

A Qualitative Study of Truthful, Deceptive, and Mixed Interactions in a Daily Diary Paradigm

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ABSTRACT. Communication is the cornerstone of socialization. In their daily life, people share their feelings, opinions, or plans. These details can indicate the sender's true intentions or be strategically distorted, depending on the specific conversational goals. Most research on daily communication is quantitative, with few studies examining what is being said across contexts in a qualitative approach. Additionally, research on deception tends to treat truth and lies as two separate, dichotomous yet heterogeneous categories. However, emerging data on embedded deception show that most of the time, people mix truthful and deceptive information in the message, with very rare instances of completely deceptive interactions. The current qualitative study is a partial replication and extension of the seminal DePaulo et al.'s (1996) study, aiming to provide an up-to-date look at individuals' communication patterns in daily life. Using a daily diary method, 30 participants were asked to record details about their social interactions over 2 weeks. We classified 1,307 responses based on their content and referent. Additionally, in contrast with previous research, we organized these reports as truthful, deceptive, or instances in which both truthful and deceptive details were provided. Our thematic analysis revealed that truthful and deceptive interactions contained references to feelings, actions, and explanations. They are most often related to the sender of the message, as well as objects, events, and places. We discuss the findings in relation to the available literature on daily deception.

Keywords: daily communication, truthful information, deception, embedded lies, qualitative study

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“Human nature is not contained in solitude but taught even by necessity to live in society and friendship.”
Marcus Tullius Cicero (*De Officiis*, 1.17)

INTRODUCTION

Despite more than two thousand years having passed since Cicero wrote one of his most influential works, *De Officiis*, the core idea that social life is one of humanity's defining traits remains valid. Humans are social beings and thus choose to forge relationships that benefit both themselves and others (Mühl, 2018). Hence, effective communication represents one of the cornerstones of human evolution. Broadly defined as a dynamic, transactional process in which social actors exchange information through various means (verbal or nonverbal) and media (face-to-face or mediated), communication enables people to share their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings with one another, as well as their worldviews and personal goals (Duck & McMahan, 2017). According to truth-default theory (TDT; Levine, 2014; 2019), while most of these messages are conveyed truthfully, sometimes telling the truth may not be useful for achieving one's communicative goal; thus, lying occurs.

Research focusing on people's veracity in everyday settings indicates a strong tendency towards truthfulness, with an average of 1-2 lies told per day (DePaulo et al., 1996; Halevy et al., 2014), and even some reports of no lies for multiple days (see Curtis et al., 2021). However, this distribution is positively skewed, meaning that not all people engage in deception to a similar frequency (Serota et al., 2010; Serota et al., 2024). While some prefer to “stick to the truth”, a small subgroup reports a greater number of lies per day, thus being referred to as “prolific liars”. The reasons behind these tendencies are varied, ranging from individual to contextual (Markowitz, 2022; Serota et al., 2022). Moreover, even for the same individual, there are certain “good” and “bad” lying days (Serota et al., 2022).

When defining deception, several aspects are considered. They relate to the intention to deceive, the strategies employed (i.e., concealment, fabrication, or manipulation of information), the content (i.e., factual or emotional), and the means by which this is done (verbal and nonverbal) (Masip et al., 2004). Specifically for everyday deception, the strategies used to deceive and the contents of these utterances are of particular interest. However, while there are extensive quantitative studies on people's self-reported lying frequency and strategies, far less information is available on the qualitative dimensions of these lies. To date, a limited number of studies have examined the actual content of these lies (Arcimowicz et al., 2015;

Cantarero et al., 2018; DePaulo, 2009; DePaulo et al., 1996; Guthrie & Kunkel, 2013; Martinez et al., 2026). One of the most relevant sources is the DePaulo et al. (1996) mixed-method daily diary study. For 7 days, 147 participants (college students, and community members alike) were asked to provide details about their interactions, focusing on the deceptive instances. From a qualitative perspective, the data was assessed by looking at the **content** of these lies (i.e., feelings, achievements and knowledge, actions and plans, explanations and reasons, and facts and possessions), **reason** for lying (self-oriented, other-oriented), **type** of deception strategy (outright lie, exaggeration, subtle lies), and the **referent** of the message (liar, target, other person, object & event). The results across samples showed that, for the most part, people lied about their feelings, actions, plans, and whereabouts. Most of the lies were self-centered and told as outright lies (i.e., complete falsehoods), and referenced mostly the liar and objects or events, followed by references to the target and other people.

