

Preying on Lonely Hearts: A Systematic Deconstruction of an Internet Romance Scammer's Online Lover Persona

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Abstract

The Internet Romance Scams (IRs) which see scammers engaging targets in romantic relationships with hopes of swindling their money, have caused victims to experience psychological and emotional trauma and social stigma, in addition to causing massive financial losses. These effects warrant an important question: How are these victims scammed from a linguistic viewpoint? In this paper, we attempt to answer this question by deconstructing the representation of the scammer's online lover persona. We provide an analysis of data obtained from the Royal Malaysian Police to unveil the strategies that take place in the online interaction between a scammer and his target, and we discuss the plausible reasons for these strategies and how they manipulate the target's cognition and emotions. By examining these romancing strategies, we are able to identify the linguistic characteristics for experimentation testing, and in the long run create awareness programmes to better protect potential victims.

Keywords: Internet romance scams, identity, romancing strategies, persuasion, semantic associations, deception

1. Introduction

The Internet has opened up endless possibilities in human communication. The anonymity of one's identity in online communication "allows people to develop reputations based on the quality of their ideas, rather than their job, wealth, age or status" (Donath, 1999, p. 54). People are also able to exhibit the best aspects of themselves in order to attract potential partners, without having physical appearance acting as a filter (Samp & Palevitz, 2012). They are empowered to have more control over their self-representation, enabling them to strategise their self-disclosure or identity-management and thus ensuring the ideal self-representation with minimal levels of social awkwardness (Ellison *et al.*, 2006; Walther, 2004). Yet the high degree of flexibility and editability also results in endless configurations of the online identity, and this increases the possibility of being more prone to inauthenticity and deception. For example, identity deception, the transmission of messages which contain "misleading information regarding the sender's identity" (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006, p. 54), has been documented as a common and accepted phenomenon especially in online social networking and dating sites (Toma *et al.*, 2008; Ellison *et al.*, 2006). Therein lies the danger where individuals with harmful intentions can easily hide behind

ideal fictitious online identities and lurk in online dating or social networking sites, looking for an opportunity to strike.

In view of this, a new cyber-crime known as Internet Romance Scams (IRSs) has greatly increased in recent years. Considered as one of the most devious of advanced fee fraud (419) schemes, romance scammers use fictitious identities to approach and initiate romantic relationship with their targets with the intention of defrauding them of large sums of money (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012, p. 14). They start off by using friendship or romance as bait, and once a trusting emotional bond is established, the scammer asks for money from the targets using circumstantial excuses, for example, to save him from some tragic or desperate situations which require immediate financial help, to secure luxurious gifts sent by him which are currently withheld at the local customs department, to secure his release from the immigration department at the airport, etc. (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012; Rege, 2009; Romancescams.org; JSJK, 2013). The Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre reports a “1,500 percent spike in romance scam complaints reported since 2008” with an average loss per victim of CA\$11,000 (La Rose, 2011) while the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) reported in 2012 that romance scammers defrauded an accumulated total of AU\$20.9 million from 2110 victims. The Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) reports that in 2012 alone, 846 IRSs cases have been recorded with a total loss of RM32.09 million and there may be more that have gone unreported. Furthermore, the manipulation of the victim’s trust and emotions also causes victims to experience psychological and emotional trauma and social stigma (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012; ACCC, 2011).

An unpublished preliminary open-ended survey conducted at the start of this study with 50 female RMP officers reveals that they had the general impression that IRSs victims are stupid, gullible, too-trusting and attention-seeking; and that they therefore ought to be blamed as they are the cause of the crime. However, information provided by RMP shows that those who were tricked included professionals and highly educated individuals. In order to shed some light on how the romance scammers successfully gain the trust of their targets regardless of how educated they are, and subsequently deceive them, this paper presents a deconstruction of a romance scammer’s online lover persona, identifying his personal attributes, and showing how these attributes establish a sense of credibility.

2. Presenting a Credible Persona

A person’s credibility plays an important factor in gaining the trust of others and consequently influencing them to accept one’s propositions (Mayer *et al.*, 1995). Clifton and Van de Mieroop (2010) elaborate Aristotle’s concept of ‘ethos’ and suggest that one’s credibility can be demonstrated by the following means:

- *good sense* - relates to “the ability to display that one is intelligent”
- *good character* – referring to an identity that displays “positive values such as honesty, sincerity and so on”
- *good will* – referring to the identity that “has the interlocutor’s concerns at heart”.

