

Detecting Lies: How Often Do People Bullshit?

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Conceptualizing Bullshitting Frequency: Definition and Scope

Bullshitting Frequency, a construct extensively studied within social and personality psychology, refers to an individual's consistent tendency to communicate information, opinions, or assertions without genuine regard for their veracity or supporting evidence. Crucially, the psychological definition of bullshitting--often abbreviated as BSing--does not necessarily imply malicious intent to deceive the recipient, but rather a profound indifference to the truth. The primary motivation underlying high Bullshitting Frequency is often to achieve a social goal, such as maintaining a favorable self-presentation, appearing knowledgeable or competent in a given domain, or simply filling a conversational void when genuine knowledge is lacking. This behavioral pattern is viewed as a stable, measurable individual difference variable, suggesting that some individuals are inherently more prone to engaging in this form of communication than others, regardless of the immediate context.

The conceptualization of this phenomenon draws heavily from the philosophical work distinguishing bullshitting from outright lying. While lying requires the speaker to know the truth and deliberately state the opposite, bullshitting operates in a space devoid of concern for truth value; the speaker is focused solely on the utility or plausibility of the statement in achieving a desired outcome. This indifference makes Bullshitting Frequency a unique and potent predictor of various cognitive and personality characteristics. Researchers emphasize that the content of the bullshit need not be factually incorrect; it merely needs to be presented with a level of confidence or detail that far exceeds the speaker's actual familiarity or expertise with the subject matter. Therefore, high frequency is indicative of a reliance on superficial plausibility rather than substantive knowledge, making it a critical area of study for understanding how individuals manage uncertainty and social performance demands.

Understanding the scope of Bullshitting Frequency requires acknowledging its manifestation across diverse settings. It is not confined to casual conversation but permeates academic environments, professional settings, and even political discourse. In academia, it might manifest as students fabricating knowledge or citing non-existent sources to satisfy assignment requirements. Professionally, high-frequency individuals might oversell their capabilities or use highly technical jargon they do not fully grasp to impress clients or superiors. The common thread across these contexts is the strategic deployment of communication designed to sound impressive or authoritative, irrespective of the underlying factual grounding. Consequently, measuring and understanding this frequency is paramount for evaluating the reliability and authenticity of communication in complex social systems where expertise and competence are highly valued but often difficult to verify instantaneously.

The Distinction Between Bullshitting and Deception

A cornerstone of the psychological study of Bullshitting Frequency involves rigorously differentiating it from traditional concepts of deception, such as lying. While both behaviors involve communication that deviates from the truth, the key differentiator lies in the speaker's psychological relationship with the truth itself. Lying is fundamentally parasitic upon truth; the liar must know what is true in order to intentionally mislead the recipient. The motivational structure of lying is rooted in the desire to actively conceal reality. In contrast, the individual with a high Bullshitting Frequency is characterized by an apathy toward the truth. They are not concerned with concealing reality, but rather with constructing a narrative--often quickly and spontaneously--that serves their immediate social or performance goals, making the truth value irrelevant to the communicative act.

This distinction is critical for measurement and theoretical modeling. If an individual is asked a difficult question and responds with fabricated but plausible details, their intent is not necessarily to make the listener believe a falsehood, but rather to avoid the embarrassment or perceived failure associated with admitting ignorance. This motivation, centered on self-presentation and impression management, separates bullshitting from malicious deceit. Research suggests that high Bullshitting Frequency often correlates less strongly with measures of outright dishonesty or psychopathy (which typically involve calculated deception) than it does with traits related to superficial charm or performance anxiety. The bullshitter's primary goal is to maintain flow and social standing, whereas the liar's primary goal is manipulation through informational distortion.

Furthermore, the cognitive mechanisms involved differ significantly. Lying often requires significant cognitive effort, involving the suppression of truthful information and the simultaneous fabrication and maintenance of a coherent false narrative. Bullshitting, however, appears to be less cognitively demanding, often relying on generalized knowledge structures, vague terminology, or the confident regurgitation of recently encountered, superficially understood information. This lower cognitive load suggests that bullshitting can be a default strategy, particularly when individuals are placed under time pressure or are asked to comment on subjects outside their domain of expertise. The behavioral outcome is the production of statements that are plausible enough to pass initial scrutiny but lack the substance or precision expected of genuine knowledge, highlighting the fundamental difference in commitment to factual accuracy.