Another study (Arcimowicz et al., 2015) derived its qualitative analysis of daily deception communication from a larger, mixed-method study (Cantarero, 2013, as cited in Arcimowicz et al., 2015). The authors provided a nuanced map of **self- and other-motives related to lying, as well as protective and beneficial goals**. Following a round of semi-structured interviews, more insight was provided into *why* people decided to lie, and that the anticipated *consequences* of lying weighed into the decision to deceive. These findings are consistent with TDT, indicating that people keep the goal of their informational exchange in mind and resort to lying only after accounting for the emotional and relational risks. Furthermore, Cantarero et al. (2018) derived six lie types depending on the lie beneficiary and the motivation to lie. Namely, lies could be self, other, or Pareto-beneficial, while motivations were mainly protective and beneficial. Similar findings that lying is context-dependent are presented in a study examining deception in romantic relationships (Guthrie & Kunkel, 2013). The findings showed that people engaged in deception for relational reasons (to maintain a relationship, negotiate tensions, establish relational control), to manage “face” (to protect themselves or their partner), and to maintain prior lies.

More recently, Martinez et al. (2026) asked a sample of college students to report the content of the lies told over the last 24-hour period. Their findings showed that, while participants were overwhelmingly truthful, they actually told an average of 1.5 lies per day. The content of their lies varied depending on whom they interacted with. For instance, when talking to their parents or teachers, the deceptive information related to time management or school performance, while with friends and peers, lies tended to be more prosocial in nature or to be aimed at maintaining social boundaries. This research also provides insight into the strategies used to lie. Generally, participants resorted to falsifications (outright lies) more often than to using half-truths or exaggerations (embedded lies).

These findings double the findings from quantitative deception research, which show that throughout development, people tend to lie for self-oriented reasons (Visu-Petra et al., 2022; DePaulo et al., 1996; Cantarero et al., 2018). However, altruistic motives are an important factor in lying, alongside the need to save face (McArthur et al., 2022). Additionally, some of these qualitative studies (Arcimowicz et al., 2015; Cantarero et al., 2018) also provided much-needed insight into daily deception in a non-WEIRD population by following the communication patterns of Polish participants. While several quantitative studies successfully replicated the core assumptions of TDT (Daiku et al., 2021; Serota et al., 2024; Zvi et al., 2025), little is known about the potential qualitative differences of daily deceptive messages.

Last but not least, while these studies provide valuable insights into deceptive communication patterns, it is important to note that, as communication research indicates, bald-faced truths and bald-faced lies rarely occur in real-life situations (McCornack, 1992; Morrison & McCornack, 2025). When being asked about their lying strategies, participants in deception studies reportedly use embedded lies (for an overview, see Cacuci & Visu-Petra, 2026). However, there is limited evidence on how these interactions, which include both truths and lies, appear from a qualitative standpoint.

Thus, the current work aimed to replicate and build upon the research of DePaulo et al. (1996) by using the daily diary method administered for two weeks in a Romanian sample. We investigated (a) the content of the information being provided and (b) the referent of the message in truthful, deceptive, and mixed interactions. This ample investigation extends the existing research by 1) addressing truthful, deceptive, and mixed interactions, compared to the focus solely on deceptive interactions (Arcimowicz et al., 2015; Cantarero et al., 2018; Guthrie & Kunkel, 2013) as well as 2) prolonging the duration from a minimum of eight to a maximum of 14 days, compared to previous diary studies which involved a maximum of seven days (Arcimowicz et al., 2015; DePaulo et al., 1996).

METHOD

The current study is part of a larger research project on truthful and deceptive communication in daily settings, approved by the Ethics Committee of Babeş-Bolyai University (No. 12.299/04.08.2025). The entire process, from participant recruitment to completing the daily diary, took place exclusively online.

2.1. Participants

Initially, 40 participants enrolled in the larger study requesting them to fill in the daily diary for two weeks. Out of this larger sample, only 30 participants (27 females, 90%) were included in this qualitative study because they fulfilled the minimal completion criterion (at least half of them, seven days). Participants were aged 19-45 ($Mdn_{age} = 23$, $SD = 6.91$). All participants were Romanian nationals and reported using Romanian as their first language. Regarding their educational level, all participants reported having at least a high school degree, with most of them (83.3%) holding a bachelor's degree or higher.

2.2. Data Collection and Procedure

Participants were recruited using online ads posted on multiple social platforms or via word of mouth. The study was designed as a mixed-methods partial replication and extension of DePaulo et al. (1996). Similar to the original study, participants were provided with an initial meeting with the research team. A detailed, accessible presentation of the procedure and a description of key concepts, such as social interactions and truthful and deceptive information, were provided, along with adequate examples for each. All details were also sent via email and were available as hyperlinks embedded in the online diary form throughout the study. We also assured participants that all recorded data was anonymous and used solely for the study. Similar to Arcimowicz et al. (2015), one of the goals of this initial meeting was to debunk common misconceptions about lying, especially in everyday interactions, since this topic is generally frowned upon in Eastern European cultures.

