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Deception at a Distance: Long-Distance Deception and Romantic Relationships

Joy Henderson, Melanie Hess, Shuang Iris Xia, Nicole Brown &
Narissra M.Punyanunt-Carter
*Texas Tech University*College of Media and Communication Lubbock, Texas *United States of America*

ABSTRACT: Research on long-distance relationships has focused on how to achieve successful long-distance relationships (LDRs), the limitations of LDRs, and the satisfaction level in long-distance relationships. Further, deception studies have focused on the nonverbal cues of deception and the effects of deception. However, few studies have researched the interaction of long-distance relationships and deception behaviors in romantic relationships. This study examined how deception comes into play in long distance relationships. There were 161 participants in this study. Specifically, we looked at how uncertainty affects deception frequency as well as gender differences. In addition, we looked at relationship length and the amount of deception as well as the frequency of deception. Results revealed that gender highly impacts the perception of deception.
Keywords:*Deception, Frequency, Gender, Long-Distance Relationships, Romantic Relationships*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships are important aspect in our lives. They bring many varying results, including happiness, satisfaction, painand uncertainty. Romantic relationships can be complicated to research, because many factors influence their development and maintenance. For example, people's personalities and characters, the length and stages of the relationships, and the geographical distance can impact the relationships significantly. Among all of the factors discussed above, geographical distance is one of the most important because it makes romantic relationships different from geographically distant relationships. A long-distance between partners will change the way people communicate and interact with each other. It may even impact how they perceive each other.

There are many unsolved problems in romantic relationships worthy of research. Deception is almost inevitable in romantic relationships, and it can happen at any stage of the relationships and influences the relationship in varies ways. Deception not only affects the relationship, but also hasanimpact on people's emotion and trust levels. For these reasons, deception in long-distance relationships may be different from the deception behavior in geographical close relationships. The following study investigates further into details about deception behavior in romantic relationships.

Rationale

Long-distance relationships (LDRs) are hard for romantic partners to preserve. Due to the physical distance between partners, couples lack of face-to-face communication, and the level of uncertainty and jealousy can be relatively higher in LDRs than with geographically close relationships (GCRs). It seems hard to maintain an LDR. However, some studies indicate that individuals in LDRs are actually more satisfied with their partners (Stafford &Reske, 1990). Often, partners can learn a lot of communication and relationship skills in the LDRs. One way to achieve this satisfaction and idealization is through deception.

Deception plays an important role in romantic relationships. In working to sustain a successful LDR, deception could help partners avoid conflict, reassure uncertainty and jealousy, and make themselves seem idealized. The current study will research deception activities in LDRs. The research will focus on the frequency of deception, the strategy of deception, and the motivation of deception in LDRs.

Former studies focused on long-distance relationships have investigated how to achieve successful LDRs and the limitations of LDRs, and the satisfaction level in long-distance relationships (Mietzner& Lin, 2005). Deception studies have focused on the nonverbal cues of deception and the effects of deception (Ekman & Friesen, 1974). Few studies have researched the interaction of long-distance relationships and deception behavior in romantic relationships. This study will attempt to examine both deception and long-distance relationships.

II. LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS

When considering the many disadvantages individuals face during the relationship, LDRs are not the most simplistic form of romantic relationships. Couples cannot meet each other as much as they want, lack physical intimacy, and cannot fully participate in their partners' daily life. According to Mietzner and Lin (2005), the major negative outcomes of LDRs are the great financial cost, lack of physical intimacy, and proximity in the relationship. Mietzner and Lin (2005) claimed individuals may perceive jealousy, increased stress and dishonesty in LDRs. O'Sullivan (2000) found that, in romantic relationships, couples preferred face-to-face communication. Furthermore, Stafford and Reske (1990) indicated that restricted communication not only provided opportunities for positive relational image building, it may also result in demise of the relationship. Frequent communication and high levels of self-disclosure can contribute to relationship development and intimacy. Communication leads to accuracy and understanding, which in turn produces relational satisfaction (Stafford &Reske,1990). Individuals in LDRs do not have much face-to-face communication, and the frequency of communication is relatively lower. Thus, their limited communication channels can result in many misunderstandings and problems in their relationship.

