

Developing online deception literacy while looking for love

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Abstract

Payal Arora and her colleagues argue that Facebook has become a widely-used tool for finding romance in the global south, especially among marginalized youth. Yet this reliance on Facebook opens users up to the possibility of deception, forcing many to develop a dynamic online deception literacy. In this response paper, I unpack the notion of online deception literacy by reviewing the existing social scientific literature on this topic. I discuss (1) the prevalence of deception in online romance; (2) people's ability to detect online deception; (3) the cues people use to detect online deception; and (4) the usefulness of those cues in accurately gauging deception. I highlight avenues for future research, especially those inspired by the experience of marginalized users in the global south.

Keywords

deception, deception detection, Facebook, online dating, internet romance scams, romantic relationships

Payal Arora and her colleagues describe the key role played by Facebook in the negotiation of love, sex, and romance in the global south (India and Brazil). The authors delineate a series of social, cultural, and economic forces that make Facebook an important conduit for romance in the region and go on to describe some of the perils faced by these users in their pursuit of Facebook romance, such as Internet romance scams, loss of privacy, and public shaming. Many of these perils, the authors argue, stem from the practice of 'friending' online strangers with deceptive or malicious intent. The authors' findings suggest that Facebook users in the global south who seek romance online must navigate many such

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deceptive or potentially deceptive encounters and as a result are challenged to develop a 'dynamic literacy' for detecting deception and protecting their privacy online.

As a scholar of deception in online environments, I found the notion of online deception literacy particularly compelling. In this response article, I would like to focus on it by drawing connections with the existing social scientific research on deception production and detection in online environments, especially in romantic contexts. How much do people lie when looking for love online? How adept are online communicators at detecting deception when interacting with strangers? On what information do they rely when judging these online strangers' credibility? Much of the research on these questions has been conducted in the West, particularly the United States, so extrapolating it to users in the global south should be done carefully. In fact, Arora et al.'s findings highlight ways in which certain users in the global south might be more vulnerable to online deception, while others might be savvier in detecting it than their Western counterparts. It will be important for future research to examine these possibilities directly.

This essay is structured as follows: I will first review Arora et al.'s arguments as to why Facebook has become pivotal in the search for romance in the global south, and why 'friending' strangers is a common practice in this search. Then, I will summarize research on online deception production within romantic contexts, with an emphasis on Internet romance scams. Finally, I will discuss the meaning of deception detection literacy by reviewing research on people's ability to detect online deception, the cues that they use in this process, and the utility of those cues in accurately ascertaining deception. Throughout, I will discuss potential differences between the users in the global south who are the subject of Arora et al.'s article and the Western users on whom the research I review was conducted.

Arora et al. argue that the following reasons account for Facebook's popularity as a portal for seeking romance in the global south: (1) its accessibility to impoverished users, (2) cultural norms that restrict cross-gender interactions, (3) aspirations to connect to high-status individuals online, and (4) politeness norms that facilitate interactions with strangers.

With respect to accessibility, Arora et al. note that the high rates of poverty in the global south make free online services especially appealing. Through its Internet.org initiative, Facebook has positioned itself as a free service in several countries in the global south and consequently has been successful in attracting large numbers of impoverished users in this region. One telltale sign of Facebook's market dominance is that most impoverished users in the global south believe that Facebook *is* the Internet and few use any other websites (as cited in Mirani, 2015). As one of the few free online services available, Facebook has become a one-stop shop for these users' informational, social, and romantic needs.

Even more directly implicated in Facebook's status as a purveyor of romance are cultural and religious norms that limit cross-gender interactions, especially of the romantic kind. In India, for instance, arranged marriages are still normative, and there are many barriers preventing romantic encounters among young people in the face-to-face realm. Yet these norms tend not to dull young people's interest in pursuing romantic connections. Many of them turn to Facebook for this purpose because Facebook makes it easy to find, 'friend', and directly communicate with members of the opposite gender and provides an environment that is less subject to public scrutiny than face-to-face.

As was the case with accessibility, poverty also drives some of these users to seek connections with what they perceive as high-status individuals on Facebook (e.g. members of

the diaspora and foreigners). Disadvantaged youth ‘friend’ others aspirationally, in the hopes of elevating their own social status through these associations. Facebook facilitates connectivity by making it easy to run search queries using location or name tags.

Finally, politeness norms, whereby it is considered rude to turn down social requests, facilitate the ‘friending’ of strangers in some of the global south countries. Arora et al. cite the case of Namibia, where young people accept friend requests on Facebook, many of them with a romantic tinge, in order not to commit a social faux pas.

These factors work together to drive users in the global south to pursue romance on Facebook and often to do so by engaging with strangers. While many of these connections are doubtless fruitful, others open up the risk of deception and scams. There is no research to date on the prevalence of romantic deception on Facebook in the global south, but some studies point out the emotionally and financially devastating nature of Internet romance scams, usually perpetrated through online dating sites. These scams typically involve an emotionally vulnerable victim, who is eagerly looking for love but has difficulty finding it face-to-face, and a con who pretends to fall in love with the victim, develops an online relationship with her or him over the course of several months, and eventually asks for money, ostensibly for a personal emergency or for visiting the victim (Rege, 2009). It is difficult to estimate the amount of money lost to these scams because they tend to be underreported by embarrassed victims. However, some studies show losses to be substantial, accounting for millions of dollars yearly (see Whitty and Buchanan, 2012, for a review). Arora et al.’s analysis suggests that the impoverished users in the global south may incur smaller losses individually than users in the West, typically the cost of recharging a phone card for the scammer, but that there might be more victims in the global south precisely because of their eagerness to find love on the Internet (due to the face-to-face barriers described earlier) and their openness to connect with strangers.