Afterward, the participants were instructed to use the link sent to their email and complete the daily form for 14 days. The diary was uploaded on the online survey framework *Formr* (Arslan et al., 2020; Arslan & Tata, 2026; www.formr.org). The structure of the daily diary was adapted from the *Social Interaction and Deception Form* (SIDF; DePaulo et al., 1996) and included both quantitative and qualitative measures (see Appendix 1 for the diary workflow). One important change from the original study was that, for each reported interaction, we asked participants whether they included truthful and deceptive information. If so, we asked them to provide a brief description. As such, we collected data for 3 instances: completely truthful, completely deceptive, and those that included both truthful and deceptive details.

2.2.1. Qualitative and Quantitative Daily Diary

The detailed protocol is available in Appendix 1 and was developed by the authors following the self-report *Social Interaction and Deception Form* of DePaulo et al. (1996). It assessed participants' daily interactions as well as the specific truthful, deceptive, or mixed information they provided. Initially, participants were asked about the total number of interactions they had throughout the day. Depending on their answer, they had to complete the corresponding number of questions for each interaction. The quantitative information (not analyzed here) pertained to the mode of interaction (1- *face-to-face*, 2- *online*, 3 - *via email*, 4 - *on the phone*, 5 - *or via SMS*), the duration of the interaction (from 1 - *less than 5 minutes* to 4 - *more than 30 minutes*), the number of people involved, and their gender. Then participants had to select the type of relationship they had with this person (1 - *a close person*, 2 - *a member of the extended family*, 3 - *a close acquaintance*, 4 - *a distant acquaintance*), how relevant the interaction was (1- *superficial*, 9 - *extremely relevant*), how much time they spent thinking about what to say (1 - *not at all*, 2 - *minutes*, 3 - *hours*, 4 - *days*, 5 - *weeks*), and to rate the quality of the interaction (1 - *unpleasant*, 9 - *very pleasant*).

Then, they would be asked whether, during this interaction, they provided one truthful piece of information or more (*yes/no*). If participants responded "yes," they were asked to describe at least one instance. They were later asked two questions about the extent to which they perceived the information to be beneficial (1 - *not at all*, 9 - *very much*) for themselves and their partner, respectively. Furthermore, participants had to respond to a similar question about whether they included at least one piece of deceptive information in that specific interaction. If so, besides having to describe it, participants reported how planned the interaction was (1- *not at all*, 9 - *completely*), to what extent they considered to be believed by others (1 - *not at all*, 9 - *completely*), and how serious they think the consequences would be if their lie were discovered (1- *not at all*, 9 - *very serious*).

2.2.2. Qualitative Instructions – Truthful Information

Participants were asked whether they included one piece of truthful information and, if so, to describe it. *For this interaction, please think about one TRUTHFUL piece of information you have provided throughout the discussion. Remember: A truthful piece of information can be anything you've said and genuinely considered to be true. It can refer to feelings, thoughts, impressions, behaviors – yours or someone else's. Example: you told your mother her new haircut is great, and you genuinely thought so; you told your teacher you were feeling fine today (and it was true); etc.)*

Please try to remember as many details as you can. Even if you are not sure whether that information is genuine, we encourage you to write it anyway. However, there is no need to provide specific names; you can only use initials.

2.2.3. Qualitative Instructions – Deceptive Information

As with the truthful information, participants were asked to consider whether the interaction they had included one piece of deceitful information or more. *For this interaction, please think about one DECEPTIVE piece of information you have provided throughout the discussion. (Remember: deceptive information is something you don't personally consider to be true, but you've deliberately said to mislead someone else. It can be something as little as **a white lie** – you told someone you're fine, even though you're not feeling quite well – or **something more serious** – you told your teacher you didn't just Google that one answer on the test. It can be something you've said **to spare yourself** some trouble, or something you said **to protect another person** (perhaps to not hurt their feelings) – mom gets an awful haircut, but you tell her it's great. It can also be **something that's completely made-up**, or **something true to some extent**, but not entirely (you've told your mom you've eaten, but you didn't tell her it was instant soup and fast food... for the last 4 days).*

Please try to remember as many details as you can. Even if you're not sure if that information was deceptive, we encourage you to write it anyway. However, there is no need to provide specific names, you can only use initials.

