Motives For Deception in Consumer Word-Of-Mouth Communication

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This research investigates an understudied facet of consumer word-of-mouth communication – the transmission of intentionally deceptive information from one consumer to another. Across 4 studies we examine whether contextual factors, including relevance of the communication recipient, significance of the lie, and the role of the consumer, can activate interpersonally-based motives and, in turn, influence lying behavior. Specifically, in contexts where a consumer’s self-image is threatened or the opportunity to gain material wealth is available consumers are more likely to tell self-focused lies. Conversely, when participants risk threatening a valued relationship they tell other-focused lies. The implications for these findings are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer word-of-mouth (WOM) communication involves the transmission of product information from one consumer to another. The majority of research in this area has focused on the impact of positive WOM on consumer judgments (Bone 1995), as well as precursors of (Richins 1983) and reactions to negative WOM (Laczniak, DeCarlo, and Ramaswami 2001). However, one facet of WOM communication that has been largely overlooked is the role of deception in consumer-to-consumer interactions.

Defined as “intentionally try to mislead someone” (DePaulo et al. 1996), lying is not an uncommon occurrence. DePaulo and colleagues (1996) discovered that lies were told regularly and were often told for self-benefit. However, we argue that in interpersonal communication one must balance various motives. This research extends previous investigations by studying several motives related to lying in consumption contexts.

Study 1 examined the role of impression-management in deceptive consumer communication. Research suggests that people will tell lies to present positive self-images in consumption contexts (Sengupta et al. 2002). Given that consumers like viewing themselves as smart shoppers (Schindler 1998), we expect they are motivated to present this image to others. We predicted that, under conditions where self-image is threatened, consumers will be motivated to deceive a relevant communication recipient (i.e., one that is familiar and important). Impression-management concerns should be prominent when interacting with relevant others because they often confer valued outcomes (e.g., Bohra and Pandey 1984) and will be involved in future interactions (e.g., Schneider 1969). Because an interaction with irrelevant others is often short-lived, consumers may not always be motivated to lie in service of impression-management. Consumers may lie to relevant others regardless of lie significance, but will be more likely to lie to irrelevant others when the significance of the lie is high rather than low.

A scenario depicting a recent car purchase was read by 105 participants. The participant was described as washing his/her new car when another person (a coworker/a stranger) asks about the car. The other person mentions that s/he purchased the same car last week for $18,000. Unknown to the other person, the participant’s car cost $200 or $2,000 more. The other person asks how much the participant paid for his/her car. Participants then indicated how likely they would be to misrepresent the price of the car on a 4-item lying index (β=.94). The results revealed that participants were willing to lie to relevant others regardless of lie significance. Conversely, participants were more likely to lie to an irrelevant other when the lie was high rather than low in significance.

Study 2 examines other-focused motives for lying. Research suggests that people will lie to manage social relations (DePaulo et al. 1996) and will most often tell other-focused lies to those who are important to them (DePaulo and Kashy 1998). Thus, we predicted that other-focused lies are most likely when the communication recipient is relevant and the lie is significant. When interacting with an irrelevant communication recipient, we do not expect that consumers will tell other-focused lies, regardless of lie significance.

A similar scenario to Study 1 was read by 105 undergraduates. However, the scenario indicated that, unknown to the other person, the participant’s car cost $200 or $2,000 less. Thus, the scenario activates other-focused motives (i.e., to prevent the other person from looking like an inferior shopper). Participants then completed the lying items. As anticipated, participants were more likely to lie when the lie significance was high and the other person was relevant than in any of the other conditions.

Study 3 explored deceptive WOM communication when the participant is a seller. Unlike a buyer, a seller’s primary objective is profit maximization. Indeed, research suggests that people will lie to gain or protect material resources (Lippard, 1988). We predicted that, when consumers are presented with an opportunity to maximize their own return, they will lie to irrelevant others regardless of lie significance. When interacting with relevant others, consumers may only lie when the lie is not significant. When the lie is significant and the other person is relevant consumers may be motivated to not appear to be taking advantage of the other person and will avoid lying.

One hundred-seven undergraduates read a scenario in which the participant was selling his/her car and either a coworker/stranger was interested in purchasing it. The other person says that cars of the same model and age initially cost $18,000. Unbeknownst to the other person, the participant originally purchased the car for either $200 or $2,000 more. The other person then asked the participant how much s/he paid for his/her car. Participants completed the lying items and also indicated the price they would report. Participants were least likely to lie when the lie was highly significant and the other person was relevant to the self. In addition, the magnitude of the lie exceeded the actual cost in each condition except for the relevant other/high significance condition.

Study 4 further examined consumer-consumer deception. As noted earlier, consumers have a pervasive desire to be viewed positively. However, when the consumer is a seller, an effort to manage impressions may not only involve a desire to be perceived as a smart-shopper, but also to not appear to be taking advantage of another person. A relevant communication recipient is someone the consumer knows, and the consumer has something to lose if the relationship dissolves (Kelley 1983). Thus, we expected that consumers will be less likely to lie while interacting with a relevant as opposed to irrelevant other.

The scenario from Study 3 was read by 100 undergraduates. The potential buyer indicates that other cars of the same model and age cost $18,000. In this scenario, the participant originally purchased the car for either $200 or $2,000 less. As predicted, participants were significantly more inclined to lie to the stranger than to a coworker.

In sum, we demonstrate that consumers’ motives for lying are highly dependent on situational factors such as relevance of the communication recipient, significance of the lie, and the communicators’ role in the interaction.

REFERENCES