In LDRs, partners often communicate online. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is an important tool they use to compensate for lack of communication due to physical distance. CMC has apparent disadvantages when compared with face-to-face interactions, in which an abundance of verbal and nonverbal cues are available. One of the disadvantages in CMC is a higher level of uncertainty about partners due to limited nonverbal cues (Yum, Y. & Hara, K.,2006). Studies indicate that CMC results in greater uncertainty, thus making it more difficult to interpret certain behavior displayed in interactions (Parks and Adelman,1983). This could discourage the development of closeness and intimacy in interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, individual's self-presentations can be manipulated by strategies such as "self-descriptions, attitude statements, social associations, and deception" during online communication (Toma and Hancock,2010). Toma and Hancock (2010) indicated that people could appear more attractive to their partners by managing their self-descriptions in CMC. Therefore, in LDRs, CMC provides great opportunities for individuals to manipulate their self-presentation in order to develop and sustain their relationships.

Other studies focused on CMC found that the disadvantages of CMC can eventually be overcome through positive self-presentation and idealization of the partner, which intensifies interaction between the partners (Walther, 1993). Yum and Hara's (2006) research supported this statement and revealed that CMC's weakness could be overcome when interactions between them occur more frequently and are sustained for an extended period of time. People learn to verbalize and elaborate their feelings online. These expressions would bein the nonverbals in face-to-face interaction.

While the communication problem can be solved through CMC, there are still many other problems exist in LDRs.Guldner and Swensen (1995) mentioned spending time together with partners is an essential factor to maintain and continue the relationship, but individuals in LDRs cannot achieve this, so couples engaged in LDRs step into uncertain territory? Uncertainty in established relationships not only brings more jealousy into the relationship, it might also affect beliefs about the relationship, individuals' emotions and their daily communication (Dainton &Aylor, 2001).

Research into deception and CMC finds that deceivers in CMC were judged as more credible than truth tellers. This says very little for people's ability to detect deception in a major form of communication for LDRs like CMC. Because many CMC correspondences are not necessarily in real-time. As Burgoon, Chen, and Twitchtell (2009) found, real-time communication stimulated a far greater sense of engagement, common ground and understanding than communicating at different times. Thus, the manipulation of communication channels and the physical distance between partners make deception in LDRs easier.

Relationship uncertainty creates turbulence in perceptions of relationships. In previous studies, individuals' perceptions of turbulence were positively related to cognitive and emotional responses to hurtful messages and made people more sensitive to jealousy threats (McLaren, Solomon, &Priem, 2011). McLaren et al. (2011) found relationship uncertainty made people more vulnerable to strong reactions to hurtful messages, and the hurt feelings they feel can make a fragile relationship eve n less cohesive (McLaren, Solomon, &Priem2011). Both self-uncertainty and partner-uncertainty were positively related to relationship uncertainty. In LDRs, people are more likely to feel uncertainty about their partners because they lack access to a wide range of their partners' social information.

Due to lacking physical contact, individuals involved in long-distance relationships may experience more stressors and challenges when compared to geographically close couples. Thus, satisfaction in an LDR may be difficult to maintain due to the distance between partners (Mietzner& Lin, 2005). Conversely, Guldner and Swensen (1995) demonstrated that despite the amount of time spent together, the levels of relationship satisfaction, intimacy, trust, and commitment individuals experience in LDRs were nearly identical to the levels demonstrated by individuals involved in GCRs. Stephen (1987) found that couples in LDRs were less likely to break up than were geographically close couples, and Stafford and Reske (1990) discovered that when compared with geographically close individuals, long-distance individuals maintained a more positive relational

image. This translates to couples who were more in love, more satisfied with their relationship, and more satisfied with the perceived quality of their communication than geographically-close couples. In this situation, the limited communication becomes an advantage for individuals in LDRs. The maintenance of idealization can be achieved as a result of blocked communication. Idealized perceptions are the 'predetermined response' available from romantic attitudes (Stafford &Reske, 1990).

Some research results demonstrate that LDRs can be beneficial. Individuals not only gain a variety of relationship and communication skills from a LDR, they also get to know more about their partners from non-physical aspects (Mietzner& Lin, 2005). For example, individuals can learn to appreciate their partners, gain independence, increase communication, have more free time, and create a stronger relationship bond (Mietzner& Lin, 2005). Moreover, trust is important to maintain LDRs. By learning to trust, individuals felt more secure in the relationships (Mietzner& Lin, 2005).

Many research publications have focused on how to maintain successful LDRs. Schulman (1974) indicated that in LDRs couples identify and isolate areas of potential conflict and avoid communication in those areas to maintain perceived agreement. Stafford and Reske (1990) found a positive correlation between the restriction of communication, positive relational images, and premarital relationship longevity. Dainton and Aylor (2001) mentioned five maintenance strategies: positivity, assurances, trust and sharing tasks in their research.