2.3. Data analysis

We used *thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to assess participants' qualitative reports. An initial assessment was conducted by the first author to identify meaningful patterns and to assess the suitability of using DePaulo et al.'s (1996) coding system. Of the 4 initial categories (content, reason, type, and referent), our qualitative data was deemed suitable for only 2: content and referent. Regarding the type of lies coded in the original study referred to, in the case of outright, subtle lies, or exaggerations, we believed this would be a large inferential leap departing from our data. Additionally, it wouldn't have been applicable to the truthful accounts. Therefore, we only mention the distinction between truths and lies (exclusive or embedded within otherwise truthful accounts), which was directly confirmed by the participants (see Table 1 for a presentation of the criteria). Secondly, our participants already indicated on numerical scales the extent to which their lies benefited themselves or others—an aspect which, by the way, would have been difficult to accurately assess from

the qualitative data, given the format of the participants' descriptions. Since here we focus on the qualitative information only, we excluded this dimension, which we are planning to address in a related paper reporting analyses of the quantitative information collected in this study. Some information was coded into multiple subcategories for both content and referent. This approach is different from DePaulo et al's (1996) study, where each lie was coded into a single category for content, but deemed suitable for more referent subtopics.

Based on these decisions, an updated list of criteria was created, following the definitions provided by DePaulo et al. (1996), and included examples from our collected data (see Table 1). To validate this system, a preliminary ICC analysis was conducted on 330 interactions (25% of the total sample), which was double coded by both the first author and a trained research assistant (see Table 2). For the remaining data, the first author coded 799 interactions, while the research assistant coded a subset of 176 interactions.

Table 1. *Categories and Definitions of Interaction Adapted from DePaulo et al. (1996, p. 983)*

| Category | Subcategory | Definition |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| <i>I. Content</i> | Feelings, Opinions | Information related to affects, emotions, opinions, or assessments about other people, events, or objects. |
| | Achievements | Information about one's achievements, |
| | Knowledge | accomplishments, failures, shortcomings, knowledge, or lack of knowledge |
| | Actions, plans, whereabouts | Information about past, present, or future actions and behaviors, about past or prospective locations. |
| | Explanations, reasons | Reasons or explanations for one's behavior |
| | Factual information | Information about facts related to people, events, objects, or possessions |
| <i>II. Referent</i> | Sender/Liar | Information that refers to something about the person providing the information |
| | Target | Information referring to the conversation partner(s) |
| | Other person | Information referring to other people, not directly involved in the conversation |
| | Object/event | Refers to objects, events, or places. |

Table 2. Interrater Agreement for All Categories (Cohen's κ)

| Category | Cohen's κ | SE | 95% CI | |
|-----------------------------|------------------|-----|--------|-------|
| | | | Lower | Upper |
| <i>I. Content</i> | | | | |
| Feelings | .88 | .03 | .83 | .93 |
| Achievements/ Knowledge | .86 | .03 | .80 | .92 |
| Actions, plans, whereabouts | .79 | .04 | .72 | .86 |
| Explanations, reasons | .85 | .04 | .76 | .93 |
| Facts, possessions | .70 | .06 | .59 | .81 |
| <i>II. Referent</i> | | | | |
| Sender | .80 | .04 | .73 | .87 |
| Target | .76 | .04 | .69 | .83 |
| Other persons | .79 | .06 | .67 | .91 |
| Object, event | .80 | .06 | .70 | .91 |

RESULTS

Participants reported their interactions for at least eight days ($M = 12.77$, $SD = 1.79$). Some participants reported more than one piece of information within a single interaction; we analyzed them as separate units. In total, 1305 units of information were presented, out of which 867 were reportedly entirely truthful, 32 entirely deceptive, and 406 were part of mixed information exchanges (215 reported as truths by the participants, and 191 reported as lies). While we assessed all answers, participants included different degrees of detail.

3.1. Truthful information

We included in this category all truthful details, whether reported as a standalone, completely truthful interaction or co-occurring with deceptive information. The thematic analysis revealed that all participants ($N = 30$) included details about all topics to varying degrees (See Table 3 for a presentation). However, not all participants provided justifications in their accounts, nor did they all address achievements or other people who were not directly involved in these interactions.

