

Teaching guide: Online relationships and use of deception

The updated specification subject content for the Relationships option (7182/3) now includes the 'use of deception' in online relationships.

The aim of this guide is to:

- provide an overview of research related to the use of deception in online relationships
- provide examples of different types of deception in online relationships
- provide some explanations of why deception is used in online relationships
- provide details of research studies into the use of deception in online relationships.

About this teaching guide

- This resource provides you with material that you can use in the delivery of the use of deception in online relationships. It includes links to research studies, newspaper articles and videos.
- There is no expectation that you will include the material in this guide in your delivery of the [A-level Psychology \(7182\) specification \(AQA\)](#)
- The delivery of this content is not prescriptive but rather offers material you may wish to use when planning and delivering lessons relating to the use of deception in online relationships. You are free to use alternative material that you select for the delivery of this specification content.

Summary

When delivering this updated specification content, you may wish to:

- briefly consider different types of deception used in online relationships
- consider the range of deceptions, from small, relatively harmless deceptions (for example, butler lies) to the more extreme, harmful form (for example, catfishing)
- explore explanations for the use of deception
- research studies into the use of deception
- explore gender differences in the use of deception.

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Overview of deception in online relationships

- Deception in online relationships refers to the intentional misrepresentation of identity, personal information or intentions in digital communication, often used to manage impressions, initiate or maintain romantic connections, or avoid social discomfort (Markowitz and Hancock, 2018).
- According to Toma, Hancock and Ellison (2008), the core motivation for deception in online dating is to present a more desirable self to attract prospective partners.
- Deception can also be motivated by seeking attention/acceptance, personal gain or avoiding conflict.
- Small strategic forms of online deception are common, but more extreme and dangerous forms are less so. Users may lie about age, appearance or interests, but usually in small ways that they believe won't be discovered quickly. (Because users expect to meet in person eventually, they tend to avoid major lies that could be easily exposed.)
- On the other hand, catfishing is an extreme form of online deception where an individual creates a fake online identity, with the intention of misleading others. The motivation for catfishing differs from the motivation behind the smaller, less harmful forms of deception.
- Ellison and colleagues (2011) discovered that the acceptability of online deceptions by online daters may vary according to factors such as the magnitude of the misrepresentation (for example claiming to be many inches taller than you are rather than just a few inches taller).
- People often rationalise the use of deception through the concept of multiple selves.
- Deception tends to be shaped by the platform being used – people tend to lie less in messages that can be saved or reviewed (such as emails and dating profiles).

Types of online deception

Butler lies

A 'butler lie' is a polite deception used in digital communication to manage social boundaries such as why you didn't reply, why you're ending a conversation, or attempts to avoid someone without being rude (Hancock, 2009).

[Hancock, J, Birnholtz, J, Bazarova, N, Guillory, J, Perlin, J and Amos, B \(2009\), 'Butler Lies: Awareness, Deception, and Design', Proceedings of the 27th International Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, CHI 2009, Boston, MA, USA, pp. 517–526 \(ResearchGate\)](#)

Watch: [Video of TED Talk by Jeff Hancock: 3 types of \(digital\) lies \(YouTube\)](#) (19 minutes).

Prevalence

Very common.

Examples

- "Sorry, I've just seen your message."
- "Sorry I didn't answer your call; my phone was on silent."
- "Got to go, there's someone at the door."

Self-enhancement lies

A deliberate distortion of your attributes or accomplishments, aimed at improving how you are perceived by others.

Prevalence

Very common.

Example

Claiming to be a little taller than you are.

Selective self-presentation

The strategic and intentional sharing of information designed to create a favourable impression (for example, carefully choosing what personal information to reveal to control how you are perceived by others).

Prevalence

Common.

Examples

- Posting only the highlights of your life on social media.
- Only revealing your accomplishments/successes.
- Only posting carefully curated photographs (for example always using filters or editing apps).

Catfishing

Catfishing is an extreme form of online deception where an individual creates a fake online identity with the intention of misleading others.

Prevalence

Less common.

13% of US adults reported that they had interacted with a catfish.

According to Norton's 2025 cyber safety report, 37% of dating-related scams were attributed specifically to catfishing. In 2023 in the US, it is claimed that 650 million dollars were stolen due to catfish romance scams.