To create an impression of a *good character*, one could list and describe one's positive qualities such as using words and expressions with positive connotations such as honest, dependable, etc. (Bhatia, 2004). However, explicit description of one's positive qualities may be counter-effective as one could instead be perceived as over-zealous or boastful (Camiciottoli, 2011). Explicit descriptions must therefore be accompanied by proof. One way of proving one's credibility could be to show consistency of one's trustworthy behavior as interaction progresses and willingness to commit to the relationship (Sztompka, 1999), or to show one's honesty by being willing to admit one's limitations and mistakes (Higgins & Walker, 2012).

Furthermore, one's credibility could also be established by displaying a sense of power and authority, for example, by referring to one's institutional or professional identity, the stability of this identity as well as drawing on the voice of those who endorse this identity (Clifton & Van de Mierop, 2010; Ho, 2010). The latter is similar to the frequent use of sources which are credible (or perceived to be credible), such as celebrities in the case of advertising, and trustees in the case of fundraising (Bhatia, 2004). Studies on 419 scam discourses have also highlighted the creation of online identities that are influential, professional, and knowledgeable in the endeavour to create a sense of authority as well as reliability (Schaffer, 2012; Chilwa, 2009). Other strategies such as referring to one's past achievements and inclination to succeed (Higgins & Walker, 2012) and highlighting one's qualifications (Bhatia, 1993) could also create the impression that one has good sense, can make good judgement and is intelligent.

From a social-relational perspective, one's credibility can be established by displaying care and concern for others and prioritising the needs of others (Cockroft & Cockroft, 2005; Simons *et al.*, 2001), and also showing respect for the feelings, beliefs, values and rights of others, for example, using polite greetings and requesting permission, opinions or participation (Higgins & Walker, 2012; Ho, 2010). The use of compliments or expressing the desirability of the other person as well as highlighting the similarity between oneself and the other person (Stevens & Kristoff, 1995; Guerrero *et al.*, 2010) could increase solidarity and subsequently develop trust. In online relationships, similarity is exceptionally important because it compensates the lack of physical proximity (Anderson & Emmers-sommer, 2006). A sense of similarity can be created by "emphasising similarities in background, experience, and group affiliation" (Simons *et al.*, 2001, p. 80), displaying common interests or attitudes (Anderson & Emmers-sommer, 2006), using personal pronouns 'we' and 'you and I' in order to create a 'us versus them' frame (Higgins & Walker, 2012), as well as using language with religious sentiments such as "greeting the religious way" (Chilwa, 2009, p. 644).

Studies have also discovered that high quantity and frequent disclosure of personal information in terms of private thoughts and feelings can create an "identifiable personality in an otherwise fairly anonymous environment" (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 252) as well as in the building and maintaining of online relationships (Gibbs *et al.*, 2011; Henderson & Gilding, 2004). In fact,

when one discloses information about one's self beyond the virtual world, one is perceived as being committed and accountable to the relationship. This continuous and progressive exchange of self-disclosure is what builds intimacy and trust in online relationships.

Essentially, the credibility of one's character is of utmost importance in building a trusting relationship as Garver (1994, p. 190) asserts, "when *ethos* disappears, so does trust". Therefore, in romance scam e-mails, it is expected that the scammer would give much consideration to his presentation of a credible character so that he can gain and maintain his target's trust in him, then manipulate this trust to achieve his deceptive goals.

3. Methods

The data of this case study was obtained with permission from the RMP's Cybercrime and Multimedia Investigation Unit. The data comprises 21 e-mails (a combination of 15 e-mails from the scammer and 6 e-mails from the victim) taken from a closed case involving a West African scammer who had scammed a Chinese female victim from Hong Kong. The amount of data is small because requests for more data were denied; nonetheless, the analysis of the 15 e-mails written by the scammer [SM1-SM15] was able to reveal patterns of strategies used by the scammer to establish a credible online lover persona. Each e-mail was examined and instances that revealed personal information about the scammer were identified. The information was categorised as attributes demonstrating either the scammer's "good sense" or "good character" (Clifton & Van de Mierop, 2010). Then each e-mail was examined for the scammer's "good will" to the target, for example, instances of showing concern, highlighting similarities, expressing desirability for the target, etc.