In the area of online romance more generally, US-based research shows that while people *believe* that deception is more prevalent online than face-to-face (see Toma et al., 2016) and that it is rampant on online dating sites (Couch et al., 2012), this might not be the case. A suite of studies in our laboratory found that, among online daters, women typically shave a few pounds from their weight and post slightly dated photographs, while men round up their height – patterns which are similar to face-to-face dating deception (Hancock and Toma, 2009; Toma et al., 2008). We theorize that online dating deception, while facilitated by the disembodied nature of online dating, where users get to construct their self-presentation in the absence of corporeal presence and through highly editable photographic and textual means, is, nonetheless, kept in check by the anticipation of face-to-face interaction with romantic partners. Since deception tends to be a relational deal-breaker, online daters who are motivated to pursue serious relationships tend to minimize it (see also Gibbs et al., 2006). The anticipation of face-to-face interaction is the key element in curbing online deception, yet marginalized youth in the global south may have fewer assurances that such interaction is likely to occur in the near future. To the extent that they connect with potential partners on Facebook who do *not* share the same geographic location and who are difficult to access in person, these users may be more likely to encounter online deception than their Western counterparts – a possibility that should be directly investigated by research.

If marginalized users in the global south do encounter more romantic deception online, how likely are they to detect it, and how will they go about doing so? This is the

core aspect of the online deception literacy issue. Arora et al.'s findings suggest that through repeated experiences with online deception, many of these users have developed a *savoir faire* for detecting it. They resort to creative techniques, such as inquiring immediately about the likelihood or timing of face-to-face interaction or asking specific questions that circumvent the formulaic responses generated by fake accounts. There is no research to date on these savvy users' deception detection ability and only limited research on online deception detection in Western countries.

The lion's share of deception detection research has been conducted in face-to-face settings, and the results are sobering: Despite feeling confident in their abilities, both lay people and trained professionals (e.g., police and customs officers) fare poorly at detecting deception, performing no better than chance. In other words, expending time and mental energy on detecting lies yields the same results as taking a guess (see Vrij, 2008, for a review). Why such inadequacy? Several reasons have been proposed. The first is the *truth bias* (van Swol et al., 2015) or the notion that humans are a cooperative species and, therefore, automatically approach social interactions with a sense of trust, the absence of which would render social life painful and inefficient. The second is a *misguided reliance on nonverbal cues*. One of the few international studies on this topic shows that respondents across 70 countries rated the avoidance of eye contact as the best indicator that someone is lying, followed by fidgeting and speech hesitations (Global Deception Research Team, 2006). Yet research shows that nonverbal cues are not useful in detecting deception (DePaulo et al., 2003). The third is *disregarding baseline information* or failing to realize that lying makes people behave differently than they normally do and, therefore, that it is important to know this baseline demeanor in order to observe deviations (Ekman, 2009).

The question arises whether people fare better at detecting *online* than face-to-face lies. There are reasons to believe they would: Online communicators who interact with strangers might be more suspicious and, therefore, display a reduced truth bias, and there are fewer nonverbal cues online that could lead lie detectors astray. However, communicating with strangers online provides no baseline information on which to anchor judgments, and online liars might craft better, more persuasive lies (hence, harder to detect), because they can revise messages and take more time to compose them than they would have in face-to-face settings. Research in this area is limited and provides mixed findings: Some studies find superior deception detection accuracy online compared to face to face (e.g. van Swol et al., 2015), whereas others find the reverse (e.g. Hancock et al., 2010). Nonetheless, these studies agree that in a general sense, people still perform poorly at detecting online deception.

An incipient line of research has begun to examine the cues people use to determine online strangers' trustworthiness, and several striking findings emerge. First, people rely on a *small* set of *simple* cues to ascertain strangers' trustworthiness. As few as five or six online cues (e.g. number of photographs posted and number of words used in free-text self-descriptions) are used to make big inferences about someone's trustworthiness (Toma, 2014; Toma and D'Angelo, 2015). Second, people prioritize uncertainty reduction: The more information strangers provide about themselves, regardless of the meaningfulness of this information, the more trustworthy they are perceived (e.g. Larrimore et al., 2011; Toma, 2014; Toma and D'Angelo, 2015; Toma and Hancock, 2012). Third, the style of communication matters a great deal: Clear, concrete writing is associated with more trustworthiness (Larrimore et al., 2011; Toma and Hancock, 2012). Uncertainty

reduction and writing style are both potentially problematic cues because they can be easily faked by malevolent online users; in fact, this may explain the success rate of online marketing scams (see Toma and D'Angelo, 2015). Third and relatedly, this emerging body of research seems to suggest that the cues people use to assess online strangers' trustworthiness are *not* diagnostic of these strangers' actual trustworthiness. In other words, people tend to rely on the wrong cues (Toma and D'Angelo, 2014; Toma and Hancock, 2012), which supports the notion that online deception detection is not particularly accurate and points to deficiencies in online deception detection literacy, at least among Western users evaluating strangers online. But to my knowledge, experience with online deception has never been tested as a moderator of these effects. That is, are more experienced online communicators better at detecting deception and at utilizing cues to this end? Does learning from experience, as seems to be the case with many users from the global south, improve online deception detection accuracy?

To summarize, the case of users in the global south who are looking for love online raises important questions about the extent to which people understand the mechanics of online deception and are able to detect it – in other words, questions about online deception literacy. The significance of these questions is both applied, in that they can help the millions of users in the global south, many of whom are disadvantaged, navigate online encounters more effectively, and theoretical, in that they can shed light on how people make sense of online deception.

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