III.   DECEPTION IN LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS

Deception is a common variable in romantic relationships. Whether explicit or more implicit, deception often remains undetected. Research indicates deceptive messages will be detected a little more than 50 percent of the time, a little better than chance (Levine,Park,&Mccormack, 1999). A truth bias assumes that as intimacy increases with one's partner, one becomes worse at detecting deception of that individual (McCornack & Parks, 1986; Horan & Butterfield, 2010).

DePaulo et al. (1996) found that college students, one of the main populations of this study tell .97 lies per day. The same study found the adults tell 1.96 lies per day, noting that deception increases with age (DePaulo, 1996). Important to this study of deception in LDRs is that emotions were found to be the most frequent topic in deception (DePaulo, 1996). Emotions run high in romantic relationships.

Research revealed that there is a huge gender influence on deception detection. Overall, women are slightly better indicators of deception across research (Katsikitis, Pilowsky, & Innes, 1997). While men and women may have different approaches to reviewing possible deception, women tend to be better at this detection when neutral or low emotions are present.

Deception was relatively more common in romantic relationships when compared with other types of relationships (DePaulo &Kashly, 1998). Cole (2001) notes that complete disclosure could not explain the nature of communication in romantic relationships. He believed that romantic partners' motivation to deceive can be the concern for the relationship. Deception activities may play an important role in LDRs since the pressure and challenge in LDRs are greater than inGCRs.In LDRs, the separation of partners will place unique stress on each individual and may create more feelings of suspicion and mistrust. As a result, these emotions might cause jealousy, dishonesty, and misperceptions (Mietzner& Lin, 2005).

Griffin (2000) summarized that the nature of deception is manipulating information. Buller and Burgoon (1996) stressed three methods to deceive in interpersonal relationships: falsification, concealment, and equivocation to accomplish their goals. They found people's motivations to deceive can be divided into three categories: achieving a specific task or instrumental goal, constructing or maintaining a relationship with the respondent, and saving face or sustaining the image of one or both parties.

Ekman and Friesen (1974), in addition to the majority of other studies regarding deception and nonverbal, conclude that nonverbals are the most accurate indicators of deception. The detection of deception being at a rate less than 50 percent includes nonverbal indicators. LDRs, due to their communication modes, have limited nonverbal communication. The lack of many nonverbal indicators in deception of LDRssuggests a detection number much lower than 50 percent. Research also finds that up to one-third of daily conversations include deception in the forms of concealment, ambiguity, exaggeration, or lying (Burgoon, Chen, Twitchtell, 2009; Buller et al. 1996; Ekman, 1996). This number could potentially be even higher in LDRs.

With Stafford and Reske (1990)'s findings that people in LDRs hold more idealized views of their partners; one could argue that the majority of deception in LDRs may be by omission (Roloff& Cloven, 1990). For example, Cole (2001) described individuals hiding certain qualities while emphasizing others. This may be more easily achieved in LDRs.Partners may feel more comfortable lying to a partner if they are aware there is less of a likelihood of being caught. However, for individuals communicating via phone, some nonverbals, such as change in pitch, pauses and hiccups, "uh" and "ums" and general speech error, can serve as indicators of a partner's lies (Littlepage& Pineault, 1981).

In Horan and Booth (2010), most couples reported maintaining the relationship even after deception was discovered. Therefore, this notes that deception within relationships does not solely have negative consequences. It would be interesting to see if that has an effect in long distance relationships.

The acceptability of a deceptive act is connected to the motives of the deceiver (Buller & Burgoon,1994). Therefore, a lie for selfish reasons may be rated differently in acceptability than a lie an individual perceives as beneficial to their partner. Kaplar and Gordon (2004) also noted motive as important, claiming that many individuals in describing lies to partner's viewed themselves as "largely altruistic." If this is true, they believed they were helping their partners by deceiving. Therefore, the motive of deceptive act may have more impact on its effects on the relationship that the deceptive act itself.

Based on the above research and need for research specific to long-distance romantic relationships in relation to deception, this study seeks to define the motivations, frequency and
effects of deception within long-distance romantic relationships.

Research Questions

RQ 1:   How does uncertainty level affect deception frequency?

RQ 2:   How does gender in LDRs affect deception?

RQ3:   How does frequency of one's deception of their partner relate to how often one believes their partner lies to them?

RQ 4:   How does the length of relationship in an LDR affect deception and trust?

Methods

To test deception in LDRs, a quantitative analysis was conducted. A 115-question survey was administered through Qualtrics online and advertised to individuals through a university announcement system. A $30 visa gift card incentive was given for individuals in a LDR response to the survey. They had a 1/50 chance of winning. 161 individuals completed the survey.

