

**Beyond Truth and Lies:
When and Why Consumers Evade**

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Working paper as of June 2020

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While prior work considers when and why people lie rather than tell the truth in consumer social comparisons, salesperson interactions, and elsewhere, a third option beyond truth and lies remains largely overlooked. We examine when and why consumers evade: a distinct behavioral response that neither informs (truth) nor misinforms (lies). Four studies demonstrate that (1) evasion, as measured by both real behavior and self-reports, may be preferred to deception as a means to avoid unfavorable consumer information disclosures, (2) rather than being merely a perfect alternative to deception, evasion's appeal shifts independently depending on situated audience factors critical to self-presentation, and (3) evasive response strategies offer emotional and self-presentational advantages that underwrite a preference for evasion (over deception). Evasive responses allow consumers to avoid revealing potentially embarrassing information without the guilt or shame associated with deception.

Keywords: evasion, deception, truth, self-presentation, consumer social comparisons

People often talk about consumption experiences and outcomes with others. They share information with marketers in surveys and focus groups (John, Acquisti, & Loewenstein 2011; Wooten & Reed, 2000), and with fellow consumers through word of mouth (Argo, White, & Dahl, 2006; Berger, 2014). Although marketers have long been wary of the veracity of information shared in focus groups (e.g., Wells, 1974; Yoell, 1974), consumers readily trust information obtained via word of mouth (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Indeed, consumers are more willing to trust or act on information obtained through word of mouth, especially from personal contacts in face-to-face settings, than on information from marketers (Nielsen, 2015).

Yet consumers lie to both marketers and their fellow consumers. They deceive to service providers to obtain material or financial rewards (Anthony & Cowley, 2012). Consumers lie to one another to present the self (Argo et al., 2006; Argo & Shiv 2012; Sengupta et al., 2002) or others (Argo, Dahl, & White, 2011) in a favorable light.

Of course, deception isn't the only way people avoid revealing information. People also obfuscate (Bickart, Morrin, & Ratneshwar, 2015), dodge questions (Rogers & Norton, 2011), or equivocate (Balevas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990) to avoid sharing unfavorable truths. In contrast to work on consumer deception, however, prior investigations of these behaviors focus only on how they impact audiences, rather than when and why people withhold or obscure information in the first place. While these behaviors may share with deception a desire to avoid embarrassing truths, they also have something in common that distinguishes them from lying: They are evasive.

Evasive self-presentation describes a class of behaviors that reflect intentions to avoid disclosing self-relevant information without resorting to deception (Leary, 1995). While much is known about when and why people intend to deceive others, little attention has been paid to the

psychological and social drivers of responses that offer little, if any, relevant information. Are uninformative responses merely direct substitutes for deception? Or does their appeal differ critically on motivational factors faced by the person who wishes to avoid disclosing the truth?

We examine *evasion* as a category of strategic self-presentation behaviors that do not involve manipulating the veracity (or quality; Grice, 1991) of information shared. For example, when asked how much they paid for something, some consumers will tell the truth even if they think they have overpaid. Others may lie to save face, reporting that they paid less than they actually did (e.g., Argo et al., 2006). Evasion represents a plausible third strategic response to such self-presentational dilemmas—a non-response that avoids, conceals, changes the subject, or otherwise muddies the waters such that no relevant information is disclosed. While the existence of evasive responding should be no surprise, by spotlighting the crucial distinction between evasion and deception, we shed light on unique psychological drivers and consequences of evasion in consumer social comparisons.

This paper makes three main contributions. First, we provide a framework that conceptually distinguishes evasion from deception. Although some suggest that evasion is merely a form of lying, we argue that evasive response strategies are distinct from deception because they need not contain false information. By recognizing that evasive responses are not merely a form of deception, we open the door for scholars interested in exploring evasion as an alternative to speaking truth or lies.

Second, we begin to shed light on *when* and *why* people facing requests for sensitive information may choose to evade rather than deceive. While much research shows when and why consumers (and people more generally) lie, and other research has demonstrated the social perceptions generated when people encounter deceivers (e.g., Argo et al., 2006) or evaders (e.g.,

Rogers & Norton, 2011), we are unaware of work examining the psychological and social drivers behind a person's decision to evade versus deceive in the first place.

Third, we predict and demonstrate unique self-presentational consequences of evasive responding. By examining evasive and deceptive strategies concurrently, we offer evidence that those who choose to evade may avoid the guilt and shame associated with deception (e.g., Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). Moreover, by considering these strategies across consumer social comparison and persuasion settings, we isolate self-presentational benefits that may be conferred to both consumers and managers who choose to evade rather than deceive.

Overall, our theorizing and empirical results support evasion as a psychologically-distinct phenomenon (from deception) that merits further consideration and examination in marketing research and beyond. In the sections that follow, we provide the conceptual foundation behind our theorizing, present experiments that test our predictions, and discuss implications of our findings.

1. DECEPTION IN CONSUMER CONTEXTS

Considerable work has examined when and why consumers deceive. For example, consumers lie to service providers for financial gain (Anthony & Cowley, 2012) and to each other to avoid losing face (Argo et al., 2006; Sengupta et al., 2002). Consumers also lie to help psychologically close or distant others (Argo et al., 2011; Argo & Shiv, 2012).

What makes communication deceptive? Scholars with an expansive view of deception treat half-truths as whole lies, especially when the communicator has the potential to “profit from lies without, technically, telling lies” (Goffman, 1959, p. 62). According to this view, a response for which any pertinent fact is omitted can be viewed as a “lie of omission” whether or not the

communicator actually offers false information. Under this perspective, anything unsaid would render what was said untrue.

Arguably, an even more expansive view of deception seems to be suggested in assertions that deceptive communication is “communication that violates any [Gricean] maxims” (Rogers & Norton 2011, p. 139). Grice’s (1991) theory of conversational implicatures is based on a cooperative principle divided into four maxims that reflect listeners’ and speakers’ shared expectations of the: (1) quantity (i.e., amount of information needed to be informative), (2) quality (i.e., truthfulness), (3) relation (i.e., relevance to the topic at hand), and (4) manner (i.e., clarity) of information presented. Because Rogers and Norton (2011) suggest that those who violate any of these maxims do so with guile, they treat violations of *any* Gricean maxim as acts of deception. This view asserts that people who merely dodge a question “mask their deception by exploiting implicit norms that direct listeners’ attention away from detecting whether a particular answer truly addresses the specific question asked” (Rogers & Norton, 2011, p. 130). Under this definition, for example, a person who utters an irrelevant or vague response to a friend’s question is lying, even if this happened only because they misunderstood the question or did not wish to answer it.

This prior research is by no means alone in its treatment of uninformative (i.e., evasive) behaviors as falling within the broader definition of deception. Consumer acts of simply withholding or concealing information from salespeople have been explicitly described as a form of deception (Anthony & Cowley, 2012, p. 478, 480; Kirmani & Campbell, 2004). Merely withholding the truth has been used as one of four measures that formed a lying index in the context of consumer social comparisons (Argo et al., 2006; Sengupta et al., 2002, Study 1). Some of this work describes concealment as a form of deception, yet only offers participants a

spectrum of being either informative (truth) or misinformative (deception), with no apparent opportunity for uninformative responding (evasion) (Sengupta et al., 2002, Study 2).

In contrast to these expansive views of deception, some scholars favor a more restrictive approach. Miller (1983) defines deception as “message distortion resulting from deliberate falsification or omission of information by a communicator with the intent of stimulating in another, or others, a belief that the communicator himself or herself does not believe.” More recently, negotiation researchers have identified paltering as a deceptive tactic that involves the use of statements that are truthful yet create false impressions (Rogers, Zeckhauser, Gino, Schweitzer, & Norton, 2017). For example, a politician who wishes to avoid disclosing the truth about a past sexual affair may answer a current question about the affair by saying “There is not a sexual relationship” rather than “There was not a sexual relationship.” Perhaps most restrictive is the perspective offered by DePaulo’s seminal paper on lying as “the deliberate fostering of a false impression rather than the judicious editing of a true one” (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, & Wyer, 1996, p. 980). These more restrictive definitions clearly define deception as acts that foster false information or inferences, distinguishing them from responses that offer no discernable information at all.

2. THE PRESENT RESEARCH: EVASION AS A DISTINCT RESPONSE STRATEGY

As described earlier, we conceptualize evasive response strategies (evasion) as a class of behaviors that allow individuals to avoid revealing potentially embarrassing truths without necessarily producing false information. By making this distinction, we can theorize that evasion

may possess different drivers and consequences than deception in consumer social comparisons, interactions with salespeople, and social interactions more broadly.