The analysis and interpretation of the data is solely dependent on analysis of the texts due to many constraints, for example, RMP was neither able to permit interviews with the scammer who wrote the e-mails nor provide detailed information about the case. For ethical reasons, RMP was also unable to reveal the identity of the victim, and so she could not be reached for an interview to obtain her direct feedback. Constraints of this kind have caused much of the relevant data to studying IRSs inaccessible (see also Rege, 2009 for other limitations for research in this area). Nonetheless, it can be assumed that each e-mail from the scammer is written in response to a prior e-mail from the target and possibly even a prior telephone conversation, chat session or even a non-response; therefore the messages written by the victim (TM1-TM6) provided useful contextual information as well as evidence concerning the possible effects or impact of the scammer's strategies.

4. Findings

In order to establish himself as a person with good moral character, the scammer in this study presents himself as a religious person through the deliberate use of religious discourse throughout the correspondence. Right from the introductory e-mail, SM1, the scammer strategically uses key words that have religious

connotations, such as ‘pray’, ‘praying’, ‘thank God’, ‘grace’, ‘God fearing’ and, as shown in Extract 1 (the texts are produced verbatim):

Extract 1. Expressions that carry semantic connotations of religion and religiosity

SM1	i have been looking for sincere ad honest God fearing woman to spend the rest of my life together.
SM6	Thank God for the grace to send me someone like you
SM13	i pray about us yesterday, i think about us and it make me smile. (...) i am praying for you and your dad . and hope to meet you soon and share everything together. so that our joy shall be complete.

Silva (2007) discovers that people with religious affiliations tend to be stereotyped as being more morally upright, decent and well-bred. Therefore by creating a persona that seems to be express devotion, belief in and fear of ‘God’, the scammer could be leading his target to believe that he cannot possibly be a bad person hence alleviate his target’s apprehension of him as a stranger. After all, due to the anonymous nature of online communication, individuals who use the Internet as an alternative means for seeking love or forming new relationships may tend to exercise more caution and suspicion. The scammer’s consistent reference to religious terms throughout the correspondence also seems like a form of subliminal messaging in hopes of getting her to think of him as a morally upright person (also see Luo *et al.*, 2004).

Based on the messages from the target, she too reciprocates and presents herself as a religious person based on instances where she indicates her belief in God and in prayers as shown in the following examples:

Extract 2. Victim’s expression of her religious inclinations

TM4	Honey, I believe in God and I believe you too
TM5	I am right here pray for you again and again and to support you.

There is a possibility that the victim’s profiles in the online dating site may have stated her religious orientation and may have also contained information revealing that she is seeking for a partner of the same faith. With this possibility in mind, the scammer successfully exploited his target’s access point. Moreover, this religious similarity with the target may have made the scammer appear more attractive and also more approachable. After all, people tend to be attracted to those they perceive to be similar to themselves, especially in terms of their world view, attitudes and values in life (Byrne, 1971). By such means, the scammer may perhaps be able to reduce the psychological gaps between his target and himself, and increase his penetration proximity into her inner social circle.

To emphasise his religious merits further, the scammer also dropped references to God and religion with his encounter with his target, and later on in the correspondence, to their intimate relationship as well. As shown in the following example, the scammer expresses to his target that his encounter with her on this dating site is all part of a divine plan.

Extract 3. Describing encounter with the target as part of a divine plan

SM1	My heart is full of joy knowing you and i pray that almighty who has brought us together through this way will guide and lead us to the right way.
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The passage shows the scammer trying to create the cognitive presupposition that the target is the scammer’s soulmate because it was God’s will that had “brought [them] together” and this was not the scammer’s doing. Hence, his target should ideally reciprocate because this is what God wants for her too. The idea of ‘Divine Providence’ was not only found in the first message, but was also emphasised and reinforced in later messages as shown in the following extracts:

Extract 4. Reinforcement of the idea of ‘Divine Providence’

SM6	You cannot imagine how much I prayed and asked God for sending me the partner he meant for me during the last months. When I finally decided to surrender, not to force anything, not taking any actions, you came into my life my dear, totally unexpected.
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The extracts show an interesting representation of thematic relations. The scammer removed the agency on his part when talking about how they met and how their relationship started, as exemplified in the phrases “I prayed and asked God for sending me the partner he meant for me”, “decided to surrender”, “not to force anything”, “not taking any actions”, and placed himself as the beneficiary instead. ‘God’ is instead given the role of the agent. In a sense then, the scammer is telling the target that if she cannot trust him, then she should at least trust ‘God’ because He was the one that had brought them together.

