answers revolves around the influence of culture within deception detection. According to Burgoon and Levine (2010), most of the research conducted on deception detection has been centralized in the United States and Western Europe. Such a limited sampling might place severe limitations on the generalizability of current knowledge about uncovering deceiving information. Surveys have been conducted on which cultural cues are considered reliable within different cultures. However, there have not been many studies which test whether individuals are better at detecting deception from similar or disparate cultural backgrounds.

Additionally, there is still room for deception research as to discover if there are universal cognitive and affective processes. Lies are expected to be uncovered during real time, without any previous background knowledge or experience, thus specific cues and methods of detecting deception need to be established. When determining which cues signal suspicious and deceptive behavior, Tim Levine has uncertainties about whether or not lying typically elicits more arousing emotions when compared to truthful statements. On the opposite spectrum, Judee Burgoon believes there are multiple indicators of deception, but they tend to be context, culture, and time dependent (Burgoon & Levine, 2010). Due to the conflicting perspectives about concrete deception cues, there are still opportunities for expanding this aspect of the Interpersonal Deception Theory in the future.

Finally, various questions have surfaced concerning the role of ground truth when validating deception research results. The term ‘ground truth’ is concerned with the degree to which the “actual truthful or deceptive nature of the message must be known so that accuracy can be determined” (Burgoon & Levine, 2010, p. 216). Researchers are faced with the tough challenge of improving the ecological validity, while concurrently maintaining the aspect of ground truth. In response to these stipulations, experimenters have proceeded forward by conducting laboratory experiments. However, this makes studying realistic and unsanctioned lies predominantly challenging (Burgoon & Levine).

Interpersonal Deception Theory is a developed and comprehensive theory that can help researchers and theorists understand the concept of deceptive communication. This theory has provided a profuse set of recognized propositions regarding the traditional deception variables, cues, and characteristics. Further, countless studies have been conducted because of these distinct propositional statements. Interpersonal communication is driven by the “normative expectations of the interactants,” thus any departure from typical patterns will be recognized and may allude to the receiver that deception is present (Infante et al., 2010, p. 241). While this theory has expanded its boundaries as deceptive processes develop, the theory still fails to recognize basic issues related to interpersonal deception. Rudimentary information regarding the different mechanisms responsible for deceptive message encoding have been left unanswered, thus it is imperative that research on the Interpersonal Deception Theory continues to be conducted in order to break through the uncertainties and create a solid, comprehensive theory.

Through examining Interpersonal Deception Theory, a great deal of information was revealed concerning how individuals communicate with deceptive behaviors in an interactive or noninteractive context. While there is much evidence concerning how individuals deceive each other in a direct or indirect context, material surrounding how people in mediated environments deceive each other is not as abundant. In a society were social media is becoming a dominate force, it is difficult not to find one’s self wrapped up in the advancements of technology. One such technology is that of text messaging. The present study sought to investigate how people engage in deception via text messaging behavior. Given the lack of information and research in this specific area, the following research questions were posed:

**RQ1:** Do people engage in deception via text messaging?

**RQ2:** Are there differences in deceptive text message behavior based on the intimacy of the relationship between the two interactants?

**RQ3:** Do people not return text messages in order to avoid being deceptive?

**RQ4:** Do people believe they can detect when they are being deceived via text messaging?

**RQ5:** Do people believe that deceiving someone via text messaging is offensive and inappropriate?

**Methods**

***Participants and Procedures***

Once approval was granted by the Human Subjects Review Board, 200 surveys were disseminated to undergraduate students at a mid-sized, private, liberal arts university in Northeastern Ohio. Student were asked to sign a letter of consent form and complete the survey with their actions and behaviors related to deceptive communication through text messaging. At the end of the study, 160 surveys were completed and returned.

Participants included 30 males and 130 females ranging in age from 18 to 35 years of age (*M* = 19.89, *SD* = 2.147). Out of the one-hundred and sixty (*n* = 160) participants, 64 were freshman, 23 were sophomores, 29 were juniors, 35 were seniors, 6 were fifth year seniors, and 2 classified themselves as others.

Undergraduate students completed the surveys in undergraduate classes if they professor granted permission or the students completed the surveys on their own time. Students either completed the survey with a pencil or pen and then returned the surveys to the researcher.

***Measures***

Participants completed various survey questions using the Likert Scale test. Using this scale, cognitive and affective components of the participants’ actions and behaviors with deception through text messaging were measured. The Likert Scale questions were all tested on a five point scale.

Please refer to Appendix 1 to view the various Likert Scale assessments from the survey.

**Results**

Research Question One asked if individuals tend to send deceptive text messages. After a Chi-Square test was conducted, results showed that participants reported that they have sent deceptive text messages (χ2 = 84.10), *df* = 1, *p* < .001. Participants admitted to sending deceptive text messages.

Research Question Two asked if there were differences in deceptive text messages based on the intimacy of the relationship. Chi-square tests indicated that significant differences between texting deception via relational and intimate relationships and those who use texting for professional reasons (χ2 = 65.85), *df* = 1, *p* < .001. When asked if participants deceive their significant other via text messaging, results illustrated that deceptive texting with these individuals was not as significant (χ2 = 3.65), *df* = 1, *p* > .05).