The survey was composed of 16 parts. The first 6 questions included demographic measures regarding classification, age, major, gender, and race. Three more questions inquired about relationship history, including length and frequency of communication. The remaining 7 parts were created through the use of questions from previously developed measures. The majority of these measures were on a Likert-type scale. These included the Individualized Trust Scale, the Relationship Uncertainty Scale, the Revised Self-Disclosure Scale, Conversational Effectiveness Scale, and Conversational Effectiveness Scale.

IV.   MEASURES

Trust. Wheeless and Grotz's (1977) Individualized Trust Scale (ITS) was used to measure trust. This measure is comprised of 15 sets of bipolar adjectives. It uses a 7-point scale that measures perceptions of trust. Examples of scale itemsinclude trustworthy/untrustworthy, considerate/inconsiderate, and honest/dishonest. Alpha reliability for this scale was .95, $M = 74.82$, and $SD = 10.26$.

Relationship Uncertainty Scale. Solomon and Knobloch's (2001) scalewas used to measure uncertainty in romantic relationships. The scales looks at perceptions of maturity, uncertainty, and behavioral norms, and future uncertainty. The alpha for relationship uncertainty overall was .93.

Self-disclosure. Wheeless and Grotz (1976)'s revised self-disclosure scale was used to measure perceptions regarding the amount and depth of self-disclosure. The scale is comprised of 31 items using a 5-point Likert scale that range from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Seven items measure the amount of disclosure and there are five items that measure depth of disclosure. Responses were averaged for each of the subscales to reveal scores for amount and depth of self-disclosure. The alpha for the revised self-disclosure scale was .90.

Conversational Effectiveness Scale. Canary and Spitzberg(1987)'s conversational effectiveness scale was used to measure effectiveness. The alpha for relationship uncertainty overall was .93.

Participants

Participants were 161 undergraduate students from a large Southwestern university. Gender was 74.62% female and 25.38% male with a mean age of 20.40 ($SD = 1.21$). Participants' year in school was primarily Junior (35%) followed by Seniors (27%), First Year (20%), and Sophomores (19%). Reported ethnicity was primary Caucasian (69.2%), followed by Hispanic (21%), Black (5.0%), Asian (1.8%), Native American (1%), and Other (1%). Participants were primarily heterosexual (92.9%) followed by bisexual (3.2%) and homosexual (2.6%). For relationship status the sample was split, specifically 80 (49.7%) reported that they were involved in a romantic relationship, while 81 (50.3%) reported that they were not currently in a romantic relationship. Of those in a romantic relationship, 31 (14.9%) were in a long-distance relationship.

A One-Way ANOVA was run on the four factors: frequency of communication, gender, age, and length of relationship.Correlation tests were also run to determine the relationships between variables.

V.   RESULTS

After six weeks of online survey data collection through the Qualtrics system, the researchers were able to acquire 161 surveys. The results after accounting for attrition in the surveys and running multiple One-Way ANOVAs yielded the following:

RQ 1: How does uncertainty level affect deception frequency?

The frequency of communication within a relationship does not have any significance on the uncertainty level that exists within a relationship. In fact, the frequency of communication within a relationship does not have an effect on the amount of deception, the level of trust that exists, the effectiveness of the communication that occurs within interactions within the relationship or the amount of self-disclosure that is present within a relationship. There is no significance at all regarding the frequency of communication within a relationship.

RQ 2: How does gender in LDRs affect deception?

Gender of an individual within a long distance relationship has a significant impact upon how deception is perceived within a relationship. The amount of deception that an individual perceives within the relationship as a whole($r = .41$, $p < .05$) and the amount or frequency of perceived deception that occurs within a week within a relationship both from the individual to his/her partner ($r = .29$, $p < .05$)) and from the partner to the individual(($r = .28$, $p < .05$)) is considered to be significant.

RQ 3: How does frequency of one's deception of their partner relate to how often one believes their partner lies to them?

The frequency of deception within a relationship between partners is significant, ($r = .11$, $p < 05$).

RQ 4: How does the length of relationship in an LDR affect deception and trust?

The length of a long-distance relationship is not significant in the amount or frequency of deception within a relationship, but does play a significant role, ($r = .21$, $p < .01$), in the individual trust that exists within that relationship for at least one of the members of the that relationship.

When conducting this research the survey data collected showed the most frequent methods of communication used within long distance relationships. The top two methods utilized text messaging and phone calls. Out of 83 respondents 73 use text messaging and 70 use phone calls to stay in contact with a significant other. Video chats fit nicely into the third most frequently used method of communication with 61 respondents explaining use of Skype, Face Time, or other video chat software. There were 35 instant message users and 25 people responding that email was still a frequent method of communication. Hand - written letters were listed by 20 people as a method of communication that they enjoyed using during their long distance relationship to keep in contact with one another. Finally, the occasional face to face visit and social networking use were recorded by 12 respondents under a category of other with a designated place for specification and further explanation of their interpretation of other.