Support for our distinction between deception and evasion is offered in equivocation theory (e.g., Bavelas, Black, Bryson, & Mullett, 1988). People can give vague or indirect responses without providing factually true or false information (Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990). That is, violations of the Gricean maxim of manner do not necessarily involve deception. Our distinction is also supported by an assertion from the relationship psychology literature that “the mere fact someone neglects to mention something to a relationship partner is not itself sufficient to establish an instance of deceptive communication” (Miller, Mongeau, & Sleight, 1986, p. 498). Here, violations of the Gricean maxim of quantity need not involve deception. What’s more, the self-presentation literature’s conceptualization of evasive self-presentation supports our conceptualization. Evasive self-presentation involves behaving “in ways that evade the necessity of ever broaching the issue” (Leary, 1995, p. 172), representing “the gentle art of saying nothing by saying something” (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). That is, it involves presenting pieces of information that, at a granular level, violate Gricean maxims of manner, relevance or quantity in service of presenting an uninformative whole.

Three categories of tactics that have been described in the literature are consistent with this conceptualization. When faced with the prospect of disclosing potentially embarrassing information, people can: (1) equivocate or obfuscate, (2) dodge the question by answering a related one, or (3) withhold or suppress information. Equivocation (Bavelas et al., 1990) and obfuscation (Bickart et al., 2015) are violations of the Gricean maxim of manner in that they primarily involve vague or ambiguous responses. These pseudo-answers are not outright lies or “leakages” of the truth, but merely “unclear” (Bavelas et al. 1990, p.207). Dodging questions

(Rogers & Norton, 2011) violates the Gricean maxim of relevance in that it primarily involves answering questions that differ from those that are asked; thus providing no information that is directly relevant to what was asked. Withholding and suppressing information violates the Gricean maxim of quantity in that communicators “clam up” (Wooten & Reed, 2000) or overtly refuse to provide any information at all (Ekström, 2009). While these evasive tactics vary in terms of the specific Gricean maxims they manipulate, they do not involve the introduction of falsities pertaining to the information requested.

In contrast to scholars who describe *any* violation of Gricean maxims as deceptive communication, we endorse the perspective that distinguishes between the provision of false information and efforts to provide no information at all. Because previous examinations of uninformative communications have primarily focused on actors such as politicians (Rogers & Norton, 2011) and salespeople (e.g., Bickart et al., 2015) who are seen as having dubious motives for withholding information from their audiences, *when* and *why consumers* use evasion (uninformative responses) rather than deception (misinformative responses) to avoid sharing the truth remains largely unexamined.

We address this gap by examining intended and actual responses to potential disclosures of embarrassing information, a common setting used to assess consumer intentions to deceive. Previous studies have shown that people intend to lie when asked about comparative outcomes that reveal unfavorable performance disparities (Argo et al., 2006; Sengupta et al., 2002), presumably because these disparities reflect negatively on their competence as consumers.¹ In the present research, we leverage a similar context to illuminate both drivers and consequences of evasion, demonstrating it as a psychologically and behaviorally distinct alternative to

¹ For brevity, we use “performance disparity” or simply “disparity” to describe the upward social comparisons central to the study of consumer deception in most prior research.

deception for people who wish to avoid truthful disclosures of potentially embarrassing consumer information.

Overview

To summarize, this paper proposes evasive communication as a distinct, and sometimes preferred, strategy from deception for those who want to avoid the disclosure of true information about a consumer performance disparity.

The four experiments that follow test our proposition that evasion represents a distinct, and sometimes preferred, strategy from deception in consumer interactions. Each study presents theory-driven tests of psychological antecedents, moderators, and/or consequences consistent with this proposition.

Study 1 demonstrates evasion as real-world alternative to deception by capturing actual responses to an experimentally-controlled social interaction. This study also provides conceptual and empirical support for our distinction between evasion and deception by revealing differences in the psychological consequences associated with engaging in the two behaviors.

Studies 2 and 3 further assess our conceptual distinction between evasion and deception by theorizing and empirically examining situational factors that should differentially affect intentions to engage in each behavior. Study 2 tests a prediction that the presence of a persistent other discourages intentions to evade, but not deceive in response to a request for information that would reveal an unfavorable performance disparity. Study 3 argues and then demonstrates that the presence of an informed other moderates intentions to deceive, but not evade in response to a similar situation. Both studies also present measurement model results as further evidence of discriminant validity between evasion and deception.

Lastly, Study 4 compares the social perceptions of individuals engaged in evasive versus deceptive communications, revealing self-presentational benefits of evasion compared to deception.

The first three studies examine evasion and deception in the context of a performance disparity revealed through an upward consumer social comparison (e.g., Argo et al., 2006; Argo et al., 2011; Sengupta et al., 2002). While people are motivated to avoid the truth when they performed worse than others (disparity condition), they possess less motivation to do so when they perform as well as others (no disparity control condition). The last study (Study 4) examines both a consumer social interaction and a selling interaction to demonstrate the differential perceptual consequences that arise across these marketing-related interaction settings.

3. STUDY 1: EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF UNINFORMATIVE AND MISINFORMATIVE RESPONSES

To provide preliminary evidence of evasion as a viable alternative to truth and lies in consumer social comparisons, Study 1 captures participants' real behavioral responses to a request for consumer social comparison information in a controlled interaction setting. While previous research uses self-reports to measure consumer intentions to deceive (e.g., Argo et al., 2006; Argo et al., 2011; Sengupta et al., 2002), socially desirable responding could be responsible for low reported deception intentions relative to either truthfulness or evasion. We predict that evasive responding will be a significant (non-zero), and possibly even preferred, alternative to deceptive responding when consumers are faced with a social comparison threat.

This study also seeks evidence of the psychological consequences that may drive this preference by exploring the emotional outcomes of employing evasion versus deception. Recent efforts to understand the consequences of truth avoidance (e.g., Anthony & Cowley, 2012; Argo

& Shiv, 2012; Rogers et al., 2017) have focused primarily on financial and behavioral consequences, and exclusively on the effect of deception as an alternative to truthfulness.

Although evasion and deception both entail truth avoidance, we predict that the two will have different emotional consequences. In particular, we expect deceptive responders to report greater levels of negative self-conscious affect (i.e., guilt and shame) than their evasive counterparts.

Because people generally value honesty, deception is a potential affront to one's morality (Bok, 1999) and self-concept maintenance (Mazar et al., 2008; Chance, Norton, Gino, & Ariely, 2011). As a result, people report feelings of tension, guilt or anxiety while lying (Caso, Gnisci, Vrij, & Mann, 2005; Ekman & Frank, 1993; Vrij, Semin, & Bull, 1996). Such feelings are due in part to the fear of deception detection—being caught in a lie (Zuckerman, DePaulo, & Rosenthal, 1981). The fear of deception detection has also been associated with feelings of shame (Keltner & Buswell, 1996). However, the psychological consequences of deception likely extend beyond the fear of being caught in a lie. When deception is self-interested, and therefore a moral transgression (Mazar et al., 2008), guilt and shame can arise from the blow to one's self-concept associated with being a liar (Ekman & Frank, 1993).

Guilt and shame are described as “close cousins” in the family of negative self-conscious affect, being the private and public manifestations of this affect, respectively (Ekman, 1985; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Accordingly, we expect feelings of guilt and shame to be prevalent among those who deceive to escape or avoid a social predicament. In contrast, and supporting our expectation that evasion is psychologically distinct from lying, we predict that these feelings will be less prevalent among evasive responders because evasion allows individuals to avoid the social or moral transgression of sharing false information.

To sum, in addition to providing a preliminary test of the mere presence of evasion as a substantial behavioral response to consumer social comparisons, we test our prediction that deception will result in higher levels of the public and private forms of negative self-conscious affect (guilt and shame) than either evasive or truthful responding.

3.1 Method

Undergraduate students (N = 212; 107 female) at a North American university participated in the study for partial course credit. Participants were invited one at a time into a small interview room with a same sex confederate who was blind to research hypotheses and condition assignment.

First, the participant and confederate were instructed to complete a test of credit-worthiness (FICO). Participants were told that they would learn their credit score as a bonus for taking the test. After taking the test, participants received a private electronic copy of their own credit report with a (bogus) FICO score of either 610, indicating “low credit-worthiness” (disparity condition) or 775, indicating “excellent credit-worthiness” (no disparity control condition). Afterwards, a research assistant (who was also blind to condition assignment) instructed the participant and confederate to wait for a third participant who was scheduled to join them in an unrelated study. Then, the research assistant left the participant and confederate in the room unattended, ostensibly to find the third participant.