Research Question Three asked if people avoid returning a text message because they did not want to be deceptive to others (χ2 = 154.66), *df* = 1, *p* <.001. Further delving into the participants’ deceitful behavior, results indicate that the receiver of the deceptive message was not able to detect the deception (χ2 = 37.764), *df* = 1, *p* < .001.

Research Question Four asked about the degree to which people believe that they can detect when they are being deceived via text messaging. Results indicate that a large portion of participants believe that they have been deceived to via text message (χ2=117.063), *df* = 1, *p* < .001. Additionally, participants reported that they did find out they were being deceived to via text message as illustrated by the Chi-Square tests (χ2 = 114.123), *df* = 1, *p* < .001.

Research Question Five asked about the degree to which participants believe that deception through text messaging is offensive and inappropriate. Results from the chi-square test indicated participants deemed that deception through text messaging is offensive (χ2 = 37.289), *df* = 1, *p* < .001).

Table 1. Frequencies and Chi-Square Values

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Have you sent a deceptive text message? | Have you not returned someone’s text message because you didn’t want to deceive them? | Did the receiver of the last deceptive message you sent ever learn the truth? | Have you ever sent a deceptive message via text message when conducting business or other professionally-related work? | How you ever been deceptive to your significant other via text message? | Have you been deceived to via text message? | Did you find out you were being deceived? | Do you believe deception through text messaging is offensive |
| No | 22 | 34 | 117 | 130 | 91 | 11 | 11 | 41 |
| Yes | 138 | 125 | 40 | 28 | 67 | 147 | 144 | 118 |
| Chi-Square | 84.100 | 154.663 | 37.764 | 65.848 | 3.646 | 117.063 | 114.123 | 37.289 |

**Discussion**

As indicated in the results of this study, text messaging seems to be viewed as an intimate form of interpersonal communication, that suppresses characteristics of professionalism and power. While texting is considered a form of interpersonal communication, facial expressions and gestures are absent through this form of communication. However, results indicate that undergraduate students view text messaging as a private and serious form of communication nonetheless. Numerous participants admitted to sending deceptive text messages to other individuals. However, when it comes to business or professionally-related interactions, individuals are not as likely to be deceptive through text messaging. In this particular situation, deceiving through text messaging is not used or seen as an appropriate venue for deception in the organization. Deceptive text messaging seems to be characteristic of a nonprofessional nature when being utilized with family or friends. Texting is viewed as socialization activity where quick bursts of information are sent to confirm dinner arrangements or plans between friends. The social element of texting seems to influence its appropriate use in the workplace.

While deception is considered a form of interpersonal communication, it can also be identified as a unique and independent interpersonal act. Deception is its own craft; it takes time and preparation to execute deceptive messaging properly. Words, sentence structure, and punctuation need to be crafted and strategically used in order to successfully deceive through text messaging. Paralanguage is not available through this form of computer-mediated technology. Thus, elements of technology are needed to overcome the missing physical and visual elements. Deception through text messaging, due to the lack of paralanguage cues, needs to be carefully planned out in order for the deceptive message to be accepted by the receiver.

While the majority of participants reported sending deceptive text messages, the majority also acknowledged that deception through text messaging is offensive and inappropriate. When participants are the deceivers and are sending the text messages, deceptive texting is viewed as acceptable if their deceitful intentions remain hidden. However, the gravity and outcome of deception differs depending on the level of deception. Individuals become distressed when being deceived via this computer-mediated technology, thus face-to-face communication is the best communication outlet to choose and honesty is the best strategy to employ when communicating sensitive information.

**Conclusion**

The Interpersonal Deception Theory recognizes the use of nonverbal behaviors, such as gestures and facial expressions to provide direct clues as to when deception may be transpiring. Through a computer-mediated technology, these visual cues are not available making it difficult to determine when deception is transpiring. Boundaries are built through text messaging and the receiver must be strategic when utilizing their words and punctuation to be successful in deception. Text messaging is an outlet that is utilized for deception in order to disguise the truthful intentions of the sender. Text messaging might be an effective communication medium to employ when engaging in deceptive behavior due to the lack of verbal elements; nonetheless, the gravity of deception can carry significant weight if the truth is uncovered.

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***Appendix 1***

Likert Scale Tests

Below are the questions of the survey which featured a Likert Scale measurement. The number in parenthesis denotes the Likert Scale value given to each selection.

Do you use texting jargon when texting? (LOL, BTW, <3, or other abbreviations)

Never (1) Seldom (2) Sometimes (3) Often (4) Always (5)

How often have you told a lie via text message?

Never (1) Seldom(2) Sometimes (3) Often (4) Always (5)

How well did you know the last person you lied to via text message?

Didn’t know at all (1) Vaguely familiar (2) Somewhat familiar (3)

Knew Well (4) Knew extremely well (5)

How serious was the last lie you sent through text message?

Not serious (1) Vaguely serious (2) Somewhat serious (3)

Serious (4) Extremely serious (5)

If yes, how well did you know the last person who lied to you via text message?

Didn’t know at all (1) Vaguely familiar (2) Casual friends (3)

Acquaintances (4) Extremely close friends (5)

How serious was the last lie you were told via text message?

Not serious (1) Vaguely serious (2) Somewhat serious (3)

Serious (4) Extremely serious (5)