Table 3. *Frequencies and Percentages for Truthful Information Provided by Participants*

| Category | N (30) % | Example of participants' responses |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| <i>I. Content</i> | | |
| Feelings/ | 30 | "I missed you." |
| Opinions | 100% | "I don't agree with what they decided to do." |
| Achievements/ | 25 | "I got a good grade on my exam." |
| Knowledge | 83% | "I congratulated her for her achievement, thinking it wasn't easy to achieve that" |
| Actions, plans, whereabouts | 30 100% | "I also said I'd like it very much to go out and talk some more." "My love, I'm so excited we're going to cook together tonight." |
| Explanations, reasons | 22 73% | "I'm really happy that I can help someone so close to me." "They invited me over, but I politely declined, saying that I have some homework to do and I cannot postpone it." |
| Factual information | 27 90% | "I told my boss I don't like my colleague's poster." "Information about the project deadline and details about the oral presentation." |
| <i>II. Referent</i> | | |
| Sender | 30 100% | "I expressed certain needs that I had." "I liked the food." |
| Target | 30 100% | "I told my partner I don't like to go to sleep mad at each other." |
| Other persons | 24 80% | "I told the parents of eighth graders that their children made progress and they're going to get good grades on the National Exam." |
| Object, event | 29 97% | "I told her that her cats are very similar to mine." |

3.2. Completely deceptive interactions

The second group of interactions we addressed involved instances in which participants reported providing only deceptive information. While all categories were covered, only a subgroup of participants reported this type of interactions ($n = 14$), which included varying degrees of subtopics (see Table 4). In terms of **content**, participants most often provided explanations or justifications, and also lied about their feelings, actions, and plans. As expected, all participants reported instances in which they were the referent, with objects and plans being the second-most frequently addressed topics.

Table 4. *Frequencies and Percentages for Deceptive Information Provided by Participants for the Interactions Where Only Lies Were Reported*

| Category | n(14) % | Example of participants' responses |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|--|
| <i>I. Content</i> | | |
| Feelings/ Opinions | 7 50% | <i>I congratulated a presentation despite not actually liking it". I said I feel well enough to help my friends, but I was actually really tired."</i> |
| Achievements/ Knowledge | 3 21% | <i>I didn't forget that I should be seeing C. this weekend."</i> |
| Actions, plans, whereabouts | 7 50% | <i>I said I lost my job for other reasons than the actual ones," I'm busy, we cannot meet."</i> |
| Explanations, reasons | 9 64% | <i>Of course I want to go on holiday with your friends." I said I have fed the baby, but that's just because I already knew that's how the conversation was going to end." I don't have enough money. I can't help you."</i> |
| Factual information | 4 29% | <i>I lied and said I lost my job because of some other reasons." I said I liked the things I tried in the store, but actually I didn't plan on buying any of them."</i> |
| <i>II. Referent</i> | | |
| Liar | 14 100% | <i>"My teacher organizes a mini-trip to [redacted], and I told her that I'm not going to go with them, but get there separately. I don't intend to go". "I'm busy, I can't go out."</i> |
| Target | 5 36% | <i>"I told my uncle's girlfriend that I am really interested in her recipes and even agreed that she lost some weight". "You look so much better without glasses."</i> |
| Other persons | 3 21% | <i>"I don't mind your colleague crashing at our place tonight". "No, I totally did not forget that I should have met with C. during the weekend."</i> |
| Object, event | 10 71% | <i>I told my dad that I don't mind running some errands for his boss, despite the fact that I found it unpleasant that he told me to do it, without asking for my opinion or about my schedule."</i> |

3.3. Embedded lies

More than half of the participants ($n = 24$) reported including lies in their interactions than in situations where the entire interaction was deceitful. The embedded pieces of deceitful information were most often about feelings or opinions, and, like completely deceptive information, were also related to actions and provided justifications. All participants detailed instances where they were the main referent, followed by the interactions where objects or events were discussed (see Table 5).

Table 5. *Frequencies and Percentages for the Embedded Deceptive Information Provided by Participants*

| <i>Category</i> | <i>n (24)</i> <i>%</i> | <i>Example of participants' responses</i> |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| <i>I. Content</i> | | |
| Feeling/ Opinions | 22 92% | "I told them I don't mind them talking to another girl, that we didn't say we're exclusive, but I see it as a lack of respect and another treason". "I told them I'm going to be upset if he keeps eating fast food." |
| Achievements/ Knowledge | 9 38% | "I told them, of course, the product has the maps and languages they asked about, but I wasn't actually too sure about that". "I am really interested in learning about their funeral practices." |
| Actions, plans, whereabouts | 17 71% | "I told my mom I'm going to get home early". "I told my partner that I don't plan on playing video games tonight because I am too tired. Actually, I was a bit upset with her because she can get really competitive." |
| Explanations, reasons | 19 79% | "I declined going out with my friend, saying I have a lot of work to do. I had work, but actually I didn't feel like socializing in the remaining time". "The children really want to go to the seaside. I couldn't tell them that we actually won't be able to make it, so I explained to them that it's not settled yet, and if we go, I will sort things out." |
| Factual information | 10 42% | "I told my child we don't have any cake in the fridge." "My neighbor asked me what my cat's name is. Her name is [Redacted], but I told him another name, because I didn't want him to think the name is silly." |
| <i>II. Referent</i> | | |
| Liar | 24 100% | "I said I'm not feeling too well." "I told them I'm not sure whether I'll stay in the city overnight or go home, but I actually decided what to do since morning." |
| Target | 16 67% | "I told my conversation partner they started looking better since they've been training more often, but it wasn't true." "Yes, honey, you cooked a great meal, I loved it." |
| Other persons | 7 29% | "I have no idea what X is doing." "I told them their baby is really cute." |
| Object, event | 19 79% | "My friend showed me a meme he made about a specific situation that happened to him. I didn't find it funny [...], but I said it made me laugh and I liked it." "I said I haven't forgotten my health card, but I actually didn't know I'd need it." |