While the participant and confederate were by themselves, the confederate initiated a conversation and revealed his/her credit score, which was either higher than (disparity condition) or the same as (no disparity control condition) the participant's score. The confederate then asked the participant about his/her credit score. As instructed, the confederate gave the participant time

to respond before covertly signaling for the research assistant to re-enter the room. Participant responses were recorded by hidden microphone.

Upon returning, the research assistant informed the participant and confederate that the third participant was “missing,” and instructed them to proceed to a final computer-based study. In this part of the study, participants indicated whether the confederate asked them anything after the research assistant left the room; and, if so, what (open-ended). We used this question to confirm that participants heard the focal question and recalled it accurately. Finally, the computer-based study asked how shameful (ashamed, humiliated, disgraced; $\alpha = .91$) and guilty (repentant, guilty, blameworthy; $\alpha = .87$) participants felt (items from Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996) as a result of their response. All items used seven-point scales. Next, three bipolar items checked the disparity manipulation (“I was less [more] credit-worthy than the other student,” “I [The other student] got a lower credit score than the other student [me],” “I had a worse [better] credit score than the other student;” $\alpha = .96$; seven-point scales). Finally, we performed a funneled debriefing, including checks for suspicion and hypothesis guessing.

The audio recording of the participant’s actual verbal responses to the confederate’s question is used to determine the dependent measure. Two independent research assistants transcribed the recordings to text. Three additional independent judges assessed the transcription of participants’ verbal responses. Judges were asked to code factually accurate (informative) responses as “truthful,” factually inaccurate (misinformative) responses as “deceptive,” and vague or indirect responses that were neither factually accurate nor inaccurate (uninformative) as “evasive.” Inter-judge agreement was 84%. Disagreements were resolved by majority rule.

3.2 Results

We provided the confederate, research assistant and audio transcriptionists with mechanisms to identify suspicious participants they encountered throughout their respective processes. Participants for which there was majority agreement regarding suspicion were withheld from analysis ($N = 20$). Participants identified as suspicious showed up earlier than their scheduled time, which allowed them to see the confederate in the lab before the study began. Using unanimous rather than majority agreement on suspicion as the exclusion criteria produces the same statistical conclusions as those reported below. No participant guessed that the study was concerned with evasion, deception, or truthfulness. After accounting for suspicion and an inaudible credit score response for one participant, a total of 191 participants (96 female) remained for analysis.

3.2.1 Manipulation Checks. All but two participants recalled that the confederate asked about their credit score. Consistent with condition assignment, analysis of variance on the mean of the three credit disparity check items revealed that participants in the disparity condition perceived themselves to be victims of a greater performance disparity ($M = 6.42$, $SD = .91$) than did their counterparts in the control condition ($M = 3.45$, $SD = .96$; $F(1, 189) = 481.17$, $p < .001$).

3.2.2 Main Results. An omnibus Fisher's exact test revealed that the pattern of responses was significantly different across the disparity and control conditions ($p < .001$). Consistent with prior research using self-reported behavioral intentions, participants were less likely to be truthful in the disparity condition (60.6%) than in the no disparity control condition (88.7%; $\chi^2(1) = 18.46$, $p < .001$).

People were significantly more likely to be evasive in the disparity condition relative to the no disparity control (25.5% vs. 11.3%; $\chi^2(1) = 6.42$, $p = .01$). What's more, participants were

significantly more likely to use evasion than deception when faced with a consumer performance disparity (25.5% vs. 13.8%; $\chi^2(1) = 4.07, p < .05$; Table 1).

TABLE 1: REAL BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES TO CONSUMER CREDIT SCORE INQUIRY

	<u>Condition</u>			
	Disparity		Control	
Truthful	57	(60.6%)	86	(88.7%)
Deceptive	13	(13.8%)	0	(0.0%)
Evasive	<u>24</u>	<u>(25.5%)</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>(11.3%)</u>
Total	94	(100.0%)	97	(100.0%)

3.2.3 Emotional Consequences. As predicted, deceptive responders in the disparity condition reported higher feelings of guilt and shame than did their evasive counterparts (Guilt: $M_{\text{Deception}} = 3.56, SD = 1.69$ vs. $M_{\text{Evasion}} = 2.33, SD = 1.59$; $t(35) = 2.16, p < .05$; Shame: $M_{\text{Deception}} = 3.82, SD = 1.88$ vs. $M_{\text{Evasion}} = 2.64, SD = 1.43$; $t(35) = 2.15, p < .05$).

Moreover, consistent with prior research, deceptive participants in the disparity condition felt more guilt and shame than did truthful participants (Guilt: $M_{\text{Deception}} = 3.56, SD = 1.69$ vs. $M_{\text{Truth}} = 1.83, SD = .98$; $t(68) = 3.58, p < .01$; Shame: $M_{\text{Deception}} = 3.82, SD = 1.88$ vs. $M_{\text{Truth}} = 2.08, SD = 1.28$; $t(68) = 3.18, p < .01$). By contrast, evasive participants felt no more guilty than truthful participants ($M_{\text{Evasion}} = 2.33, SD = 1.59$ vs. $M_{\text{Truth}} = 1.83, SD = .98$; $t(79) = 1.44, p > .15$), and only marginally more ashamed ($M_{\text{Evasion}} = 2.64, SD = 1.43$ vs. $M_{\text{Truth}} = 2.08, SD = 1.28$; $t(79) = 1.75, p = .09$).

3.2.4 Alternative: Lies of Omission. While prior theorizing and our empirical results support our conceptualization of evasion as a behavioral response that is distinct from deception,

one could argue that evasive responding can result in what is popularly termed a “lie of omission” if the omission intentionally produces deceptive inferences among audiences (Miller, 1983; Rogers et al. 2017). Under this interpretation, some of the real responses judged to be evasive could instead (or additionally) be judged as deceptive.

To test this possibility, for each of the 35 actual responses the earlier judges had coded as evasion, we asked a new set of five independent judges whether the confederate (a) could determine the FICO credit score the participant claimed to have received based on the participant’s response, and (b), whether the participant’s response was intended to cause or could have caused the confederate to believe the responder had received a different (e.g., higher) credit score than they had actually received. There was full agreement among judges (5 out of 5 judges) that none of the 35 responses (a) enabled an inference about the particular score the participant received, or (b) intended to cause, or could have caused, a deceptive inference. These results suggest that “lies of omission” are unlikely to be a factor.

3.3 Discussion

Study 1 examined actual behavioral responses in a controlled laboratory setting, and revealed that uninformative, evasive responding is a non-zero, and possibly preferred, alternative to deceptive responding when consumers are faced with an unfavorable social comparison.

Findings from this study also suggest that evasion has different emotional consequences than deception. Evasion produced less guilt and shame than deception, and had emotional consequences resembling those associated with truthful responses. While we cannot assert with certainty that these emotions are not partly a result of selection (e.g., people who tend to deceive generally tend to feel more guilty and shameful to begin with), these findings begin to shed light on the source of a possible preference for evasion over deception.

Finally, the analysis of open-ended, real responses obtained in this study helps rule against the alternative that a “lies of omission” category, which could blur the lines between evasion and deception, explains the results.

4. STUDY 2: THE PRESENCE OF A PERSISTENT OTHER MODERATES INTENTIONS TO EVADE BUT NOT DECEIVE

Study 2 proposes and examines the first of the two psychosocial moderators that enable us to empirically distinguish evasion from deception.

Imagine two consumers discussing consumer credit. While one shares her credit score openly, the other skirts the question about her score. What happens if, rather than just letting it go, the first consumer asks the second again, “But what is your credit score?” We hypothesize that, among those who face a consumer performance disparity, the presence of a persistent other will attenuate intentions to provide evasive (i.e., uninformative), but not deceptive (i.e., misinformative), responses because the latter contains information that appears to address the questioner’s expressed need to know, even if that information is false.

Prior research suggests that an uninformative answer (i.e., evasion) may be a risky strategy for an individual who faces a persistent questioner (Buller, Strzyzewski, & Comstock, 1991), partly because the questioner is motivated to detect and reject uninformative responses (Andone, 2013; Burgoon, Buller, Ebesu, & Rockwell, 1994). However, persistence on the part of questioners does not necessarily improve efforts to detect and avoid misinformation (Buller, Comstock, Aune, & Strzyzewski, 1989), as people can simply continue to substantiate lies that meet the Gricean standards of manner and relevance required by persistent questioners. As a result, persistent questioners are likely to discourage ambiguous or irrelevant (evasive) responses (Inbau, Reid, Buckley, & Jayne, 2011), but not necessarily deceptive ones.