These thematic relations suggest that this is the scammer’s strategy to mask his intentions when approaching his target. The scammer created the impression that he did not intentionally seek out his target from the start, but was led to her and with that, the target may perhaps be less suspicious about the scammer’s intentions of approaching her. This strategy can be considered successful because as shown in Extract 5, the target reciprocated and indicated that she too believe that it an act of God who brought him into her life and that he is her destined soul mate.

Extract 5. The target indicating her belief that the scammer is her pre-destined soul mate

TM2	I am really happy God linked us together and make you found me at the site. I feel you are my another half who i searched for long time. I really love you. I keep you saying I love you becoz i really love you so much.
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To further emphasise his good character, the scammer presents himself as exuding moral goodness, which in turn lends credibility to his persona that he has the qualities of a trustworthy online suitor. Consider Extract 6:

Extract 6. Scammer pointing out his naivety on the dating site

SM1	...am quite new here in the dating site. A friend of mine who got his soulmate in this site introduced me to the site.
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Extract 6 is taken from the first paragraph in SM1 and it appears that the scammer made it a point at the beginning of their correspondence to demonstrate his naivety (“am quite new here”) of the dating site. One possible explanation for this is that the scammer is trying to create the impression that he is not a person who frequents online dating sites randomly looking for romance. Instead, this may be his first time engaging in online dating. The scammer is trying to add to his *ethos* that he is not an online flirt and the act of contacting his target is not merely for a random fling. The scammer also claims that his friend who introduced him to this site found a soulmate here, and so accentuates his naivety in claiming that the online dating site is a trustworthy site that fulfils the dreams of people looking for a relationship. And of course, naivety tends to be associated with innocence, moral behaviour, and nicety of personal character.

To penetrate into his target’s social circle, the scammer uses these words - ‘honest’ ‘sincere’, ‘credible’ and ‘having faith’ - which connote characteristics of trustworthiness (Simons *et al.*, 2001, p. 81), as Extract 7 shows.

Extract 7. Words that connote characteristics of trustworthiness

SM1	I will always remain honest and sincere to you, and i wish to inform you that, i was married before with a daughter and i lost my wife, looking forward to hear from you again... it something credible to say that am well encourage in having faith and understanding with people around me. and i believe that you are such minded person too.
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Not only that, his use of “I will always” is a commissive deontic modality that places himself as a person who will fulfil an obligation in the future. It is relevant to note Bhatia’s (1993, p. 70) remark that this kind of “self-glorification lacks credibility and is likely viewed by the reader as purely subjective”. Hence, it is possible that this is a conscious attempt by the scammer to overtly corroborate his statement by using such deontic modality as a type of performance or demonstration of character.¹ To validate his claims that he is honest and sincere with his target, the scammer disclose a personal narrative that he was once married and he has a daughter. In a sense, by disclosing to his target that he has some personal flaw, his target may be more compelled to believe him and by extension, trust his moral character.

The scammer also portrays himself as a successful elite:

Extract 8. Scammer giving the impression he has a good education and career

SM1	i graduated from university of London, where i studied architectural. i am an arc tech, in engineering department. i work with both government and private company as a building engineer, both internationally and locally. am from Scotland, i like in dunblane city. my position as engineer entitles me as, senior project surveyor monitoring in building department. am a good engineering, good in drawing both computer drawing and skilful drawing.
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¹ Henderson and Gilding (2004, p. 492) notes that in view of the enormous possibility of fabrication in online communication, performance is deemed more important than mere reputation or appearance in promoting trust and in online communication, performance is executed through words in the form of self-disclosure.

The scammer’s pseudo self-disclosure in Extract 8 aims to create an impression that he comes from a good genetic pool and was brought up in a nurturing environment. In order to give the impression that he is an *übermensch* who comes from a well-educated and well-to-do family (father is an engineer), he chooses specific powerful references and words to connote them. For instance, he says that he is an architecture graduate from the University of London. Additionally, the scammer adopts a western identity (Chris Edward), perhaps to create a sense of uniqueness and glamour to attract the target (who is an Asian); and this identity could also be an index of power and financial stability as the United Kingdom is one of the global powers (Blommaert & Omoniyi, 2006).