Examples

- Read: [Article titled 'Al Brad Pitt dupes French woman out of €830,000' \(BBC News\)](#)
- Read: [Article about a catfish victim making 'the best of life' \(BBC News\)](#)
- Read: [Slide deck of 2025 Norton Cyber Safety Insight Report: Global Results Online Dating \(Gen Digital\)](#)

Hancock (2009): The butler lie

A 'butler lie' refers to a false statement delivered through digital channels, such as text messaging or instant messaging. They are intended to manage social interactions and typically serve to explain why someone may not be available or has to end a conversation, or to politely avoid interaction without appearing rude. According to Hancock, most people do not tell big lies; they make small tweaks. He argues that:

- 81–90% of people admit to some form of deception in their dating profile, but the lies are generally small and believable. Most lies are 'white lies' and socially motivated (butler lies)
- lies are often small and strategic – they are often employed to make people look better or to avoid awkwardness (such as slightly exaggerating their height)
- in comparison to other communication platforms, people lied most often on the phone, less in instant messaging and least in email
- people lie less online than expected. He argues that online communication is recorded, so people think twice about lying. This is known as the 'recordability effect'. Lying online requires cognitive load – it is harder to stay consistent
- there are gender differences: men often add a bit of height whereas women reduce their weight
- language reveals lies – he found that there was less use of 'I' and 'me' words, messages were shorter/simpler and they made use of more negative emotion words.

Research study one

[Toma, CL, Hancock, JT and Ellison NB \(2008\), 'Separating Fact from Fiction: An Examination of Deceptive Self-Presentation in Online Dating Profiles', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Volume 34 Issue 8, pp.1023–1036](#)

Method

80 heterosexual online daters were recruited from a popular online dating website. Researchers collected online profiles and then invited the participants into a lab, where they measured their height and weight directly. They also took a photograph to compare with their profile picture.

Key findings

- Lying was common: nearly everyone lied but they were usually minor (small edits rather than fake profiles) – viewed as ‘identity enhancing’ rather than fabrication.
- Both men and women exaggerated their height.
- Women were more likely to underreport their weight.
- Many used older or edited photographs.
- Lies were goal orientated to maximise their attractiveness (they wanted to appear desirable but did not want to be caught in a big lie during a real-life meeting).

Research study two

[Toma, CL and Hancock, JT \(2012\), ‘What Lies Beneath: The Linguistic Traces of Deception in Online Dating Profiles’ *Journal of Communication*, Volume 62 Issue 1, pp. 78–97](#)

(**Note:** this article requires an account to view.)

This study aimed to identify the linguistic cues that reveal deception in online dating profiles. Participants created a dating profile and were then asked to identify which parts were deceptive. Researchers then analysed the language using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count software.

Findings

- Fewer self-references.
- More negations, for example words such as not and never.
- Fewer emotion related words.

Conclusions and implications

- Deceivers try to manage impressions but will leave behind subtle linguistic traces.
- The study suggests that, even in carefully edited online contexts, linguistic patterns can reveal deceptive intent, offering insights for lie detection in digital communication.
- This has implications for online safety and automated deception detection.

Explanations for the use of deception in online relationships

The Hyperpersonal Model (Walther, 1996)

An early classic study is [Walther, JB \(1996\), 'Computer-Mediated Communication: Impersonal, Interpersonal, and Hyperpersonal Interaction' *Communication Research*, Volume 23 Issue 1, pp.3–43](#)

Deception is discussed through the lens of the hyperpersonal model. This model says that people can sometimes feel closer and more connected when talking online than they do in real life. Online relationships can become hyperpersonal (hyper meaning exceeding personal), more intense and emotionally charged than offline ones. This model helps explain phenomena like online dating, catfishing and digital deception, where idealised personas flourish.

Key points

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) enables selective self-presentation

Because users can carefully control what they reveal online, they may present an idealised version of themselves. Online, you can choose your words carefully and show only your best side. This is not necessarily intended to be malicious.

Idealised perceptions and feedback loops

Receivers often fill in missing social cues with positive assumptions, which reinforces the sender's behaviour. This creates a feedback loop that can deepen relationships based on inaccurate or exaggerated portrayals. (When someone reads your message, they might picture you in a more positive way than you really are.)

Deception is facilitated by reduced cues

The lack of nonverbal cues in CMC makes it easier to hide or manipulate information, allowing users to deceive more easily than in face-to-face interactions.

Not all deception is harmful

Walther suggests that some deception in CMC may be strategic or socially motivated, aimed at impression management rather than exploitation (like *the butler lie*).

