

# **MATCHING REALITY AND VIRTUALITY: ARE ADOLESCENTS LYING ON THEIR WEBLOGS?**

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**Abstract.** Presented paper focuses on adolescent weblogs with emphasis on the frequency of lying. 120 experienced adolescent bloggers were contacted to fill an online questionnaire. 12 respondents were also contacted in face-to-face meetings and the presented data was verified. The results show a very low frequency of lying in weblogs. A higher tendency to lying was found in younger adolescents. Overall, respondents lied least often about age, gender and school related information, while lying most often about partnership and their family situation. Such weblogs seem to create a space for communication between a person and a few other individuals (schoolmates) and support thoughts that experienced users of certain applications on the Internet tend to use an identity corresponding with their real one.

## **1. Introduction**

As the Internet spreads, some of its applications are directly affecting our lives. Weblogs are one of these applications, especially favored by current adolescents. For example, [www.blog.cz](http://www.blog.cz), the favorite blog server in the Czech Republic, is simultaneously one of the top 10 visited web sites (Ambrož, 2007). About 1000 new weblogs can be found there every day. The question of the credibility of information provided by bloggers is intelligible – are they really writing about their lives? Or are they mostly shifting personal and other information to be in accordance with their ideal identities, audience etc.? Simply put: how much are they lying?

## **2. Sample and method**

The presented study is part of a larger one, where we worked with 200 weblogs chosen by the stratificated-random technique from the three largest Czech blogging servers.

The Criteria were: an age of 13 to 17 and at least 3 months of active blogging (indicating that we chose to focus on active and experienced bloggers). Then we randomly chose 120 blogs – the bloggers had a mean age of 14.7 years and 90% of them were girls – and consecutively sent invitations to their writers regarding participation in our study. Participants had to fill in a survey about lying, which consisted of personal questions (gender, age, home town) and whether the answers matched with personal info presented in their weblogs. There was also a battery of 7 Lickert-type questions, where we asked how often bloggers lie in these aspects: about their family, school, interests, skills, sexual experiences, partnership and friendship, appearance. The scale was 1 (never lied), 2 (rarely lied), 3 (sometimes lied) and 4 (frequently lied). The participants were also informed that 12 of them will be chosen for face-to-face meetings to verify their answers and that they will be given small presents (ranging between 20 and 40 euros) – this was to ensure we were getting mostly true answers, since respondents were motivated to come in person and meet the authors for verification, otherwise they would not receive the reward. The return rate of our questionnaires was high, we received 113 of 120 sent questionnaires (i.e. almost 94%), but one third of the participants had to be contacted more than once to fill the questionnaire. The face-to-face meetings were also trouble-free, although the fact that 11 of those 12 „winners” arrived escorted by their mothers was interesting. All winners filled the questionnaires truthfully.

### 3. Results

By summarizing answers from the scale, we created a „lie-score“ (E.g. a blogger who claimed that he “never lied” in all 7 questions achieved a score of 7). The mean value of this lie-score was 8, which means that the bloggers lied very rarely. 56% of respondents do not lie at all on their weblogs. Concrete results are shown in table 1:

*Table 1.* Distribution of lie-score by age

	Lie-score value						Total (%)
	7 (%)	8 (%)	9 (%)	10 (%)	11 (%)	12 + (%)	
Age 13	40,9	27,3	13,6	13,6	4,5	0,0	100,0
14	50,0	20,0	6,7	13,3	3,3	6,6	100,0
15	65,4	7,7	7,7	11,5	3,8	3,8	100,0
16	55,0	35,0	5,0	0,0	0,0	5,0	100,0
17	78,6	14,3	0,0	7,1	0,0	0,0	100,0
Total	56,3	20,5	7,1	9,8	2,7	3,6	100,0

We can see that 41% of 13 year-olds never lied in their weblogs, which contrasts with the group of 17-year-olds (almost 78.6%). Higher lie-scores were more common for younger bloggers. There was also a moderate correlation between age and lie-score:  $r = 0.216$  (Spearman's Rho, significant at the 0.05 level). Due to a very small number of

male respondents, we couldn't analyze lie-score distribution among genders. There was an interesting tendency towards not lying about one's age and gender – only two percents of respondents published untrue information about these characteristics. The next figure shows percentages of lying in each of the 7 aspects (while omitting the „never lied“ option, which was most frequent and can be computed by subtracting values from 100%):

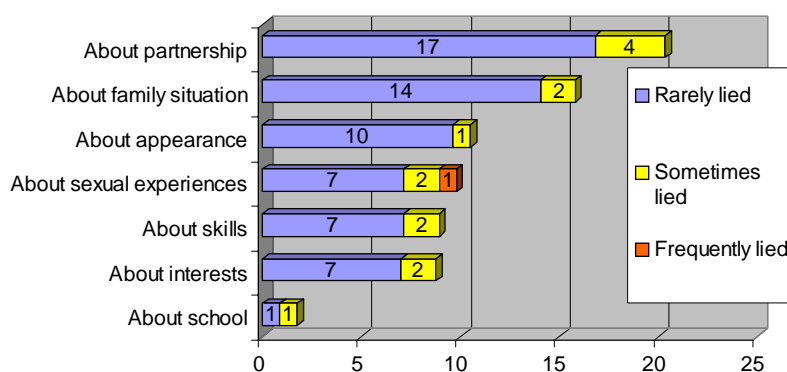


Figure 1. Frequency of lying (in percents).