In the present context, consumers should anticipate difficulty providing uninformative responses to questions that have the potential to uncover performance disparities if they expect someone to continue probing for information. Eventually being “exposed” for dodging the question is likely to exacerbate the social predicament that the evasive responder was trying to avoid. As a result, the presence of a persistent other should reduce evasion intentions. However, because deceptive responses are informative (albeit falsely so), the tendency to provide them should be unaffected by the prospect of facing someone who refuses to accept responses devoid of clear and relevant information. As a result, the presence of a persistent other should reduce intentions to evade, but not deceive in response to questions that could reveal a performance disparity (i.e., one consumer’s credit score is lower than another’s).

4.1 Method

Study 2 employed a 2 (Disparity vs. No Disparity Control) x 2 (Persistent Other vs. No Persistent Other) between-subjects design. Undergraduate students (N = 174; 68 female) at a large university participated for partial course credit.

Participants imagined themselves meeting a group of same-sex friends at a mall food court. On the way to the food court, the participant and a friend (the interaction partner) stop at a kiosk where each privately receives a free FICO credit report. As in Study 1, a performance disparity was manipulated by presenting participants a credit report with a FICO score of either 610, indicating “low credit-worthiness” (disparity condition) or 775, indicating “excellent credit-worthiness” (no disparity control condition).

Later, while socializing with friends over lunch, the participant overhears the interaction partner being either very persistent or not very persistent when asking another friend about a

score on a recent exam. In the scenario, the participant thinks about how this display of (absence of) persistence is typical of the interaction partner. The interaction partner then turns the conversation to the credit scores that s/he and the participant obtained. The interaction partner mentions that s/he had a rating of “excellent credit-worthiness” with a FICO score of 775, and then asks the participant, “What about you?” (see Appendix for full stimuli).

Immediately after participants read this scenario, we measured evasion and deception intentions. We assessed deception intentions with three items adapted from prior research (e.g., Argo et al., 2006) that capture: (1) being deceptive about, (2) lying about, or (3) misrepresenting the score ($\alpha = .95$). Evasion intentions were assessed using three items that capture: (1) being evasive, (2) being vague, or (3) being ambiguous about the score ($\alpha = .93$). These items capture the range of responses previously discussed as forms of evasive responding, focusing on violations of Gricean maxims of manner and relation. All items were measured with seven-point scales anchored by 1 = Very unlikely and 7 = Very likely. Item order was randomized. See Appendix for exact wording.

Three bipolar items were used to assess the effectiveness of the persistent other manipulation (the friend was “relenting:unrelenting,” “surrendering:persistent,” “unyielding:yielding” (reversed); $\alpha = .60$). Participants also completed a manipulation check for the performance disparity manipulation (“I had a much worse [better] credit than my friend,” “I [my friend] got a better credit score than my friend [me]” (reverse), “I had a much lower [higher] credit score relative to my friend;” $\alpha = .94$). All items used seven-point scales.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Measurement Model. We subjected the items used to capture deception and evasion to confirmatory factor analysis to assess discriminant validity between the intended constructs. A two-factor model (three-item deception, three-item evasion) fit better than a single factor model combining these items ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 315.54, p < .001$). Average variance extracted from the two-factor model was greater than both the recommended cut-off (.81 > .5) and the squared correlation of the factors (.81 > .31; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). These results suggest participants perceived the three items intended to measure evasive responding as distinct from the deceptive responding measures used in prior research.

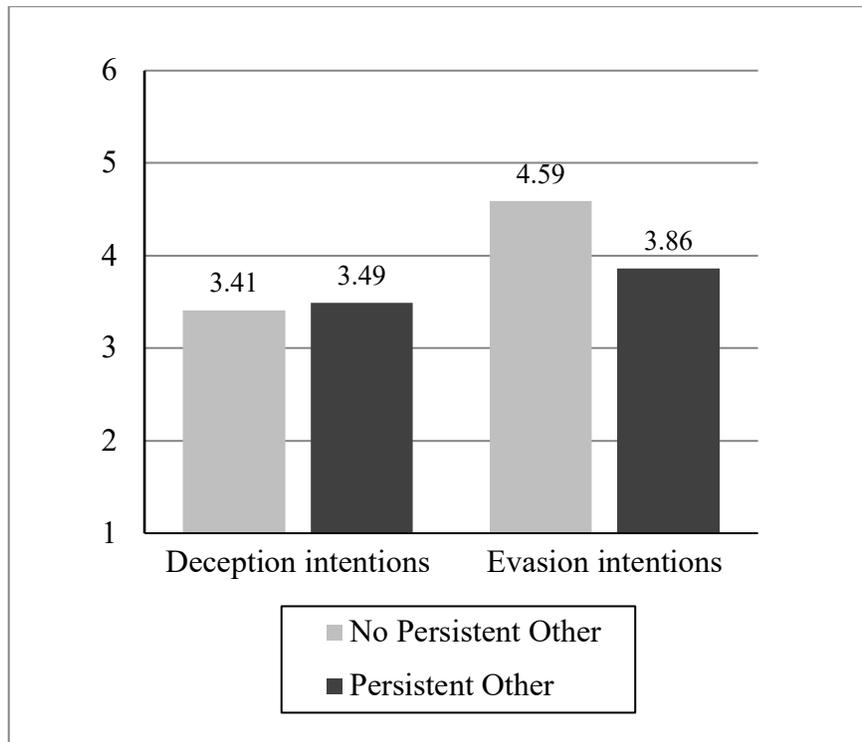
4.2.2 Manipulation Checks. Participants in the persistent other condition perceived the friend as more persistent ($M = 4.91, SD = 1.02$) than did participants in the no persistent other (control) condition ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.04; F(1, 170) = 84.58, p < .001$). There was no crossover simple effect on persistence perceptions by disparity condition or a disparity by persistence condition interaction ($F_s < 1$). Responses to the three-item disparity check ($\alpha = .94$) confirm that the disparity manipulation was also successful ($M_{\text{Disparity}} = 6.16, SD = 1.29$ vs. $M_{\text{Control}} = 4.03, SD = .70; F(1, 170) = 185.38, p < .001$). There was no crossover effect of persistence condition on perceived disparity ($F(1, 170) = 1.20, p = .28$) and no persistence by disparity interaction ($F(1, 170) = 2.37, p = .13$).

4.2.3 Deception Intentions. Omnibus analysis of variance examining performance disparity, the presence of a persistent other, and their interaction as predictors of deception intentions revealed only a main effect for performance disparity ($M_{\text{Disparity}} = 3.45, SD = 1.81$ vs. $M_{\text{Control}} = 2.81, SD = 1.46; F(1, 170) = 6.43, p = .01$; other effects $F < 1$). As predicted, deception intentions did not differ due to the presence of a persistent other within either the disparity ($M_{\text{Persistent other}} = 3.49, SD = 1.87$ vs. $M_{\text{No persistent other}} = 3.41, SD = 1.76; F < 1$; Figure 1) or the

control conditions ($M_{\text{Persistent other}} = 2.92, SD = 1.53$ vs. $M_{\text{No persistent other}} = 2.71, SD = 1.41; F < 1$).

Thus, the presence of a persistent other did not affect deception intentions.

FIGURE 1: PRESENCE OF A PERSISTENT OTHER IMPACTS EVASION BUT NOT DECEPTION (GIVEN A PERFORMANCE DISPARITY)



4.2.4 Evasion Intentions. In contrast, the presence of a persistent other did affect evasion intentions. Omnibus ANOVA examining performance disparity and the presence of a persistent other as predictors of evasion intentions ($\alpha = .93$) revealed a significant main effect of the performance disparity ($M_{\text{Disparity}} = 4.22, SD = 1.61$ vs. $M_{\text{Control}} = 3.54, SD = 1.64; F(1, 170) = 7.82, p < .01$), no main effect of the presence of a persistent other ($F < 1$), and a significant interaction of disparity with the presence of a persistent other ($F(1, 170) = 7.83, p < .01$). Victims of a performance disparity were significantly less likely to evade in the presence of a persistent other ($M = 3.86, SD = 1.74$) than in the absence of a persistent other ($M = 4.59, SD =$

1.39; $F(1, 170) = 4.51, p < .05$; Figure 1). As expected, the presence of a persistent other did not significantly impact evasion intentions in the control condition ($M_{\text{Persistent other}} = 3.86, SD = 1.65$ vs. $M_{\text{No persistent other}} = 3.23, SD = 1.58; F(1, 170) = 3.37, p > .05$).

4.3 Discussion

Study 2 demonstrates that the presence of a persistent inquirer impacts intentions to evade, but not deceive, in response to an inquiry about a consumer performance disparity. This result provides empirical support for our conceptual distinction between evasion and deception by showing that evasion has at least one independent moderator.