DISCUSSION

The current study employed a qualitative approach to assess people's content in daily interactions. Overall, truthful interactions were more varied in topic, and more participants reportedly engaged with different themes when truthful. They discussed their feelings, actions and plans, and provided factual details. While all participants reported instances in which they talked about themselves, they also included details about targets, objects and events, or other people. For the deceptive reports, however, not all participants addressed all mapped topics. These differences were also visible when participants reported providing only deceptive information or a mix of truths and lies. While for embedded lies, talking about feelings was a recurrent topic, complete fabrications were reportedly more often linked to explanations or justifications. In the subsections below, we will discuss each of these findings and their relevance to daily deception research.

4.1. Content

For the most part, *feelings and opinions* were mentioned regardless of the veracity of the information provided. While being truthful about one's feelings and opinions is generally common, manipulating this information can be motivated by different reasons. Our thematic analysis of this matter revealed that participants tried to hide their true feelings, particularly through embedded lies. 92% of participants reported details of interactions in which they hid what they felt or thought, compared with 50% who reported telling complete lies about such information. On the one hand, people lie about their emotions and thoughts to protect others from being hurt. For instance, children can choose to lie to a stranger and say they enjoyed a disappointing gift if they understood the truth would upset them (Williams et al., 2013). Similarly, one participant from our study reported that *"I received a present I disliked, but I pretended to be surprised and very excited about it, because I didn't want the person who gifted it to be disappointed."* On the other hand, people can intentionally misreport their feelings and beliefs about certain individuals or situations to avoid losing face. In some situations, especially those related to professional life, speaking one's true mind is deemed less desirable, and thus, "adjusting" the truth becomes an acceptable option (Weiss & Feldman, 2006). For instance, one participant reported lying about enjoying a presentation (*I said I enjoyed a presentation despite that not being true.*), and another said they actually agreed with their conversation partner to avoid upsetting them (*I said I agreed with what they said, only to avoid a conflict.*). However, the often-overlooked topic of self-deception indicates that

people can tell self-oriented lies to maintain their own well-being and to conform to external social desirability pressures (Moldoveanu & Visu-Petra, 2025).

Similarly, while sometimes talking about **achievements and knowledge (or lack thereof)** reflects a sincere sense of pride and accomplishment (*I got a good grade in my exam, P22*), it can also be associated with deception, boasting, or exaggeration of one's abilities. This topic was not mentioned by all participants (83%) in their truthful encounters, and even less so in embedded (38%) and completely deceptive (21%) reports. For instance, one person reported an embedded lie where they overstated how much they worked on a given task (*I exaggerated the effort I put into finishing the allocated task.*). Talking about one's achievements is also a culturally driven topic, with research indicating that people take cultural norms into account when deciding whether to be truthful or lie about their achievements (Ma et al., 2026).

Moving to the topic of **plans and actions**, it was not addressed by all participants (50%) when providing complete lies, but more (71%) included it when reporting embedded lies. Participants reported instances where they mentioned having other plans than their real ones (*I said I would go to the pharmacy today, even though I had planned to go tomorrow. / No, I'm not upset we have to go somewhere this Saturday, even though I had work to do.*). These instances also overlapped with reportedly minimizing one's displeasure regarding certain situations (*No, I am not upset you forgot about our coffee date and postponed it.*) or to avoid potential confrontations with their conversation partner (*I told my mom I will come home early.*) or losing face (*I told my colleague I couldn't do much college work during my first year because of my nightshift. That wasn't actually true, but I didn't want them to think I was lazy [...]*).

However, while not all participants (73%) reported providing **explanations and reasons even** in their truthful recalls, this topic was reported by more than half of participants in instances where they were either completely deceptive (64%) or mixed truths and lies (79%). These instances overlap with planning, since more reports included justifications to explain why they cannot fulfill specific commitments (*I am busy, we cannot meet. P30/ I told her I cannot go shopping with her tomorrow because I have to finish my project, but actually I wasn't in the mood for that. P08*). A related finding comes from quantitative deception research, which indicates that when people use embedded lies, they tend to craft them around directly or vicariously experienced events and actions (Leins et al., 2013; Loconte & Kleinberg, 2025; Gnisci et al., 2010; Verigin et al., 2019). Thus, we could infer that people tend to report their lies around arguments that seem plausible.