Methodology for Measurement: The Bullshitting Frequency Scale (BFS)

The empirical assessment of Bullshitting Frequency primarily relies on self-report measures, most notably the Bullshitting Frequency Scale (BFS). The BFS is designed to quantify an individual's dispositional tendency to engage in this form of communication. Unlike scales that measure lying or deception, the BFS focuses on items that probe the propensity for talking confidently about

subjects one knows little about, or the tendency to prioritize sounding knowledgeable over being accurate. Typical items on the scale might ask respondents to rate their agreement with statements such as, "I have often pretended to know more about a topic than I actually did," or "I sometimes say things I know are plausible but I haven't checked the facts on." The reliability and validity of the BFS have been robustly established across various populations, confirming that it measures a distinct psychological construct separate from general deceitfulness.

Beyond self-report, researchers also utilize behavioral measures to corroborate BFS scores, particularly in experimental settings. One common behavioral paradigm involves presenting participants with a list of technical or esoteric terms, some real and some fabricated (pseudofacts). Participants are then asked to rate their familiarity or knowledge of each term. High Bullshitting Frequency is inferred when participants report significant familiarity with the fabricated terms, demonstrating a willingness to claim knowledge where none exists. This behavioral marker provides an objective, albeit indirect, measure of the disposition to bullshit, as the false claims of knowledge serve the same function as verbal bullshitting: maintaining the appearance of competence. This methodology helps to mitigate potential social desirability biases inherent in purely self-report measures, strengthening the overall assessment of the construct.

Furthermore, the measurement of Bullshitting Frequency often involves analyzing conversational patterns and linguistic markers. Studies have identified specific linguistic features associated with high-frequency communication, including the use of abstract language, complex syntax without corresponding complex ideas, overuse of hedging language (e.g., "it seems," "it is generally understood"), and excessive jargon or technical terminology that lacks precise application. Analyzing transcripts or recorded interactions allows researchers to quantify the density of these markers, providing a subtle, unobtrusive measure of the tendency to prioritize style and superficial complexity over substantive content. These multiple methodological approaches--self-report, pseudofact recognition, and linguistic analysis--converge to provide a comprehensive profile of an individual's Bullshitting Frequency, solidifying its place as a quantifiable psychological trait.

Psychological Correlates and Personality Predictors

Bullshitting Frequency is not an isolated behavior; it is systematically correlated with a range of established personality traits, offering deep insight into the underlying psychological architecture of the individual. Research consistently links high BFS scores to elevated levels of the Dark Triad traits, specifically **Narcissism** and **Machiavellianism**. Narcissistic individuals, driven by a grandiose self-view and a need for admiration, frequently engage in bullshitting as a tool for self-enhancement and maintaining their inflated self-image. The confident assertion of non-existent knowledge serves as a defense mechanism against perceived intellectual challenges, validating their self-proclaimed superiority. Similarly, Machiavellianism, characterized by cynicism and exploitative interpersonal tactics, utilizes bullshitting strategically to manipulate social situations

and achieve personal gain, viewing it as a low-cost, high-reward method of social influence.

Beyond the Dark Triad, Bullshitting Frequency shows notable correlations with aspects of the Big Five personality model. Individuals high in **Extraversion** and low in **Conscientiousness** often exhibit higher BFS scores. Extraverts, who are generally more talkative and socially engaged, may find themselves in situations where they must constantly contribute to conversation, leading them to rely on plausible filler when genuine expertise is lacking. Conversely, low Conscientiousness--reflecting impulsivity and a lack of diligence--suggests that high-frequency individuals may be less motivated to invest the cognitive effort required to acquire genuine knowledge, preferring the easier path of superficial performance. This combination of high social drive and low diligence creates a fertile ground for the regular production of bullshit.