Hyperpersonal communication carries risks

If someone is pretending or hiding things, it can lead to disappointment when you meet in person.

Two-way deception in the hyperpersonal model

Senders (the person writing the message) can choose what to share and may leave out things or exaggerate to look better.

Receivers (the person reading the message) often fill in the blanks with positive guesses, imagining the sender as better than they really are (halo effect).

Catfishing

This type of deception involves fabricating an online identity to mislead others, often with the intent of initiating a romantic connection or pursuing other harmful objectives. Such actions are typically driven by emotional, social or financial motives ([Ryan, S and Taylor, J \(2024\), 'An exploration of the motivations of catfish perpetrators and the emotions and feelings expressed by catfish victims using automated linguistic analysis and thematic analysis' Discover Data Volume 2 Article 6](#))

Two explanations for this more extreme form of online deception are considered below.

Attachment theory

Attachment theory explains how early relationships shape adult relationship styles.

Two key insecure styles that have been found to be related to catfishing are:

- **attachment anxiety** – fear of rejection and abandonment, leading to clinginess or overdependence
- **attachment avoidance** – discomfort with closeness and emotional intimacy.

Personality: The Dark Tetrad

The Dark Tetrad identifies four personality traits that are related to catfishing.

1. Psychopathy – impulsivity, lack of empathy and disregard for social norms.
2. Narcissism – grandiosity, entitlement and a need for admiration.
3. Machiavellianism – manipulateness, strategic deceit and cynicism.
4. Sadism – deriving pleasure from causing harm to others.

These traits have also been found to be related to other online anti-social behaviour such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking and trolling.

For further reading, read this [article by Evita March titled 'What kinds of people 'catfish'? Study finds they have higher psychopathy, sadism, and narcissism' \(The Conversation\)](#)

Research studies into attachment explanation and the Dark Tetrad

Catfishing: Attachment

[Mosley MA, Lancaster M, Parker, ML and Campbell K \(2020\), 'Adult attachment and online dating deception: a theory modernized', *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, Volume 35 Issue 2, pp.247–243](#)

- Traditional attachment theory is updated to reflect the digital age, showing how online environments allow more control over self-presentation and increase the chance of deception.
- It suggests that attachment insecurity influences how individuals manage themselves online, for example self-presentation online.
- Gender differences are found between the deceptive behaviour of men and women online.
- Women are more likely to be targets and men are more likely to perpetrate catfishing or online dating deception.
- Men were more likely to deceive for entertainment, control or sexual motives.
- Women were more likely to deceive for emotional connection or protection, such as avoiding rejection or judgement.

Insecure Attachment

- People with insecure attachment styles (anxious or avoidant) are more likely to use deception in online dating to manage fears of rejection or closeness.
- Those with anxious attachment may lie to appear more attractive and gain emotional closeness, fearing abandonment. Their fear of abandonment and desire for closeness may drive them to misrepresent themselves to appear more desirable.
- Avoidantly attached individuals may deceive to keep control and avoid intimacy, using online platforms to stay emotionally detached. The motivation is to maintain emotional distance and control. Their discomfort with intimacy can lead to calculated self-presentation that minimises vulnerability.
- Online dating platforms create environments where users can selectively present themselves, often leading to deceptive practices. The anonymity and control over self-disclosure on these platforms amplifies tendencies rooted in attachment insecurity.
- The study found that both styles contribute to online deception, but attachment anxiety had stronger predictive power.
- The study concludes that people with insecure attachment styles are more likely to deceive in online dating to manage fears of rejection or intimacy.

Catfishing: The Dark Tetrad

[Lauder, C, and March, E \(2023\), 'Catching the catfish: Exploring gender and the Dark Tetrad of personality as predictors of catfishing perpetration' *Computers in Human Behavior*, Volume 140](#)

- This study explored the role of the Dark Tetrad (psychopathy, narcissism, sadism, Machiavellianism) in predicting catfishing behaviour.
- Researchers surveyed 664 adults via social media, asking about catfishing behaviours and personality traits.

Key findings

- People who engage in catfishing often show higher levels of psychopathy, sadism and narcissism – traits known for callousness, manipulation and lack of empathy.
- Sadism (enjoying harming others) was the most powerful predictor of catfishing behaviour.
- Men were more likely than women to report engaging in catfishing.
- While some catfishes aim for financial gain, others may do it for emotional manipulation or enjoyment, showing that harm itself can be a motive (sadism).