Moreover, the scammer was deliberate in his description of his career in order to create the impression that he also has a credible successful career. He underscores his influences and vast experiences by saying he has worked in “both government and private” and “both internationally and locally”. He also builds upon this elitist status by throwing in a fancy job title to indicate that he is not just any generic engineer, but a specialised expert who goes by the title “senior project surveyor”. Of course, this career information does not only create a reputable identity, it also suggests he has a stable career and he is a high-income earner, which are attractive qualities in any potential male suitor in a patriarchal society where the male is the breadwinner. One can also interpret his job description as a person who is not restricted to only “local” work engagements, but as a person who also needs to travel a lot, which makes him seemingly important and powerful individual. In other words, these quality indicators would likely create an impression in the target’s mind that she is lucky to have found the ideal life partner who would make her life comfortable.

To further solidify his stand in the eyes of the target, the scammer certainly made effort to develop a strong emotional bond with his target by expressing keen attraction for the target, putting the target as the main priority in his life and also giving compliments to the target.

Extract 9. Expressing keen attraction for the target

SM2	All I want is for us to love each other for the rest of our lives, you can call me with this number +447045702211 okay. i really want to have a word together Thanks
SM8	how are you doing? hope you are fine. am very happy reading your mail keep putting smile on my facen how is your work hope your doing fine, i really want to know you more and see what the future will bring between us please can you have account in yahoo messenger so that we can have a word together. hope to hear from you soon, kissing for you thanks

In Extract 9, the use of the expressions such as ‘all I want’ and ‘really want’ indicates that he wants to know so much more about her because he finds her attractive and is seriously considering her to be his partner for life. In fact, he thinks of her “all the time” (see Extract 10), is so infatuated that her e-mails put a smile on his face, and is craving for her attention. It appears that the scammer’s persistent fawning had a perlocutionary effect of getting his target to

lower her guard and to trust him with more confidential and personal information about herself.

Extract 10. Putting the target as the main priority

SM9	you are all i have been dreaming for and i cannot imagine more honor than living by your side modesty. i feel moved by your deep faith and confidence.
SM3	I'll be with you wherever you go, on the clouds on high, on the firm ground below. I'll be with you in unexpected ways, to guide you, to watch you, through all your days. For you're in my heart, and you're in my mind, and I'm with you now and for all time. Every moment of every hour, of every day, for every reason imaginable, and in every way, I need you, and I like you.
SM13	i do think about you all the time, after reading your email again and again (...) you mean so much to me and my family too.

Not only that, the scammer also emphasises that the target is his main priority in life, as shown in the use of hyperbolic phrases such as ‘all I have been dreaming for’, ‘cannot imagine more honor’, ‘wherever you go’, ‘through all your days’, ‘now and for all time’, ‘every moment’, ‘every way’, ‘all the time’ and ‘so much’. Cockroft and Cockroft (2005, p. 184) suggest that hyperbolic phrases may be used to amplify certain aspects of a message – in this case, that the target is the most important person in his life. By so doing, the scammer may also be trying to arouse the target’s good feelings towards him, since a positive emotional bond may influence the development of trust (Grabner-Kräuter, 2009, p. 512).

Extract 11. Praising and complimenting the target

SM1	I must confess that i am so happy to hear from your previous message in AD, and it keeps putting smiles on my face.
SM11	i found you to be very interesting woman with a kind heart.
SM13	i found you to be a very responsible woman with a kind heart. i am so proud of you, and i feel moved by your deep faith and confidence.

The scammer’s generous use of compliments may perhaps be an effort to make the target feel desirable and special. Indeed, studies have shown that such acts of adoration - giving compliments and praises and by giving assurance that one is special and desirable, could make one’s partner feel ‘good’ about him- or herself and lead to an increase in the emotional closeness and intimacy of a relationship (DeLameter & Myers, 2011; Pendell, 2002). Indeed, flattery is also a tactic for building solidarity in other 419 scams (Freiermuth, 2011, p. 139). This could then be the scammer’s strategy to appeal to her emotions and at the same time, lure her deeper into their relationship.

Furthermore, the scammer puts his target on a higher pedestal by making her his benefactor. This is demonstrated in his expressions of indebtedness to the target for her love, concern and monetary assistance, as shown in Extract 12.