5. STUDY 3: THE PRESENCE OF AN INFORMED OTHER MODERATES INTENTIONS TO DECEIVE BUT NOT EVADE

Study 3 offers a second theory-driven moderator to further examine evasion as a distinct alternative to deception as a means of avoiding disclosures of sensitive information. Imagine that two consumers purchased the same product, albeit at a different place and/or time. During a conversation, one shares the price she paid openly, while the other is reluctant to do so out of fear of revealing a consumer performance disparity. To complicate matters, this conversation occurs in the presence of a third person who was on the shopping trip with the person trying to avoid sharing the price she paid. This third person has the potential to aggravate the other's self-presentational predicament by "exposing" her as a liar if she provides a deceptive response. How, then, will she respond?

Information people present to others can be constrained by what their audiences know about them (Baumeister & Jones, 1978). For example, people are less likely to self-aggrandize in the presence of others who can invalidate their self-presentations (Schlenker, 1980). By

increasing the probability of detecting, and possibly revealing, misinformation, the presence of an informed other should reduce intentions to deceive, but not evade. Equivocation theory supports our prediction that the presence of an informed other should not reduce intentions to evade. According to this theory, “people typically equivocate when placed in (...) an avoidance-avoidance conflict, in which all of the possible [direct] replies to a question have potentially negative consequences but, nevertheless, a reply is still expected” (Bull, 1998, p. 39). Answering an embarrassing question in front of an audience that includes an informed other represents such a conflict because the two most obvious direct responses, telling an embarrassing truth or being caught in a lie, both have negative consequences. Most importantly, equivocation theory supports our argument that the presence of an informed other has a different impact on deception than on evasion, thereby corroborating our conceptual distinction between the two behaviors.

Study 3 tests our prediction that the presence of an informed other should attenuate intentions to deceive, but not evade in response to a request for embarrassing information.

5.1 Method

Undergraduate students (N = 198; 89 female) at a North American university completed the study for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Disparity vs. No disparity control) x 2 (Informed other vs. No informed other) between-subjects design.

This study used a price comparison scenario similar to those used in consumer deception research (e.g., Argo et al., 2006, Argo et al., 2011; Sengupta et al., 2002). Participants imagined that they had purchased a television, but learned that they paid either \$200 more than (disparity condition) or the same as (no disparity control condition) a friend who bought the same

television. In the informed other condition, a second person present in the situation also knew the actual price the participant paid for the television. In the no informed other condition, the participant was the only one who knew how much s/he paid for the television. Scenarios were constructed to involve same-sex interactions. Full text of the scenario is provided in the Appendix.

After presenting the scenario, we captured participants' intentions to evade or deceive in the same manner as in Study 2. Participants then completed a series of comprehension checks. First, we asked participants to indicate how many people knew how much they paid for the television (only me, me and one of my friends, me and all of my friends). Next, we used three items to assess comprehension of the presence of an informed other: (1) how hard it would be for the friends to find out the actual price (reverse scored), (2) how easily the friends could discover the real price paid, and (3) how accessible the true price was to the friends ($\alpha = .92$).

We also used three items to assess the performance disparity manipulation ("I paid much less [more] than the other guest," "I [The other guest] got a better deal than the other guest [me]," "I paid a much lower [higher] price relative to the other guest," $\alpha = .93$) and three items to assess participant comprehension that both parties in the scenario purchased similar products ("Not at all [Extremely] similar," "Not at all [Very much] identical," "Not at all [Very much] the same"; $\alpha = .92$). All items used seven-point scales.

5.2 Results

5.2.1 Measurement Model. Replicating the results of Study 2, confirmatory factor analysis of the six evasion and deception items supported evasion and deception as distinct factors. A two-factor model fit better than a single factor model combining these items ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 327.67, p$

< .001), with average variance extracted again greater than the recommended cut-off (.76 > .5) and the squared correlation of the factors (.76 > .46).

5.2.2 Manipulation Checks. All participants correctly identified how many friends knew the actual price paid for the television. Consistent with condition assignment, participants in the informed other condition perceived a higher risk of discovery ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 1.32$) than those in the no informed other condition ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 2.01$; $F(1, 194) = 44.35$, $p < .001$). There was no crossover effect for disparity condition ($F(1, 194) = 1.54$, $p = .22$) and no interaction ($F < 1$). Participants in the disparity condition indeed noticed a greater price disparity ($M = 6.10$, $SD = .81$) than did control participants ($M = 4.03$, $SD = .31$, $F(1, 194) = 542.75$, $p < .001$), with no crossover effect of informed other condition or interaction ($F_s < 1$). Participants recognized that both parties purchased extremely similar televisions ($M = 6.74$, $SD = .70$ on a seven-point scale).

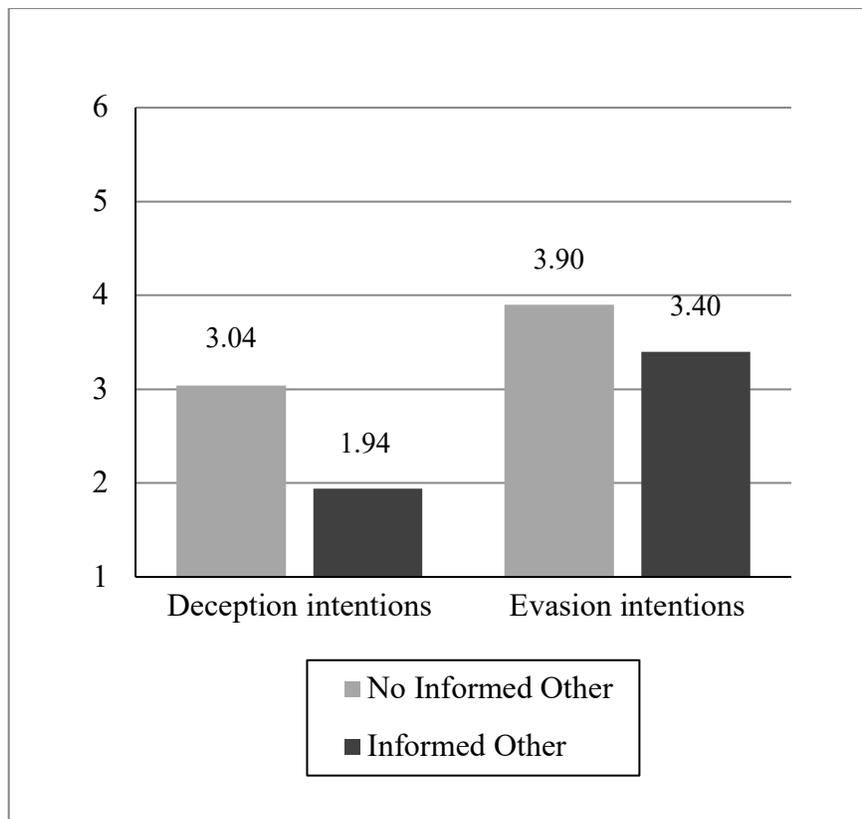
5.2.3 Deception Intentions. Omnibus ANOVA with performance disparity and presence of an informed other as predictors of deception intentions revealed a significant main effect of a disparity ($M_{\text{Disparity}} = 2.47$, $SD = 1.82$ vs. $M_{\text{Control}} = 1.65$, $SD = 1.31$; $F(1, 194) = 17.15$, $p < .001$), no main effect of an informed other ($F(1, 194) = 1.87$, $p = .17$), and a significant disparity by informed other interaction ($F(1, 194) = 9.48$, $p = .01$).

As predicted, given a performance disparity, participants who faced an informed other were significantly less likely to deceive ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 1.25$) than were those who did not face an informed other ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 2.16$; $F(1, 194) = 10.30$, $p < .001$; Figure 2). There was no difference in deception intentions due to the presence or absence of an informed other in the no disparity control ($M_{\text{Informed other}} = 1.85$, $SD = 1.54$ vs. $M_{\text{No informed other}} = 1.42$, $SD = 1.42$; $F < 1$).

5.2.4 Evasion Intentions. In contrast, and as predicted, the presence of an informed other did not affect evasion intentions. The same omnibus ANOVA for evasion intentions yielded a

main effect of disparity ($M_{\text{Disparity}} = 3.63$, $SD = 1.96$ vs. $M_{\text{Control}} = 2.17$, $SD = 1.65$; $F(1, 194) = 24.40$, $p < .001$), no main effect of an informed other ($F < 1$), and no interaction of disparity and informed other ($F(1, 194) = 2.42$, $p > .10$). Most centrally, evasion intentions did not differ due to the presence of an informed other within either the disparity condition ($M_{\text{Informed other}} = 3.40$, $SD = 1.96$ vs. $M_{\text{No informed other}} = 3.90$, $SD = 1.94$; $F < 1$; Figure 2) or the control ($M_{\text{Informed other}} = 2.32$, $SD = 1.72$ vs. $M_{\text{No informed other}} = 2.00$, $SD = 1.58$; $F < 1$).

