Lying Your Way Out of a Bad Situation

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Research investigating deception in consumer research has focused on transgressions of marketers. However, consumers also are motivated to be deceitful to gain financial rewards that are otherwise unattainable. Study 1 reveals that given a deal, liars feel happier than truth tellers, but in the event of an impasse, liars feel less happy than truth tellers. Study 2 provides evidence showing that liars’ amplified affective reactions are explained through increased deliberation and the resulting counterfactual thoughts associated with lying. Finally, study 3 shows that priming the concept of morality after the outcome eliminates the amplification effects.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction
Research investigating deception in consumer research has focused on transgressions of marketers (Burke et al. 1988; Deighton and Grayson 1995; Gaeth and Heath 1987). However, consumers also are motivated to be deceitful to gain rewards that are otherwise unattainable (Ekman 1997, 2009). If consumers do tell lies in pursuit of better outcomes, the transgression may have consequences for their affective outcome evaluations. In this research, we examine how lying affects the consumer’s happiness with a consumption outcome.

Competing Hypotheses
The literature enables us to hypothesize that liars’ affective evaluations will depend on the financial or moral outcomes considered while deliberating over their strategy. According to Decision Affect Theory (DAT: Mellers, Schwartz, and Ritov 1999; Mellers et al. 1997), as a decision becomes more deliberative, more counterfactual thinking should occur, resulting in amplified affective responses. We argue that lying is a more deliberative strategy, than truth telling. In particular, a salient source of deliberation for a person contemplating deception as a means of getting out of a bad situation, are the financial gains attainable if they succeed. Accordingly, DAT predicts that that when a lie succeeds, liars will feel happier than truth tellers because they will generate more counterfactuals about how the outcome could have been worse financially had they not lied. If a lie fails, DAT predicts that liars should feel more regretful than truth tellers because they will generate more counterfactuals about how the outcome could have been better financially had they told the truth.

In addition to the financial outcomes associated with lying, there are also moral outcomes that may be deliberated during decision-making; after all, most people consider lying morally questionable. The concept of morality is consistent with Higgins’s notion of ‘Value From Proper Means’ (VFPM: Camacho, Higgins, and Luger 2003; Molden and Higgins 2005). Value from proper means occurs when the way a goal is pursued coincides with socially accepted rules or normative principles of morality (Higgins et al. 2003; Merton 1957; Pennington and Hastie 1988; Tetlock 1991; Tversky and Shafir 1992). This value is then incorporated into the evaluation of the outcome of an experience. Dishonesty may not provide a good source of ‘fit’ (Camacho et al. 2003; Carver and Scheier 1990). Therefore, the VFPM perspective predicts that liars will feel worse than truth tellers, as they will counterfactually consider that the outcome could have been better, had they used a morally better means. The importance of morality is also incorporated in equity theory which holds that people prefer outcomes that are fair and deserved (Adams 1965; Messick and Cook 1983; Walster, Walster, and Berscheid 1978). Receiving more than one deserves produces guilt, and receiving less than one deserves causes anger and disappointment (Oliver and Swan 1989; Van den Bos et al. 1997; Van den Bos, Peters, and Bobocel 2006; Van den Bos et al. 1998). Accordingly, equity models, predict that liars will feel worse than truth tellers as they will generate more counterfactuals about how a deal could have been better (more deserved) had they acted fairly and truthfully. However, unlike VFPM, equity models predict that liars will feel better than truth tellers encountering an impasse, as they will counterfactually consider that the outcome could have been worse had they attained an undeserved deal.

Study 1
The purpose of study 1 was to test the competing hypotheses (DAT: financial deliberation vs. VFPM/Equity Models: moral deliberation) for differences in the affective reactions of liars compared to truth tellers. In study 1, participants played the role of consumer in a simulated negotiation task. Lying versus truth telling was induced by manipulating the nature of competitor information provided. Participants were told that the salesperson would endeavor to match currently available competitor offers. Therefore, strong-competitor-information encouraged truth telling as favorable deals were currently available. Weak-competitor-information encouraged lying as favorable deals were currently unavailable. Liars lied by claiming that a favorable but expired competitor offer was currently available. Further, the outcome of the negotiation was manipulated such that half the participants received a deal while the other half encountered an impasse. Study 1 results revealed, that given a deal, liars were happier than truth tellers, and in the event of an impasse, liars were more regretful than truth tellers. The results are consistent with DAT.

Study 2
The objective of study 2 was to examine the counterfactual thinking processes underlying the DAT hypotheses. It is our contention that liars amplified affective reactions occur because lying requires more strategic deliberation which entails increased counterfactual thinking. Therefore, in study 2, we introduce a manipulation that is designed to increase deliberation about their strategy for truth tellers (and therefore counterfactual thinking). Following this, the deliberation manipulation was introduced using an operationalization of risk. Participants were informed that there was a good chance of (not) being believed by the salesperson. Finally, the outcome was manipulated to be deal or impasse. Study 2 results revealed, that increasing the risk for truth tellers amplified their counterfactual thinking and thereby eliminated the observed differences in affect across strategy.

Study 3
The objective of study 3 was to demonstrate that liars amplified affective reactions are counterfactually referenced to the financial risks associated with lying. Priming a morality focus should eliminate the amplification effects. Further, study 3 sought to demonstrate that truth telling is a less strategic option. The outcome, a priming manipulation was introduced to encourage either a financial or morality focus. Study 3 results revealed that the financial priming condition replicated the results of earlier studies; liars displayed more amplified affective reactions compared to truth tellers. Importantly, as hypothesized, morality priming eliminated liars’ amplification effects. Also, whilst the levels of the priming manipulation had differential effect on liars, truth tellers were not affected, confirming our contention that truth tellers are affected by the outcome, not their moral strategy.

Discussion
An important implication of our findings is that if marketers do not stand to lose too much financially, it may be advisable to
exercise more leniency when negotiating with suspects of deception because marketers ultimately run the risk of wrongfully accusing innocent truth tellers.

References
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