Extract 12. Expressing gratefulness to the target

SM9	Thanks a lot for those wonderful feelings towards me. I do have the same feelings to my honey. (...) i am willing to sacrifice for you to show how much i cherish you.it touches my heart so much to read about your deep feelings.
SM11	I am very grateful for your help so far and I must pay you back even with interest.I shouldn't be that ungrateful not to surprise you with something you will marvel with as my beloved.I have something special for you as we finish with this and I coming to meet you over there in your country.

It is interesting that this strategy was also used when the request for money was made as seen in SM11, whereby as a token of his appreciation for the target's monetary help, he promises to 'pay back even with interest', prepare 'something special' for her, go over to her home country to meet her and to spend the rest of his life with her. By doing so, the scammer may also be attempting to display good moral character - portraying a person who is grateful and appreciative of what is given to him. Undoubtedly, these statements of commitment, promises and affection have not fulfilled the felicity conditions of the 'commissive' speech act because the scammer did not have any intention to fulfil those conditions (see Searle, 1975), but these were not obvious to the target. As a result, the perlocutionary effect of the message had still occurred and the target was deceived at the end.

5. Concluding Thoughts

In order to achieve his deceptive goal of defrauding the target, establishing credibility is undoubtedly an important, if not the basic building block, of the scam operation. Freiermuth (2011) points out that the key to a successful scam is trust and in fact, the anecdotal account of an ex-scammer revealed that when a target trusts the scammer and takes up the correspondence, the scammer would be successful in his or her endeavour (Dixon, 2005). As shown in this study, the scammer at the very start projects positive self-representations, which in some ways resembles the way non-fraudulent relationships develop (Samp & Caren, 2012). Advocacy websites and the media often caution the public against online profiles or characters that seem too good to be true; however, given that identity deceptions are "frequent, subtle and intentional" (Toma *et al.*, 2008, p. 1034), the target appears to have given the scammer the benefit of the doubt when he exaggerated his credentials. Additionally, it is likely that the scammer tailored his online identity according to the specific preferences of his target as online dating sites often encourage their members to be as detailed as possible in their personal descriptions and expectations in order to find a perfect match, but, this practice makes individuals easy targets of scammers.

The scammer's willingness to correspond via telephone (see Extract 9) also raises questions as to whether or not the scammer was able to speak with a British or American accent in order to reinforce the perception that he is indeed someone from the UK. Since there is no audio data of the purported telephone conversation, we are unable to come to a valid conclusion. The victim's e-mails suggest that she may have had telephone conversations with the scammer's 'mother', and this level of accountability could perhaps be the reason why the target was convinced that the scammer was real.

Regarding the grammatical form of the e-mails, they had flaws, such as consistency of wrong lexical choices and poor punctuation. However the sentence structures were mostly in the correct order and there is cohesion throughout the text. Yet, it is interesting to wonder why the target had not considered the scammer's language to be a telling sign that the credentials of the writer is dubious given that his writing style does not reflect the level of an individual from the United Kingdom who possesses an elite education. One plausible reason is perhaps people give less emphasis on the form and accuracy of the language during a casual form of communication; unlike business letters in other 419 scams. It is also speculated that the victim may want to believe so badly that she has found her ideal life partner so much so that she is willing to discount these indicators.

The data also suggest that the scammer was impatient and did not want to invest a lot of time into his target, as indicated by the recurring and intense display of emotions from the early stages of the interaction. The strategy may also be a type of pressure tactic to get his target to reciprocating to his affections, by giving her less time to evaluate the correspondence and to make her more dependent on her emotions to make decisions (see O'Keefe, 2002, for discussion on the *Elaboration Likelihood Model*). By constantly making her feel special, loved and appreciated, the scammer may also be cultivating the target's emotional dependency on him; akin to creating some form of emotional addiction (Lipka, 2012). The need to satiate the emotional needs and desires may perhaps be another plausible reason behind the romance scam victims' willingness to pursue the correspondence and even give money to people they have never met before. Indeed, RMP investigation officers with experience working with romance scam victims said that they think victims are lonely people with little social networking outside of the virtual realm. Interviews with victims can shed light into this.

Nevertheless, this preliminary study has provided, within its limitations, a glimpse into one of the many strategies used by a romance scammer in carrying out his fraudulent schemes. More data would be needed in order to confirm the findings of this study as well as to reveal other strategies and patterns of use. More work must also be done to reveal the scammer's tricks so that empowered with the knowledge; people can remain alert and protect themselves while they turn to the Internet as a new medium of meeting new people, maintaining relationships or seeking romance.

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