FIGURE 2: PRESENCE OF AN INFORMED OTHER IMPACTS DECEPTION BUT NOT EVASION (GIVEN A PERFORMANCE DISPARITY)



5.3 Discussion

Study 3 provides further support for our conceptual distinction between evasion and deception by providing evidence of a unique moderator of deception, but not evasion. The presence of an informed other decreased consumer intentions to deceive without affecting their intentions to evade.

Together, Studies 2 and 3 demonstrate through measurement models and independent moderation of deception and evasion intentions that evasion is not merely a form of deception, but an independent response strategy people utilize when faced with potential disclosure of consumption-related information.

These two studies also provide evidence consistent with the real behavior examined in Study 1 that evasion may even be a preferred response to deception in the consumer social comparison settings we examine. Across conditions, both studies observed higher evasion than deception intentions (Study 2 $M_{\text{Evasion}} = 3.88$, $SD = 1.65$ vs. $M_{\text{Deception}} = 3.14$, $SD = 1.68$; $t(173) = 6.06$, $p < .001$; Study 3 $M_{\text{Evasion}} = 2.91$, $SD = 1.80$ vs. $M_{\text{Deception}} = 2.15$, $SD = 1.69$, $t(197) = 7.99$, $p < .001$). While socially desirable responding could account for these results, the response patterns are largely consistent with the real behaviors observed in Study 1.

6. STUDY 4: SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF EVASIVE AND DECEPTIVE COMMUNICATORS

Study 4 moves beyond drivers of evasion versus deception to the distinct self-presentational consequences of these two forms of non-truthful responding. We propose that people are less likely to generate negative perceptions of those who evade than those who deceive in response to requests for consumption-related information. In addition, we explore the possibility that interaction context (selling vs. consumer word of mouth) moderates the extent to which evaders are viewed as unfavorably as deceivers.

As much as consumers perceive the importance of maintaining moral identity (defined as “a self-conception organized around a set of moral traits” (Aquino & Reed, 2002) and are motivated to stay within an ‘acceptable range of dishonesty’ as a moral person (Mazar et al., 2008), consumers tend to treat their moral identity as a significant component of their social self-schema (cf. Markus, 1977). Therefore, consumers should be motivated to maintain the extent to which other people view them as moral. As such, deceptive communications should hold self-presentational consequences for the communicator. While lying is difficult to detect in face-to-face interactions (Bond & DePaulo, 2006), once exposed, it can have a detrimental effect on one’s reputation (Boles, Croson, & Murnighan, 2000; Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006).

Previous research often has treated evasive responses, most notably by salespeople and politicians, as acts of deception. These actors are assumed to possess dubious motives for withholding information from audiences with a legitimate need to know the information they seek (e.g., consumers and voters) (Bickart et al., 2015; Rogers & Norton, 2011). However, as an alternative to deception, we predict that evasion will allow communicators to avoid the truth while, simultaneously, avoiding the undesirable social perceptions associated with deception; specifically, perceptions that impugn their moral identity. While we predict that, in general, perceptions of immorality will be less prevalent for evasive than deceptive communicators, we expect these perceptions to be particularly low for evasive responders to audiences with low information needs (i.e., a less legitimate need or right to know). For example, audiences should be more likely to attribute dubious motives to salespeople who obscure information about product features that potential buyers have a legitimate need to know (high information need), than to their fellow consumers who obscure information about consumption outcomes that have little or no bearing on future decisions (low information need).

While past research assumes that evasive responders have dubious motives, empirical tests of this proposition consider only communicators who possess a selling motive (e.g., politicians, salespeople; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Friestad & Wright, 1994), which may result in more automatic negative perceptions for any truth-avoidant response, whether deceptive or evasive. However, in many consumer conversations, the communicator may have a different motive and little obligation to share the requested information. By leveraging a context in which the communicator's obligation to share and the audience's right to know differ from previously examined contexts, we can draw a clearer distinction between evasion and deception and develop a more nuanced understanding of their psychosocial drivers and consequences.

This thinking leads to two predictions. First, we expect a main effect of response strategy on social perceptions such that those who deceive are perceived as less moral than those who evade. Second, interaction context will moderate this effect. In a selling (vs. social) interaction context, the perceptual benefits of evasion (vs. deception) will be attenuated due to the audience's need to know the product information requested.

6.1 Method

Participants recruited from an online panel ($N = 797$; 495 female) completed the study for a nominal payment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 2 (Context: Selling vs. Social) \times 3 (Behavioral Response: Truth, Deception, Evasion) between-subjects design.

Participants were asked to imagine a scene in which two people, Maria and Jane, are having a conversation in front of Maria's house. In the selling context, Maria listed her house for sale and Jane was a prospective home buyer. In the social context, Maria was merely a resident,

while Jane was a new neighbor. In both conditions, Maria mentioned some benefits of living in the neighborhood, and then Jane asked how much Maria paid for her house. Depending on condition assignment, participants were told that Maria responded by either giving the true amount (truth), giving a false amount (deception), or changing the subject without revealing the amount paid (evasion). Full stimuli text is provided in the Appendix.

Next, participants reported their perceptions of Maria's dishonesty (dishonest, untrustworthy, unreliable; $\alpha = .92$) and immorality (immoral, unvirtuous, unprincipled; $\alpha = .92$) given her response. Item order was randomized. All items used seven-point scales (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

We then collected manipulation checks for response type and context conditions. The extent to which the participants perceived Maria's response to be deceptive versus evasive was assessed by 3-item composite measures similar to prior studies (Deceptive: being deceptive about, lying about, misrepresenting the price; $\alpha = .97$; Evasive: being evasive, being vague, being ambiguous about the price; $\alpha = .81$). Participant perceptions of Jane also were measured in terms of her nosiness (nosy, curious, inquisitive; $\alpha = .61$) and politeness (impolite, discourteous, inconsiderate; $\alpha = .92$) as indicators of the extent to which she had a need to know the requested information across conditions.

6.2 Manipulation Checks

As intended, participants in the evasive condition saw Maria as more evasive ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.54$) than those in the deception ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.85$) or truth conditions ($M = 1.44$, $SD = 1.09$; omnibus $F(2, 794) = 177.95$, $p < .001$; pairwise contrasts $ps < .001$). There was no crossover effect of context ($F < 1$, $p = .61$) and no context by response interaction ($F < 1$, p

= .75). Similarly, participants in the deception condition perceived Maria's response as more deceptive ($M = 6.32$, $SD = 1.13$) than those in the evasion ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.24$) or truth conditions ($M = 1.28$, $SD = .84$; omnibus $F(2, 794) = 1762.89$, $p < .001$; pairwise contrasts $ps < .001$). Again, there was again no crossover effect of context ($F < 1$, $p = .47$), and no interaction ($F < 1$, $p = .81$).

Consistent with the idea that Jane had lower information needs in the social condition than in the selling condition, Jane was perceived to be nosier ($M_{\text{Social}} = 5.59$, $SD = 1.23$ vs. $M_{\text{Selling}} = 5.14$, $SD = 1.19$; $F(1, 791) = 27.60$, $p < .001$) and more impolite ($M_{\text{Social}} = 4.24$, $SD = 1.86$ vs. $M_{\text{Selling}} = 3.13$, $SD = 1.68$; $F(1, 791) = 78.65$, $p < .001$) when she asked about the home's price as a neighbor than as a potential buyer. There were no interactions observed ($F_s < 1$).

6.3 Results

Omnibus ANOVA with immorality perceptions as the dependent measure found the expected simple effect of response type ($M_{\text{Truth}} = 1.62$, $SD = .93$ vs. $M_{\text{Deception}} = 3.56$, $SD = 1.69$ vs. $M_{\text{Evasion}} = 2.01$, $SD = 1.21$; $F(2, 791) = 173.46$, $p < .001$), a simple effect of context ($M_{\text{Selling}} = 2.57$, $SD = 1.72$ vs. $M_{\text{Social}} = 2.25$, $SD = 1.37$; $F(1, 791) = 12.39$, $p < .001$), and the predicted interaction of context and response ($F(2, 791) = 14.60$, $p < .001$). The pattern of results for situated dishonesty perceptions (reported in Appendix Table 1) replicated these results. The simple effect of context is consistent with the generalized negative consumer schema of salespeople (Campbell & Kirmani 2000; Kirmani & Campbell 2004).