VI.   DISCUSSION

It was surprising to find that the frequency of communication within a relationship did not affect the amount of deception within a relationship, especially considering that one would suppose that the more a couple was able to communicate, theless deception would be present. However, quantity does not necessarily equal quality, particularly in relationships in which deception may occur.

It was interesting to note just how much the amount of deception between partners impacted the perceived deception between partners. This was not necessarily an expected result given the previous findings regarding the frequency of communication within the relationship. Examples of this may be found within the research of (Stafford &Reske, 1990; Toma & Hancock, 2010). Both of these research teams have produced work that state that high levels of communication and self-disclosure can contribute to the building of a relationship. However, while the self-disclosure can help build a relationship, this self-disclosure can also be attributed to manipulative and deceptive strategies that could potentially impact the relationship in positive ways if undiscovered and potentially destroy the relationship if uncovered. However, after further reflection and contemplation on the part of the researchers, it would stand to reason that if one is lying to a significant other this would perhaps create or plant a seed of doubt in the mind of the deceiver to contemplate the communication and deceptive nature or actions of his/her partner. Most often it is reasonable to believe that if one does not lie, then one would not be lied to either. However, this may be a naïve way of thinking.

The length of a long-distance relationship is not significant in the amount or frequency of deception within a relationship. However, it does play a significant role in the individual trust that exists within that relationship for at least one of the members of that relationship. This is an interesting aspect to note because if a LDR lasts for a very long time there may be moments during that period of time in which each member of the relationship may begin to have doubts or feel insecure about the relationship and how much that individual may be able to trust his/her partner's fidelity within the relationship.

As for the aspects of a LDR that may or may not encounter issues of deception within the relationship, gender plays a significant role. The gender of an individual within a LDR has a significant impact upon how deception is perceived within a relationship. This is within the relationship as a whole and on a more individual level as far as being lied to and being the deceiver within that relationship. If an individual senses deception or perceives it within an individual aspect of the relationship, it could potentially spread into the rest of the encounters within the relationship and cause a negative tincture overall for the relationship. This is an especially potent or pertinent line of thinking if the individuals involved are the ones doing the lying or deceiving. Thus, if an individual is lying within a relationship, then he/she may be more apt to express a an overall concern about deception from their partner as a paranoid side-effect of the current behavior or as a way of truthfully admitting that there is a problem of deception within the relationship overall and not specifically as perceived from his/her partner.

VII.   LIMITATIONS

The first major limitation to this study was the sampling choice. Convenience sampling, while easily accessible, does not provide diverse data and cannot serve as a representative of the general population. Since the survey was open to all individuals, faculty, staff and students at a Southwestern university, most of the responses came from individuals with higher levels of education. In addition to the inability of these results to be reflective of the general population, the survey may have received more respondent had if not been so lengthy. Due to survey fatigue, respondents may have become tired toward the end of the test and half-heartedly answered questions, as opposed to thoroughly considering them; this may have caused data near the end of the survey to be less accurate. Another limitation within the survey is the questions asking for recall. For example, inquiries about frequency require retrospective evaluation on part of the respondents. Since most people do not document frequency of communication or frequency of deception, it is likely most of the responses to these measures were mere estimations.

Furthermore, the topic of this research is, in fact, a limitation. Deception is often a taboo subjectand many people are uncomfortable discussing this topic candidly. Therefore, this study may have experienced some self-report problems. Since the survey was anonymous and online, individuals are more likely to be honest than if they were responding in person. However, with deception being an uncomfortable subject, respondents may want to make themselves look or feel better about theirs' or their partner's deception.

VIII.   FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has discovered some interesting results about deception behaviors in long-distance relationships. The frequency of communication, which is related to the uncertainty level in relationships, and the length of the relationships are not significantly correlated with couples' deception behaviors. But the perceived deception between partners and gender plays significant role in deception. Even though this paper studies long-distance relationships, it seems that deceptive behaviors within long-distance relationships are not significantly different from geographically close relationships except in the aspects of frequency of communication and uncertainty level.

In general, this study opens a window for researchers to think more aspects about deception behavior in long-distance relationships. Future research can do more in-depth interview s and qualitative research to seek the reasons why some of the findings are significant and some are not. Additionally, future research may gather more information about deception details in long-distance relationships and expand upon how these deceptive behaviors and practices can affect the individuals within the relationship as well as the health of the relationship overall.

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