Another critical predictor is **Self-Monitoring**. High self-monitors are acutely attuned to situational cues and adapt their behavior to fit the immediate social demands, often prioritizing impression management over internal consistency. For these individuals, bullshitting becomes a highly functional social lubricant--a versatile tactic used to quickly align their presented knowledge with the perceived expectations of the audience. They are proficient at gauging what sounds credible in a given context and delivering it confidently, even if unsubstantiated. This reliance on external validation and situational appropriateness reinforces the link between high Bullshitting Frequency and behaviors centered on social performance rather than genuine intellectual curiosity or factual fidelity.

Cognitive Factors and Intellectual Ability

The relationship between Bullshitting Frequency and cognitive factors, particularly intellectual ability (e.g., fluid intelligence or IQ), presents a nuanced but generally inverse correlation. Numerous studies indicate that individuals who score lower on standardized measures of cognitive ability tend to report higher Bullshitting Frequency. This finding suggests that bullshitting may function as a compensatory strategy: when true cognitive resources are limited or insufficient for solving a problem or mastering a domain, individuals resort to presenting superficial competence to mask their deficits. The production of believable, though unsubstantiated, claims requires less rigorous analysis and intellectual integration than providing genuinely informed responses, making it a cognitive shortcut for navigating complex social and intellectual tasks.

However, the relationship is complicated by the distinction between cognitive ability and cognitive style. While lower general intelligence may predispose one to higher frequency, certain cognitive styles, such as a reliance on System 1 (intuitive, fast) thinking over System 2 (analytical, slow) thinking, also play a significant role. Individuals who are less inclined toward reflective thinking, or who exhibit lower levels of need for cognition, are more likely to accept and subsequently assert plausible but unverified information. They are less motivated to critically evaluate the evidence

supporting their own claims or those presented by others. This preference for cognitive ease contributes directly to the rapid, low-effort production of bullshit, which is inherently characterized by a lack of critical self-assessment regarding factual accuracy.

Furthermore, cognitive biases often intersect with this frequency. High-frequency individuals may be particularly susceptible to the **Dunning-Kruger effect**, wherein individuals with low competence overestimate their abilities. This overestimation provides the psychological permission structure necessary to confidently assert expertise they do not possess. The combination of limited self-awareness regarding their knowledge gaps and a reliance on quick, intuitive judgments creates a cognitive environment where bullshitting is a habitual, self-reinforcing response. Consequently, the study of Bullshitting Frequency provides a unique lens through which to examine how cognitive limitations interact with motivational factors to shape communicative behavior in diverse intellectual settings.

Contextual Influences and Situational Triggers

While Bullshitting Frequency is treated as a stable dispositional trait, its manifestation is heavily modulated by contextual and situational factors. The perceived demand for competence is perhaps the strongest situational trigger. In environments where expertise is highly valued--such as job interviews, academic seminars, or high-stakes business meetings--individuals, particularly those with a dispositional tendency toward bullshitting, feel enormous pressure to appear knowledgeable, leading to a surge in high-frequency communication. The presence of an audience perceived as having higher status or authority also amplifies the pressure to perform, prompting the speaker to use jargon or overly complex language to mask uncertainty. The implicit rule in these contexts is often that silence or admission of ignorance is unacceptable, making bullshitting the preferred tactical alternative.

The structure and ambiguity of the task also influence frequency. When questions are open-ended, ill-defined, or concern highly abstract concepts, the opportunity and motivation for bullshitting increase substantially. The lack of clear factual constraints allows the speaker greater latitude to construct plausible narratives without immediate fear of contradiction. Conversely, tasks that require precise, verifiable factual recall or rigorous quantitative analysis tend to suppress bullshitting behavior, as the risk of exposure is significantly higher. Therefore, situational ambiguity serves as a permissive factor, enabling the dispositional trait to express itself more freely, demonstrating the interactionist perspective of personality and environment.