As predicted, for the response type main effect, participants viewed the deceptive responder as more immoral ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.69$) than either the truthful ($M = 1.62$, $SD = .92$; $t(794) = 17.10$, $p < .001$) or evasive responder ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 1.21$; $t(794) = 13.64$, $p < .001$).

They also viewed the evasive responder as more immoral than the truthful responder ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 1.21$ vs. $M = 1.62$, $SD = .92$; $t(794) = 25.66$, $p = .001$).

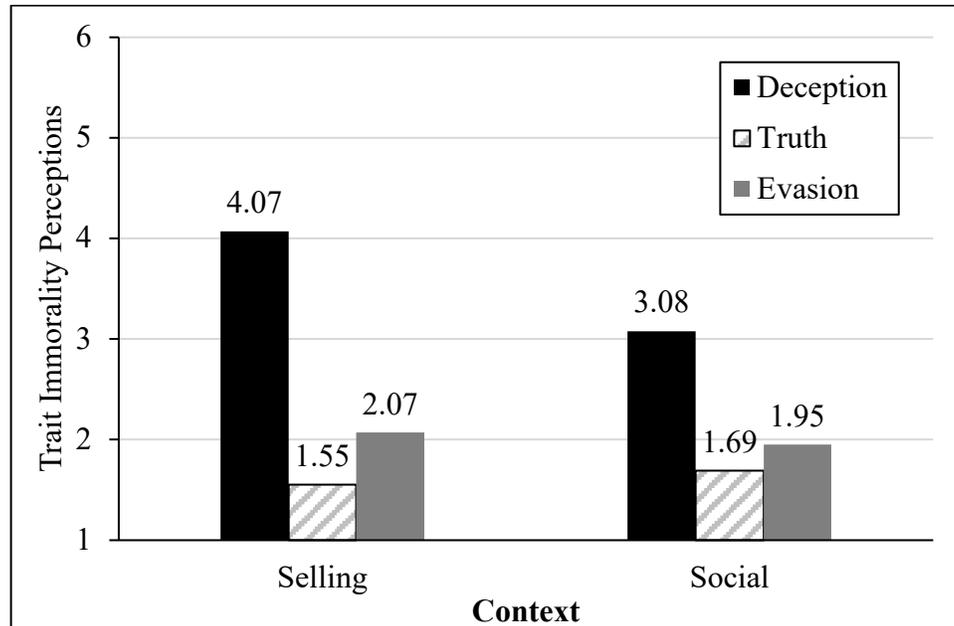
Moderation by interaction context was also sustained. Participants perceived the deceptive communicator as more immoral in the selling context ($M_{\text{Selling}} = 4.07$, $SD = 1.72$) than in the social context ($M_{\text{Social}} = 3.08$, $SD = 1.50$; $t = 6.37$, $p < .001$). However, context did not impact morality perceptions when the communicator was either evasive ($M_{\text{Selling}} = 2.07$, $SD = 1.20$ vs. $M_{\text{Social}} = 1.95$, $SD = 1.22$; $t = .74$, $p = .46$) or truthful ($M_{\text{Selling}} = 1.55$, $SD = .94$ vs. $M_{\text{Social}} = 1.69$, $SD = .91$; $t = -.96$, $p = .34$).

Additional planned contrasts tested our prediction that the perceptual benefits of evasion will be attenuated (more like deceptive communicators) in the selling context. As predicted, evasive responders in the social context were viewed as significantly less immoral than deceptive responders ($M_{\text{Evasion}} = 1.95$, $SD = 1.22$ vs. $M_{\text{Deception}} = 3.08$, $SD = 1.50$; $t = 7.16$, $p < .001$), and no more immoral than truthful responders ($M_{\text{Evasion}} = 1.95$, $SD = 1.22$ vs. $M_{\text{Truth}} = 1.69$, $SD = .91$; $t = 1.61$, $p = .11$). However, participants in the selling context saw evasive responders as more immoral than truthful responders ($M_{\text{Truth}} = 1.55$, $SD = .94$; $t = 3.31$, $p = .001$). That said, participants still viewed evasive responders in the selling context ($M_{\text{Evasion}} = 2.07$, $SD = 1.20$) as significantly less immoral than deceptive responders ($M_{\text{Deception}} = 4.07$, $SD = 1.72$; $t = 12.67$, $p < .001$).

In sum, Study 4 further supports our distinction between evasion and deception by demonstrating that evasion does not produce the self-presentational costs of lying. Whereas liars were perceived as more immoral than either evasive or truthful responders, evaders were perceived no differently than truthful responders when facing requests for information that their audiences had less need to know. Study 4 also provides support for our argument about the

importance of interaction context (e.g., motives of the communicator and/or information needs of the audience) when forming perceptions of non-truthful responders.

FIGURE 3: SELF-PRESENTATIONAL COSTS OF DECEPTION ARE GREATER FOR DECEPTIVE THAN EITHER TRUTHFUL OR EVASIVE RESPONSES



7. GENERAL DISCUSSION

Although a large body of research documents the use of deception in exchanges of marketing-related information, scant empirical attention has been paid to consumer efforts to employ a less obvious means of avoiding the truth in these contexts. We address this gap by conceptualizing and examining evasion as an alternative to both deception and truthful responding to requests for consumer or product information.

Findings from four experiments demonstrate that: (1) evasion is a significant (non-zero) behavioral response to consumer social comparison situations and produces less guilt and shame

than deception (Study 1), (2) the presence of a persistent other discourages intentions to evade, but not deceive in response to a request for sensitive consumer information (Study 2), (3) the presence of an informed other moderates intentions to deceive, but not evade in similar situations (Study 3), and (4) audiences perceive evasive communicators as significantly less dishonest and immoral than their deceptive counterparts and just as honest as truthful communicators to audiences with low information needs (Study 4). Our findings suggest that evasive responses allow communicators to avoid disclosing social comparison information without the guilt, shame, or negative social perceptions associated with deception.

Our research makes four main contributions. First, across four studies using both actual behaviors and self-reported intentions, we find evidence that evasion is an attractive alternative to deception to avoid disclosures of unfavorable consumer information. Previous studies of evasive communications have focused not on the causes of evasive communication, but rather on audience perceptions of evasive speakers who are assumed to have dubious motives for withholding information (e.g., salespeople, politicians; Bickart et al., 2015; Rogers & Norton, 2011). Consequently, scholars have not sufficiently theorized the nature and breadth of when and why people, much less consumers, are evasive. By leveraging consumer interaction contexts that arguably involve lower levels of suspicion and lower demands for transparency, we extend theorizing of evasive communications beyond the domain of deceptive maneuvers. Our findings suggest that “beating around the bush,” dodging, and obfuscating may be preferable alternatives to more blunt refusals to answer sensitive information requests (e.g., saying “None of your business”).

Second, we provide evidence of discriminant validity between evasion and deception. We accomplish this in four ways: through judge coding of actual response behaviors (Study 1), by

conducting confirmatory factor analyses of participants' response intentions (Studies 2 and 3), by identifying unique moderators of each response strategy (Studies 2 and 3), and by demonstrating different social perceptions for evaders versus deceivers (Study 4). Evasion (but not deception) intentions were affected by the presence of a persistent other who refuses to accept an uninformative response, whereas deception (but not evasion) intentions decline with the risk of being "exposed" for providing misinformation in the presence of a person who has knowledge of the truth. Furthermore, we observed evasion occurring at a higher rate than deception in what is, to our knowledge, the first experimentally-controlled examination of real truth-avoidance behaviors in a consumer social comparison context.

Third, we reveal that deception and evasion may have distinct emotional and social consequences. People reported feeling less guilty and ashamed after evading than deceiving. Beyond the communicator's own feelings towards the non-truthful behavior, observers of evasive communication reported that evaders are less immoral and dishonest than liars. That is, evasion appears to allow consumers to escape the social predicaments associated with revealing sensitive information without the guilt, shame, or negative social perceptions associated with deception. However, our findings regarding social perceptions of deceivers and evaders are limited to a third person perspective. Future research is needed to examine the extent to which direct recipients of evasive responses (who do not get their questions answered) view evaders differently than do indirect recipients who merely witness them, as is the case with paltering, a tactic that targets perceive as less ethical than do palterers and outside observers (Rogers et al., 2017).

7.1 Theoretical Implications and Future Research

Although our research provides a formal conceptualization and initial empirical exploration of evasive communication, more research is needed for a fulsome understanding of when, why and how evasion occurs, both within and outside word of mouth and marketing settings. Wooten and Reed (2000) theorize that evasion is especially likely to occur when individuals are highly motivated to make desired impressions but uncertain of how to do so. Their analysis suggests that evasion may be useful when individuals want to avoid looking bad, but that it may be less useful when they are concerned about looking good.