Extension

- The Dark Tetrad is also found to be related to online cyberbullying, cyberstalking and trolling.

Trolling refers to a harmful form of online behaviour intended to provoke, upset or disrupt others which can negatively impact on others' mental and emotional well-being:

[Volkmer SA, Gaube S, Raue M and Lerner E \(2023\), 'Troll story: The dark tetrad and online trolling revisited with a glance at humor' *PLOS ONE* Volume 18 Issue 3](#)

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Gender differences in the use of deception in online relationships

Multiple studies, such as Mosley et al. (2020) and Lauder and March (2023), consistently find that men are more likely than women to engage in catfishing.

Men tend to score higher on Dark Tetrad traits (especially psychopathy, narcissism and sadism), which are strongly linked to catfishing behaviour.

Men	Women
More likely to be a catfish perpetrator (Moseley, 2020): 38% identified as catfish perpetrators, while 62% were targets of catfishing behaviour. More likely to misrepresent: • wealth • interests • personal characteristics. Men are more likely to catfish for reasons related to entertainment, control or sexual exploration. More likely to enhance their positive attributes when a face-to-face meeting is less likely.	More likely to be a victim of catfishing (Moseley, 2020): 23% identified as catfish perpetrators, and 77% identified as catfish targets. More likely to misrepresent their physical characteristics. Women who catfish are more often motivated by loneliness, body dissatisfaction or identity exploration, including gender and sexual identity.

Quick view summary

Types of online deception

Type	Description	Example
Butler lies	Polite excuses to manage social boundaries	"Sorry, just saw your message!"
Self-enhancement lies	Small exaggerations to appear more attractive	Saying you're taller than you are
Selective presentation	Only showing the best parts of yourself	Using filters or only posting achievements
Catfishing	Creating a fake identity to deceive others	Pretending to be someone else online

Why people lie online

- To impress others or avoid rejection.
- To manage social situations (for example ending a conversation politely).
- For emotional or financial gain (especially in catfishing).
- Because online platforms allow control over what is shared.
- More extreme forms of deception have been explained through insecure attachments and personality traits.

The Hyperpersonal Model (Walther, 1996)

- Online communication can feel more intimate than face-to-face.
- People carefully control what they share.
- Receivers often fill in gaps with idealised assumptions.
- This can lead to strong but misleading connections.

Attachment theory and deception

Attachment style	How it relates to deception
Anxious	Lies to gain closeness and avoid rejection
Avoidant	Lies to maintain distance and control

The Dark Tetrad and catfishing

Traits linked to harmful online behaviour:

- psychopathy – impulsive, lacks empathy
- narcissism – self-centred, needs admiration
- Machiavellianism – manipulative, strategic
- sadism – enjoys causing harm.

Gender differences

Men	Women
More likely to be catfish perpetrators	More likely to be victims
Lie about wealth, interests, characteristics	Lie about appearance
Motivated by control, entertainment	Motivated by emotional connection, identity

Linguistic clues to spot lies

- Fewer personal pronouns ('I', 'me').
- More negative words ('not', 'never').
- Shorter, simpler messages.

Research highlights include:

- Toma and Hancock (2008): most people lie a little in dating profiles.
- Mosley et al. (2020): attachment insecurity predicts deception.
- Lauder and March (2023): Dark Tetrad traits linked to catfishing.

Catfishing statistics

- 13% of US adults have interacted with a catfish.
- In 2023, \$650 million was lost to romance frauds.
- 37% of dating scams are linked to catfishing.

Additional resources

Watch

- [Video news report about catfishing: Widow loses \\$430,000 in romance scam \(YouTube\)](#) (3 minutes)
- [Video news report about catfishing: Aurora woman loses \\$250K to online dating scam; FBI shares red flags \(YouTube\)](#) (4 minutes)
- [Video trailer for documentary film titled 'Sweet Bobby: My Catfish Nightmare' \(YouTube\)](#) (2 minutes)
- [Video of TEDTalk by Jeff Hancock titled 'The future of lying' \(YouTube\)](#) (19 minutes)
- [Video of TEDTalk by Elise Hu titled 'How digital culture is reshaping our faces and bodies' \(TED\)](#) (5 minutes)

Read

- [Article by Holly Parker titled 'Online Dating with a Dash of Deception' \(Psychology Today\)](#)
- [Article by Krystal D'Costa titled 'Catfishing: The Truth About Deception Online' \(Scientific American\)](#)