Similar to the previous topic, *facts about people, events, or possessions* were not included by all participants (90%), not even in their truthful accounts. Less than half of the people involved in the current study told lies about facts such as complete fabrications or mixed with truths. These reports were sometimes phrased as compliments (*You look so much better without glasses. / My friend got herself a set of clip-on nails, and she seemed very excited about them. I told her I like the idea and cannot wait to see them, but I don't think they will look too good when they are glued on or the way she expects them to.*). Others related to situations where people wanted to save face (*I told them I forgot my health card, but I actually didn't know I needed it. / I told them I lost my job for other reasons.*).

4.2. Referent

The second broad topic we sought to identify in participants' daily reports pertained to the referent of the information. It could refer to the sender (a liar for deceptive information), the target, or another person not present in the conversation. A fourth subcategory related to references of objects, events, or places. As somewhat expected, all participants reported mentioning themselves in both truthful and deceptive interactions. They talked about themselves and how they dealt with different situations (*I felt bad telling them I couldn't finish the task, as promised, so I lied, saying I have problems with my laptop*) or what they liked or disliked (*I told my hairstylist I like that color*). Very few participants (36%) mentioned the target in their completely fabricated statements, but more (67%) were likely to do so in embedded lies. A similar situation was reported in instances where other people not present in the conversation were mentioned. Instead, more than 70% of the participants included references to objects, activities, or events in their deceptive daily interactions. These findings go in line with the idea that people generally report information relevant (and in relation to) themselves. Research on people's motivation to deceive found that younger people tend to lie for self-oriented reasons more often (Evans et al., 2025). This relates to the need for privacy or to fear of being judged by others, thus leading to an altered version of one's true feelings, opinions, likes and dislikes, and even plans or behaviors.

4.3. Limitations

Our research is not without limitations. Despite providing a generous number of individual reports, participants tended to be rather brief in their descriptions. This scarcity of detail could be due to the large number of daily

interactions they had to report, making them less likely to provide detailed accounts. Additionally, we cannot rule out the possibility that participants reported only partial information, even when discussing complete fabrications. While situations where people tell “bald-faced lies” can occur, most often, people mix truthful and deceptive details. One study found that, on average, people report a 3:1 truth-to-lie ratio (Loconte & Kleinberg, 2025). Thus, to maximize the quality of the collected data and to ensure participants won't skip reporting, future research could limit itself to either qualitative questions or to asking participants to report only a few interactions.

Last but not least, a limitation of the current work is that, as with qualitative assessments, the coder's subjective perspective can come into play. It is possible that, if we asked participants in an ulterior interview about their motives to lie, similar to Arcimowicz et al. (2015), some categories could be shifted or further detailed. Nevertheless, our findings provide preliminary qualitative data on what people discuss in their truthful, deceptive, and mixed interactions.

4.4. Conclusion

Circling back to Cicero's quote, while people are not mandated to interact with others, they do so to share their feelings and experiences, keeping in mind both their personal communication goals and their partner's. This research attempts to provide a preliminary perspective on the nuances of daily communication, which often reduces human experience to numbers. In line with Arcimowicz et al.'s (2015) sensible remark, qualitative research restores the individual agency and transforms the passive stance of participants into a lively and rounded human experience.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflict of interest statement:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1. Daily Diary Form

Page 1

In order to access the diary, please generate your **PERSONAL CODE**.

Page 2

Please select how many interactions you have had throughout the day (up to this hour). (A *social interaction* represents any exchange of information between two or more people, lasting at least 5 minutes, and in which one person's behavior is a response to the behavior of the other person(s)).

Important! You can also include interactions that lasted less than 5 minutes and in which you transmitted one (or more) piece(s) of truthful and/or deceptive information. Social interactions can be face-to-face, by phone, via messages (SMS), or online (e-mail, WhatsApp, or through social networks like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat).

In the case of emails and SMS/chat messages, you can consider the time spent writing that text.

For example: when talking to your mom on the phone; when texting your best friend; when meeting a friend for coffee; when sending an email to a professor or faculty staff member; when chatting with someone new at a party; when exchanging a few replies with an old friend on a Facebook post; when talking to the cashier at the checkout.)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

(Based on the number of interactions to be selected, an adequate number of interaction forms will be generated)

Page 3

For the following questions, please think about the *[Interaction number]* interaction you have had and try to remember as many details as you can, then select the answer you consider fitting the situation.

