

Big little lies of mobile dating

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For some online daters, the constant contact of mobile technology has made it hard to play it cool. As a result, lying about availability is a common deception mobile app daters tell their potential partners, according to a new paper by two Stanford researchers.

"Communication technologies connect us now more than ever," said Jeffrey Hancock, a professor of communication in the Stanford School of Humanities and Sciences. "This paper is an example of how [people](#) respond to some of the new pressures from the technologies that connect us."

Hancock, along with David Markowitz, a former graduate student in communication who worked in the Stanford Social Media Lab founded by Hancock, conducted several studies that examined [deception](#) in mobile dating conversations. These findings culminated in a paper published in the *Journal of Communication*.

"Until now, it has been relatively unclear how often mobile daters use deception in their messages before they meet the other person," said Markowitz.

The lies people tell, or in most cases – don't tell

To find out what lies people tell, Markowitz and Hancock recruited more than 200 people who use mobile apps for dating. They examined over 3,000 messages users sent during the discovery phase – the conversation period after a profile match but before meeting face-to-face. Markowitz and Hancock then asked participants to rate the level of deceptiveness in messages.

The researchers found that overwhelmingly, people are honest: Nearly two-thirds of participants reported not telling any lies. But around 7 percent of messages online daters sent were reported as deceptive.

When people lied, what fibs did they tell?

"Most of these lies were about relationships – or not starting relationships – rather than lying to hook up," said Hancock.

A majority of lies were driven by a desire to appear more attractive, such as exaggerating personal interests and availability. "Being always available might also come across as being desperate. Therefore, people will lie about their availability or their current activities," said Markowitz.

Hancock calls these deceptions "butler lies," a term he coined in 2009 with others to describe lies that tactfully initiate or terminate conversations. Named after the personal stewards of yesteryear, these lies use deception as a polite way to conceal unwanted social interactions.

When daters lied, approximately 30 percent of deceptions were butler lies.

In one instance, one participant messaged, "Hey I'm so so sorry, but I don't think I'm going to be able to make it today. My sister just called and I guess she's on her way here now. I'd be up for a raincheck if you wanted, though. Sorry again." They rated this message as extremely deceptive but the participant apparently still wanted to remain in contact with the other person.

"Butler lies were one way that daters try to handle saving face for both themselves and their partner," said Hancock, who noted in the paper that these deceptions can preserve the relationship in the event that daters ever meet face-to-face.

In another example, a participant told the match, "Not tonight, Its [sic] late and I'm so tired, have to be up early for work tomorrow." The real reason, according to the participant: "I was a little tired but I mostly didn't want to meet them because it was late at night and I didn't feel comfortable."

Sometimes participants told butler lies to decelerate the relationship. One participant blamed technology for unresponsiveness, saying "Im [sic] sorry I can't text currently my phone is not working." But as the participant later explained to the researchers, "My phone was fine. I just get too many stalkers."

"These data suggest that technology can serve as a buffer to discontinue or delay future communication activities between daters," wrote Markowitz and Hancock in their findings.

The deception consensus effect

The researchers were also curious to know how daters perceived the deceptiveness of others.

They found that the more participants reporting lying in conversation, the more that they believed their partner was lying as well. The researchers called this pattern of behavior the deception consensus effect.

When people consider the actions of others, they are biased by their own behavior, said the researchers.

But as Markowitz and Hancock emphasized, the frequency of lying in mobile dating was relatively low.

"The data suggest that mobile dating deceptions are strategic and relatively constrained. Most of the messages people report sending are honest and this is a positive step toward building trust in a new romantic relationship," said Markowitz, who will be joining the University of Oregon as an assistant professor in the fall.

More information: David M Markowitz et al. Deception in Mobile

Dating Conversations, *Journal of Communication* (2018). DOI: [10.1093/joc/jqy019](https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy019)

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