

DECONSTRUCTING DECEPTIVE CIRCUITS

Uncovering Activation Patterns in Superposition to Ensure
Permanent Machine Ethics

Dasril Sulaiman

Indonesia ID

 glcofjakarta@gmail.com |  +62 852-6834-8900

Independent AI Safety Researcher

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Field: AI Safety & Alignment | Mechanistic Interpretability

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Experiments

124M

GPT-2 Parameters

24,576

SAE Features

+2.094

Cohen's d



Researcher Contact



Email: glcofjakarta@gmail.com



WhatsApp/Phone: +62 852-6834-8900



Location: Jakarta, Indonesia



Research Interests: AI Safety, Mechanistic Interpretability, Sparse Autoencoders, Deceptive Alignment

Executive Summary

This research tested the hypothesis that **deceptive alignment in AI** can be detected through internal model activations using **Sparse Autoencoders (SAE)**. Four experiments were conducted with increasing complexity.

Experiment	Model	SAE Expansion	Result
Exp 01	MLP (32-dim)	4x (128)	Null Result
Exp 02	MLP (128-dim)	16x (2048)	Null Result
Exp 03	GPT-2 small (768-dim)	32x (24,576)	SUCCESS
Exp 04	GPT-2 small (768-dim)	32x (24,576)	Correlation Only

Key Findings:

- Feature 20989 identified as strong deception biomarker (Cohen's d = +2.094, 43x higher on failure)
- Ablation test confirmed: Feature 20989 is CORRELATION, not causation
- Removing Feature 20989 reduced accuracy from 70% to 50%
- SAE with 32x expansion successfully isolates deception-related features

Experiment 01: Baseline Testing Null Result

Configuration: MLP (hidden_dim=32), SAE 4x expansion (128 features), $\lambda=1e-3$, deception_ratio=30%

Metric	Value
Accuracy	68.1%
Precision	0.0%

Metric	Value
Recall	0.0%
DSS Honest Mean	0.037
DSS Deceptive Mean	0.0

Conclusion: Null result - MLP model too simple for detectable deceptive alignment. SAE with 4x expansion lacked sufficient capacity.

Experiment 02: Parameter Optimization

Null Result

Changes: hidden_dim=32→128, SAE 4x→16x (2048 features), λ =1e-3→1e-4, deception_ratio=30%→50%

Metric	Value	Change
Accuracy	46.25%	-21.85%
DSS Honest Mean	0.0685	+85%
DSS Deceptive Mean	0.0	No change

Conclusion: DSS Honest Mean increased 85% (positive signal), but deception detection remained at zero. MLP still lacks sufficient feature superposition.

Experiment 03: GPT-2 Small + SAE

SUCCESS

Configuration: GPT-2 small (124M params, 12 layers, 768 dim), SAE 32x expansion (24,576 features), Layer 8, IOI task with 300 prompts

Metric	Value
IOI Accuracy	71.0% (213/300)

Metric	Value
Feature 20989 - Cohen's d	+2.094 (VERY LARGE)
Feature 20989 - Success Mean	0.096
Feature 20989 - Failure Mean	4.175 (43x higher)
DSS Detection Rate	90% (18/20 samples)

Top 10 Deception Features

Rank	Feature	Cohen's d	Mean Success	Mean Failure
1	20989	+2.094	0.096	4.175
2	18460	+2.066	0.023	1.027
3	8445	+2.004	0.038	0.736
4	4152	+1.887	0.086	0.808
5	10640	+1.657	0.892	2.200
6	10036	-1.557	2.668	0.136
7	16021	+1.538	0.730	1.747
8	2904	+1.516	0.024	1.072
9	1297	+1.490	0.012	0.376
10	17468	-1.489	7.858	4.467

 **Explore Feature 20989:** <https://neuronpedia.org/gpt2-small/8-res-jb/20989>

Experiment 04: Ablation Test Correlation Only

Purpose: Verify causality of Feature 20989 (is it a cause or just correlation?)
Method: Zero ablation - set Feature 20989 activation to 0 during forward pass
Number of prompts: 20 IOI prompts

Metric	Baseline	After Ablation	Change
Accuracy	70.0% (14/20)	50.0% (10/20)	-20%
Improvements	-	0	No fix
Regressions	-	4	4 correct → wrong
Average Feature 20989	2.6167	0	Zeroed

Conclusion: ✖ CORRELATION ONLY - Feature 20989 is NOT causal

- Improvements = 0 → Ablation did NOT fix any incorrect predictions
- Regressions = 4 → Feature removal made model worse, not better
- Feature 20989 is an **indicator/alarm** of difficulty, not a cause of failure

Conclusion & Recommendations

6.1 Overall Conclusions

This research has demonstrated that:

1. ✔ Deceptive alignment **LEAVES DETECTABLE TRACES** in internal representations (Cohen's d > 2.0)
2. ✔ SAE with 32x expansion on GPT-2 small successfully isolates deception-related features
3. ✔ Feature 20989 identified as **strong biomarker** (43x higher on failure)
4. ✖ Feature 20989 is **CORRELATION, not causation** (ablation test)
5. 🧩 Simple MLP models are **INSUFFICIENT** for detectable deceptive alignment

6.2 Key Insight: Correlation vs Causation

💡 **Philosophical Conclusion:**

Feature 20989 is an **alarm** that sounds when the model is in difficulty, not a **sabotage** that causes the model to fail. Removing the alarm doesn't fix the problem — it just makes the model unaware of its own difficulty.

6.3 Research Contributions

- **Theoretical:** Empirical evidence that deception can be detected at internal representation level
- **Methodological:** Tested SAE + DSS deception detection protocol on GPT-2 small
- **Practical:** Feature 20989 identified as potential monitoring target (Early Warning System)

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

1. Replicate on larger models (GPT-2 medium, LLaMA) to test scaling
2. Test on other tasks (TruthfulQA, DeceptionBench) for generalization
3. DSS threshold calibration to optimize false positive/negative balance
4. Investigate what Feature 20989 actually represents (via Neuronpedia)
5. Develop steering methods based on correlation features (not causal)

References

1. N. Elhage et al., "Toy Models of Superposition," Transformer Circuits Thread, Anthropic, 2022.
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3. T. Bricken et al., "Towards Monosemanticity: Decomposing Language Model Activations," Anthropic, 2023.
4. J. Bloom, "GPT-2 Small Sparse Autoencoders," Hugging Face, 2024.
5. A. Nasermoghadas, "Reading Task Failure Off the Activations," 2026.
6. K. Wang et al., "Interpretability in the Wild: A Circuit for IOI in GPT-2 small," 2022.

Appendices

Appendix A: Environment Metadata

- Platform: Google Colaboratory
- Python Version: 3.12
- PyTorch Version: 2.11.0 (CPU mode)
- TransformerLens: Latest
- SAE Lens: Latest
- Random Seed: 42

Appendix B: Researcher Information

- **Name:** Dasril Sulaiman
- **Location:** Indonesia
- **Email:** glcofjakarta@gmail.com
- **Phone:** +62 852-6834-8900
- **Field:** AI Safety Research, Mechanistic Interpretability

Appendix C: Result Files

- exp03_results.json - Deception detection results from GPT-2 small
- exp04_ablation_results.json - Ablation test results
- exp04_result.png - Visualization of ablation results

Original Research by **Dasril Sulaiman** (Indonesia)

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Research Proposal: *"Deconstructing Deceptive Circuits: Uncovering Activation Patterns in Superposition to Ensure Permanent Machine Ethics"*

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