Social norms within a group or organizational culture also dictate the acceptability of high Bullshitting Frequency. In cultures that prioritize speed, superficial confidence, and charismatic presentation over meticulous accuracy, bullshitting may become normalized and even rewarded, reinforcing the behavior. Conversely, in cultures predicated on scientific rigor, critical peer review,

and intellectual humility, the frequency of such communication is likely to be lower due to the increased social and professional costs of exposure. This suggests that organizations seeking to foster environments of genuine knowledge sharing must actively cultivate norms that penalize the appearance of competence when it lacks substantive backing, thereby mitigating the situational triggers that encourage high-frequency communication.

Social and Academic Implications of High Bullshitting Frequency

The consequences of high Bullshitting Frequency extend beyond individual performance and have significant implications for social trust, academic integrity, and organizational effectiveness. Socially, while bullshitting can initially serve as an effective means of impression management, particularly in short-term interactions, its long-term effect is corrosive to credibility. Repeated exposure to unsubstantiated claims leads others to perceive the individual as unreliable, intellectually dishonest, or merely superficial. This erosion of trust can severely hamper the individual's ability to form deep, meaningful, and cooperative relationships, limiting their social capital and influence when genuine expertise is truly required. The short-term gains of appearing knowledgeable are often outweighed by the long-term costs of diminished trustworthiness.

In academic settings, high Bullshitting Frequency poses a direct threat to intellectual integrity and the learning process. Students who frequently rely on this strategy may successfully navigate assignments or tests that reward superficial knowledge, but they fail to acquire the deep conceptual understanding necessary for true mastery. This reliance on performance over learning fundamentally undermines educational goals. Furthermore, when bullshitting is prevalent, it contaminates the collective knowledge pool, making it difficult for peers and instructors to distinguish genuine competence from feigned expertise, which can lead to misallocation of resources, unfair grading, and a general decline in intellectual standards within the institution.

Professionally, high-frequency communication can lead to flawed decision-making. When individuals in leadership roles or technical positions prioritize sounding confident over being accurate, organizational strategies may be based on unsubstantiated assumptions rather than rigorous data analysis. This is particularly dangerous in fields requiring precision, such as engineering, medicine, or finance. Organizations must develop robust mechanisms--including structured peer review, accountability for claims, and fostering a culture where admitting ignorance is acceptable--to filter out the noise generated by high Bullshitting Frequency. Failure to do so risks catastrophic errors rooted not in malice, but in the pervasive indifference to truth that characterizes this communication style.

Theoretical Models and Future Research Directions

Current theoretical models of Bullshitting Frequency attempt to integrate personality, cognitive, and

contextual factors into a coherent explanatory framework. One prominent model posits a dual pathway: the strategic pathway, where individuals (often high in Machiavellianism) intentionally use bullshitting to achieve specific goals; and the spontaneous pathway, where individuals (often low in cognitive ability or high in impulsivity) resort to bullshitting as an automatic response to fill knowledge gaps under pressure. Future research must focus on refining these models by utilizing advanced neuroscientific techniques, such as fMRI or EEG, to map the distinct cognitive processes underlying these two pathways, determining whether spontaneous bullshitting involves reduced prefrontal cortex activation (associated with cognitive control) compared to strategic deception.

Another critical direction involves investigating the cross-cultural variability of Bullshitting Frequency. While the construct has been primarily studied in Western, individualistic cultures that highly value verbal fluency and self-promotion, the social acceptability and manifestation of bullshitting may differ significantly in collectivistic cultures, where humility and group harmony are prioritized. Comparative studies are needed to determine if the personality correlates (e.g., Narcissism) predict the same behavioral outcomes when social norms strongly discourage self-aggrandizement. Understanding these cultural moderators is essential for establishing the generalizability of the BFS and the underlying psychological theories.

Finally, research must explore effective intervention strategies aimed at mitigating high Bullshitting Frequency in applied settings. In educational contexts, this might involve developing curricula that explicitly teach students the value of intellectual humility and the difference between critical thinking and superficial performance. In organizational psychology, interventions could focus on designing communication structures that reward accuracy and transparency, thereby increasing the situational cost of bullshitting. Longitudinal studies are required to assess whether targeted training focused on enhancing metacognition--the ability to accurately assess one's own knowledge state--can effectively reduce an individual's reliance on this pervasive and often detrimental communication strategy.