The most untruthful category seemed to be „partnership“ with 19% of respondents lying from time to time and „family situation“ with 16%. On the other hand, there is the „school-related“ category with only 2% of lying users. There was no significant correlation between the frequency of lying in these categories and age, except for „lying about interests“:  $r = -0.298$  (Spearman's Rho, significant at the 0.01 level). Surprisingly, only 10% of respondents lied from time to time about sexual experiences; we expected this to be far more frequent. Interestingly, we can say that bloggers more often lied about “external objects” – such as relationships and/or family situation and less lied about themselves (such as sexual experience, skills and interests).

## 5. Discussion

The large portion of girl blogs is quite surprising – they constitute a whole 90% of our sample, which we consider representative for this age group in the Czech Republic. Similar results have been documented in foreign studies, e.g. Subrahmanyam (2007) reported 86% girl and 4.3% boy blogs (and almost 10% of unknown gender) in her study on American adolescent blogs. The author speculated that writing diaries (which are in a sense similar to blogs) had traditionally been more of a girl's activity.

For users, one of most discussed aspects of the internet is the possibility to transform and experiment with one's identity (Suler, 2001). Thus, anonymity may support playing different roles (but the question is whether shouldn't consider this a fantasy rather than lying). We can suppose that a lot of information online, especially on weblogs, doesn't correspond with reality. However our findings don't support this statement. The areas of age and, to a certain extent, gender, traditionally considered to be lying domains, seem to correspond to reality quite well. The areas of appearance, sexual experiences, also usually sensitive for adolescents, also seem to correspond to reality reasonably well.

Based on Subrahmanyam (2007), about 50% of adolescents place their photo on their blog and hence claims "there is identity stability between blogs and the physical world". According to Whitty (2002), who focused on lying on chat rooms, there is a higher tendency for lying among those who visit them less often. Also Kendall (2002), who writes about social MUDs (MOO), claims that there is a tendency to act trustworthily and with a real identity among those who meet often in cyberspace. Supposedly, this is caused by the fact that the probability of meeting in real-life grows with time and participants usually have invested too much to that virtual relationship already. They also tolerate the hidden identity of others only for a short time and lying itself is of course not permitted at all. It can also be argued that it is mentally more difficult to consistently keep lying rather than to tell the truth.

Adolescent webbloggers also more-or-less form a private community of a few friendly weblogs where those who write them also read the other's. These bloggers are usually also familiar with each other from their real lives, mainly from school and this is perhaps the reason why the frequency of lying about school was the lowest in this research. On the other hand, lies were most frequent about rather intimate and private areas, such as partnership and one's family situation. Thus weblogs can be seen as a tool of communication rather than an individual intimate „diary“ – it lies between the personal space of the writer and the public space of the audience. Scheidt (2006) claimed something similar; that these blogs have become a communication tool for adolescents – it is not an intimate personal space, nor face-to-face communication, but rather a similarity with mutual reactions and thus interaction between the actor and his audience.

Neotribalism (Maffesoli, 1996) is a suitable concept for understanding this situation. Neotribes are informal groups, diffusal, with an emotional base. Maffesoli believes that in today's world, individuals will exist in several such "tribes" at the same time, their identity will thus be formed not by factual data but rather through identification with such groups and symbols represented by these tribes. The virtual environment and especially blogs stimulate the creation of small groups around a certain interest (typically subcultural in the case of adolescents, e.g. a specific music band).

The tendency towards lying amongst younger adolescent bloggers can be connected to their "unexplained" identity, typical for this age category (Macek, 2003) and usually ties with identity-seeking and experimentation. The mutual sharing of this identity-seeking and its form – identification rather than actual creation of something stable – can thus create situations where adolescents feel no need to hide things, to lie.

However, our research focused on experienced bloggers and this probably affected the obtained results, which might not be generally valid for all bloggers. Internet is a new medium, but this doesn't necessarily mean that it promotes the transmission of new thoughts – in some of its applications, such as weblogs, and for some of its users, such as adolescents, it simply constitutes a space for telling what is and/or would be said elsewhere, by other mediums.

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