The results of Studies 2 and 3 suggest that the risk of being exposed by an interaction partner plays an important role in determining the relative attractiveness of evasion and deception. These findings hold implications for those on the receiving end of truth avoidant behavior. While rates of deception detection among lay people are no better than chance (DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985; Vrij & Graham, 1997), researchers have devised ways to improve evasion detection (Buller et al., 1991; Rogers & Norton, 2011). We found that the presence of a persistent other moderates evasive, but not deceptive responding, possibly because probing facilitates detection of evasion (Buller et al., 1991; Burgoon et al., 1994) but not deception (Buller et al. 1989). On the other hand, our finding that the prospect of being exposed by an informed other moderates the use of deception (but not evasion), suggests that being “exposed” may be costlier for deceivers than evaders. People likely hope to avoid the public shame that comes with being caught lying, yet the facade of a false reality can be challenging to sustain over time (Buller et al., 1991). Thus, deceptive responses may be easier to construct, harder to maintain, harder to detect, and more damaging if exposed to the information recipient.

7.2 Substantive Implications

The 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer, a survey of over 33,000 respondents across 28 countries, reveals declining public trust in business, media, and government to a point where respondents trust people like themselves more than government officials or corporate CEOs (Harrington, 2017). Relatedly, a global survey by Nielsen (2015) reports that consumers rely more heavily on interpersonal communication than ever before, and they trust this information source more than firm-generated alternatives (e.g., advertising; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). Our research further confirms the need for consumers to reconsider their trust in word of mouth communications (Barasch & Berger, 2014; Packard, Gershoff & Wooten, 2016). Although deception is a likely response to requests for sensitive information (e.g. Anthony & Cowley, 2012; Argo et al., 2006, 2011; Argo & Shiv, 2012; Mazar et al., 2008; Sengupta et al., 2002), obfuscation of true information (evasion) may sometimes be more prevalent than the introduction of false information (deception). In other words, instead of being misinformed in word of mouth, we find evidence that consumers may often come away uninformed (or insufficiently informed) in such exchanges.

The extent to which receiving an evasive response is less problematic than receiving a deceptive one also merits investigation. The problem created by evasive responding depends, in part, on the ability of message recipients to detect evasion (Rogers & Norton, 2011). If information recipients successfully recognize that their information needs have not been met, then the problem of being uninformed is minimal. In this case, recipients may seek additional information from other sources. However, the potential problem arising from evasive responding is much greater if evasive responses go undetected. In this case, consumers may not realize that they are insufficiently informed, which may lead them to make purchase decisions based on limited or non-diagnostic information.

In addition to settings that involve consumers providing information to other consumers (e.g., word of mouth), our findings have implications for contexts that involve consumers providing responses to questions from marketers (e.g., marketing research). While marketing scholars have long addressed concerns about misleading information in commercial marketing research studies, most notably focus groups (e.g., Bristol & Fern, 1983; Calder, 1977), they have paid less attention to problems of vague or ambiguous information. Our results suggest that consumers' self-presentational concerns impact not only the veracity, but also the clarity and relevance of the information they share with others. Thus, our research highlights the need for firms to train their research, sales and service personnel to recognize evasive responding, which should be easier to detect than deception (Buller et al., 1991). Greater ability to detect evasive responses from consumers could allow frontline employees to better recognize the need to probe customers for more or clearer information, and could alert them to the presence of alternative buying motives that consumers may be reluctant to disclose.

Our results also suggest that evasion is a viable, if not preferred, alternative to deception. One might argue that evasive behaviors may be more prevalent than our studies suggest because we limited our investigation to consumer responses to direct requests for information. In settings where consumers have more freedom to choose what information to share, it may be much easier to withhold information without having to "beat around the bush."

In conclusion, this research spotlights evasion as a conceptually and empirically distinct alternative to deception in exchanges of consumer information. It also contributes theory-driven insights on the behavioral and psychological distinctions between these two means of avoiding an embarrassing truth. We hope that this research will stimulate further investigations of evasive maneuvers and their impact on those who experience them.

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APPENDIX

SCENARIO STIMULI

STUDY 2

(Male Version: Persistence other condition / No persistence other condition)

Imagine that you and some friends are meeting for lunch at the food court in the local mall. You and one of your friends, John, arrive a bit early to walk around the mall. The two of you stop at a kiosk for a credit card company that offers a free credit report for completing a credit application. After completing the application, each of you go to separate booths to see electronic copies of your credit reports. You privately learn that your FICO score of (Disparity condition: 610 is in the “low credit-worthiness” range; No disparity condition: 775 is in the “high credit-worthiness” range).

You and John then head to the food court to join your friends for lunch. While eating, you overhear a conversation between John and one of your mutual friends, Victor:

John: “That history midterm was brutal. How did you do?”

Victor: “I’ve been so busy this term, it’s been hard to study.”

John: “I know what you mean. (So how did you do on the midterm? / So what did you do on the weekend?)”

Victor: “I studied really hard for that exam.”

John: (“So what was your mark?” / “So what are you doing tonight?”)

Victor: (“Well, I got a C.” / “Well, I’m going to a movie.”)

John: “Me too. (Maybe we should study together! / Maybe we should go together)!”

After listening to this conversation, you think to yourself, “That’s just like John... he’s (so / not very) persistent when he wants to know something. He (totally didn’t / totally) let Victor avoid answering his question about his midterm mark.”

John then mentions to everyone that the two of you just received your credit scores. He says, “I got a score of 775, which means I have “excellent credit-worthiness.” Turning to you, he says, “What about you?”

You are the only one who knows about your low credit score. How are you likely to respond to John’s question?

How likely do you think you would be to do each of the following about your credit score?

[Item order randomized]

Very unlikely to be deceptive about my credit score : Very likely to be deceptive about my credit score

Very unlikely to lie about my credit score : Very likely to lie about my credit score

Very unlikely to misrepresent my credit score : Very likely to misrepresent my credit score

Very unlikely to be evasive about my credit score : Very likely to be evasive about my credit score

Very unlikely to be vague about my credit score : Very likely to vague about my credit score

Very unlikely to be ambiguous about my credit score : Very likely to be ambiguous about my credit score

STUDY 3

(Female Version: Informed other condition / No informed other condition)

Imagine that you have invited a handful of friends to your apartment to watch a movie on the new big-screen TV that you bought for \$1,000. One of your friends, Maria, arrives at your apartment a few minutes earlier than everyone else, so the two of you talk about the (price you paid for / features on) your new television while you wait for your other friends to arrive. Maria seems to be impressed when you tell her (you paid \$1,000 for it / about the 60-inch screen).

Soon, everyone arrives at your apartment and gathers around the television before you start the movie. Everyone is talking, when Jane looks at your TV and notices that it is exactly the same brand, model, and size as the one she bought a week ago. She suddenly blurts out, "Hey, I got the exact same set on sale last week for (Disparity condition: \$800, No disparity condition: \$1,000) at Best Buy, what about you?"

How are you likely to respond to Jane's question?

How likely do you think you would be to do each of the following about the actual price you paid for the TV?

[Item order randomized]

Very unlikely to be deceptive about the price : Very likely to be deceptive about the price

Very unlikely to lie about the price : Very likely to lie about the price

Very unlikely to misrepresent the price : Very likely to misrepresent the price

Very unlikely to be evasive about the price : Very likely to be evasive about the price

Very unlikely to be vague about the price : Very likely to vague about the price

Very unlikely to be ambiguous about the price : Very likely to be ambiguous about the price

STUDY 4

(Female Version: Selling condition/Social condition)

Maria was standing by the (“For Sale” sign/mailbox) in front of her house when she was approached by Jane, who was walking by. Jane introduced herself as a (prospective home buyer/new neighbor), commented on the “curb appeal” of Maria’s home, and then expressed how much she (wants to live/enjoys living) in the neighborhood. Maria introduced herself and highlighted a few of the benefits of living in the neighborhood. A few minutes into the conversation, Jane, the (prospective buyer/new neighbor), asks Maria how much she paid for her home.

(Truth condition) Maria responds by telling Jane the true amount.

(Deception condition) Maria responds by telling Jane a false amount.

(Evasion condition) Maria carefully changes the subject without telling Jane the amount.

APPENDIX TABLE 1: MEAN (SD) DISHONESTY PERCEPTIONS (STUDY 4)

	Condition		
	Combined	Selling	Social
Deception	4.38 (1.65)	4.82 (1.61)	3.96 (1.58)
Evasion	2.16 (1.28)	2.25 (1.31)	2.07 (1.24)
Truth	1.51 (0.82)	1.42 (0.76)	1.59 (0.87)