The interaction took place:

- Face-to-face
- Online (on an online platform, etc.)
- Via e-mail
- On the phone
- SMS/MMS

(if they selected "online", then the following question appeared)

The online interaction took place:

- On a platform allowing video streaming (ZOOM, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Discord, etc.)
- On an instant chat
- On a social media platform (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, etc.)
- On a forum (reddit, 9gag, etc.)

The interaction lasted:

- Up to 5 minutes
- 5 – 15 minutes
- 16 – 30 minutes
- more than 30 minutes

In the interaction, there were involved:

- One person
- Two people
- More than two people

(if they selected "one person", then the first question below appeared; if they selected "two people" or "more than two people", then the second question below appeared instead)

The gender of the other person was:

- Feminine
- Masculine
- Other

If there were more than two people, they were:

- Only women
- Only men
- Both
- Other/I don't know

The person you have interacted with is:

- A close person (mother/father, sister/brother, wife/husband, life partner, a very close friend)
- A member of the extended family (grandmother/grandfather, aunt, uncle, niece, cousin, etc.)
- A close acquaintance (a former life partner, a work/university colleague, “someone I get along with”, flat mate/dorm room mate, etc.)
- A distant acquaintance (someone I know, landlord, neighbor, a stranger, etc.)

(if there were more partners involved, then the following question would appear instead)

The people you have interacted with are:

- Close persons (parents, siblings, wife/husband, very close friends)
- Members of the extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, cousins, etc.)
- Close acquaintances (former life partners, work/university colleagues, “people I get along with”, flat mates/dorm roommates, etc.)
- Distant acquaintances (people I know, landlords, neighbors, strangers, etc.)

How much time did you spend thinking about what to say?

- No time at all
- Minutes
- Hours
- Days
- Weeks

How relevant was the interaction for you:

1 - Superficial ... 9 - Extremely relevant

How would you describe the quality of the interaction?

1 - Very unpleasant ... 9 - Very pleasant

Page 4

During interaction number *[Interaction number]*, did you provide one piece of TRUTHFUL information?

- Yes
- No

(If the answer was “yes”, the following question appeared. Otherwise, the participant jumped to the Deceptive section)

For the interaction number *[Interaction number]*, please think about one TRUTHFUL piece of information you have provided throughout the discussion.

Remember: A truthful piece of information can be anything you've said and genuinely considered to be true. It can refer to feelings, thoughts, impressions, behaviors – yours or someone else's.

Example: you told your mother her new haircut is great, and you genuinely thought so; you told your teacher you were feeling fine today (and it was true); etc.)

Please try to remember as many details as you can. Even if you are not sure whether that information is genuine, we encourage you to write it anyway. However, there is no need to provide specific names, you can only use initials.

How much do you think you benefited from the truthful information you've provided?

1 - Not at all ... 9 - Very much

How much do you think the other person/people benefited from the truthful information you've provided?

1 - Not at all ... 9 - Very much

Page 5

During interaction number ***[Interaction number]*** did you provide one piece of DECEPTIVE information?

- Yes
- No

For the interaction number ***[Interaction number]***, please think about one DECEPTIVE piece of information you have provided throughout the discussion.

(Remember: deceptive information is something you don't personally consider to be true, but you've deliberately said to mislead someone else.

*It can be something as little as **a white lie** – you told someone you're fine, even though you're not feeling quite well – or **something more serious** – you told your teacher you didn't just Google that one answer on the test. It can be something you've said **to spare yourself** some trouble, or something you said **to protect another person** (perhaps to not hurt their feelings) – mom gets an awful haircut, but you tell her it's great. It can also be **something that's completely made-up**, or **something true to some extent**, but not entirely (you've told your mom you've eaten, but you didn't tell her it was instant soup and fast food... for the last 4 days).*

Please try to remember as many details as you can. Even if you're not sure if that information was deceptive, we encourage you to write it anyway. However, there is no need to provide specific names, you can only use initials.

How much do you think you benefited from the deceptive information you have provided?

1 - Not at all ... 9 - Very much

How much do you think the other person/people benefited from the deceptive information you have provided?

1 - Not at all ... 9 - Very much

How planned was the deceptive information you have provided?

1 - Not at all ... 9 - Completely

To what extent do you think your partner/s believed you?

1 - Not at all ... 9 - Completely

How serious do you think the consequences of your deceptive information would be if you were discovered?

1 - Not serious at all ... 9 - Very serious

the sequence [pages 3 to 5 from the form] repeats for as many interactions as needed

*At the end *I'm done for today* (submit button)*