

# Mapping Computer Mediated Communication Theories and Persuasive Strategies in Analysing Online Dating Romance Scam

Kalaivani Annadorai<sup>1</sup>, Pramela Krish<sup>1</sup>, Azianura Hani Shaari<sup>1</sup>, Mohammad Rahim Kamaluddin<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, The National University of Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

**Abstract** – The breakthrough of technological innovation especially the Internet has given rise to cybercrime and the danger of this digital interaction has opened the floodgates of online dating romance scams. Online dating romance scam is described as a specific type of mass marketing or advance fee fraud where scammers pretend to initiate a relationship through online networking sites by using fictitious identities, with the hope of swindling money from victims. Online dating romance scam has far-reaching impacts on the victims who not only have to deal with financial losses but also suffer from negative emotions and non-performance in daily life. What is not clear, is why and how these victims are not doubtful of the illusionary promises made by the scammers. This paper discusses relevant theories which attempt to identify and explore the persuasive strategies and linguistic features used in online dating romance scams. By exploring these strategies and features, the paper will elicit plausible reasons behind this scam and establish the linguistic patterns used by the scammers.

**Keywords:** online dating romance scam, cybercrime, persuasive strategies, linguistic features, computer mediated communication

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet revolution has indirectly created a platform for unscrupulous users to utilize cyber space to discover the potential of monetizing in the name of scam (Kopp, 2017). This rapid advancement of the Internet has also made us digitally connected with the existence of popular social media and dating sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Tinder and Twitter (Finkel et al., 2012). These sites enable free access to online chatting, including the opportunity to create a romantic relationship with people from different parts of the world. Through this easy approach, individuals are able to find perfect candidates to begin a relationship, without be conscious that one can personalize or edit the profile information and details of personal interest, and demographic details.

Although online dating is widely accepted as a social norm (Edelson, 2003), this digital interaction has however opened the floodgates for cybercrimes, one in particular being online dating romance scam (ODRS) on a global scale. Online dating romance scam (also referred to as African Scam or 419 Scam) is described as a specific type of mass marketing fraud or advance fee fraud where scammers use fictitious identity and pretend to initiate a relationship through online networking sites with the intention to defraud the victims of large sums of money (Whitty, 2013). These scammers target vulnerable, romantic and lonely people who are looking for companionship or a relationship (Burchanan & Whitty, 2014).

The scammers do not only target elderly people as their target but provided that the victims have access to funds. Sample 1 below illustrates a good explanation where the scammer was more interested on the victim's job rather than a casual conversation. By probing questions such as "what is your job" and "I hope you have will paid?", the scammer was verifying whether the victim has any access to funds since she does

not have any full time job by asking the victim

<i>Sample 1 (taken from a real time conversation)</i>	
Scammer 19	Im working here in USA as a <b>contractor manager</b> Wow you look nice and pretty you look younger <b>then</b> your age <b>what is your job?</b>
Victim 19	Ok dear Aww thank u Im a housewife Part time I bake cake n doing biscuits
Scammer 19	Wow that's great <b>I hope you have will paid?</b>
Victim 19	Yea

(Source: Instagram Chat, 2017)

Corresponding with this, an online search was conducted on the job scope of contractor manager, the results showed job scope for contract manager or construction manager instead for contractor manager and no occupation listed as contractor manager. It could be a typo error yet as a construction manager or contract manager, a person should have great communication skills and also make no basic grammar mistakes. This can be supported with another grammatical error made by the scammer where he used "then" instead of "than". These errors should not be seen as typos or basic grammar mistakes because this shows the proficiency of an educated person which the scammer claimed to be (Koon, 2013).

In online dating romance scam, the scammers use fictitious profile on social networking sites as a first step to approach and develop an intimate relationship with the victims by using persuasive strategies (Whitty, 2013). The scammers will initiate conversations with the victims by sending the victims vague messages filled with love or desire, and maybe even a stolen glamorous or professional photo. Sample 2 shows how the scammer started the conversation with a good morning quote to impress the victim.

<i>Sample 2 (taken from a real time conversation)</i>	
Scammer 8:	Hi dear How is your night? When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it it to be alive – to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love. Good Morning
Victim 8:	Nice wordings. Thank you You are?

(Source: Instagram Chat, 2017)

The quote shared by the scammer motivated the victim to reply and create a conversation with the scammer as it hearten the victim. Through these, the scammer likely to create a good impression in the victim's mind that he is a person of good values.

After that it can be seen that the scammers build a creative profile to portray as a rich figure and professional or someone with an attractive job like engineer, contractor, or businessman as these are among

the commonly mentioned jobs by the scammers. The scammers tactically move the “relationship” away from the social media or dating site and instead communicate through phone chatting applications (Whitty, 2013) such as „Whatsapp“, „Viber“, and „Wechat“. They claim that they will be travelling or inactive in social media. The real reason behind this is the scammers’ profile will no longer be available on the social media after some time due to complaints by other victims who know that he is a scammer, hence the scammers choose other unmoderated chatting applications to communicate with the victims. Koon (2013) asserted that the scammers try to persuade the victims to communicate via personal e-mail, instant messaging or by phone so that the scammers are able to remove their profiles from the online sites and avoid being easily tracked down. Frequent emails, online conversations and phone interactions between the scammers and the victims build up the relationship to the next level. By this the scammers will lead the victims to harbour strong feelings towards the romance scammers.

While the scammers are coaxing for money from the victims, they also plot persuasive stories that suit the background of each victim in order for the ODRS to look natural and unforced (Whitty, 2013). The duration of this online dating romance scam lasts only for a few months as the scammers' main intention is to defraud a large sum of money (Rege, 2009). Once an emotional bond of trust is established, the scammers begin to request for money by giving various excuses such as wedding gifts, emergencies, and retrieval of items at customs among others.

This is obviously an impracticable relationship as the victims have never seen nor met the scammers in real, and the victims have no knowledge about the scammers’ background. They are only counting on fanciful love words and fake promises by the scammers. This can lead to far-reaching impacts on the victims wherein the victims do not only have to deal with financial losses but also suffer from negative emotions such as depression, embarrassment, anger and fear (Whitty, 2013). The scammers use poetic messages to influence victims to carry out a claim for the scammers.

However the victims are not being skeptical of the scammers’ writing style, flow of disclosure, cheesy clichés and photographs are resilient factors for the scammers to defraud victims (Koon, 2013). It is unconvincing that these victims are not doubtful on the illusionary promises made by the scammers. By realising this harm, it is essential to comprehend and analyze the enormous powerful persuasive language used as a strategy that can coerce the victims to fall for online dating romance scam. Hence, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) theories and persuasive strategies will be explored to understand the modus operandi used by the scammer in online dating romance scams.

## 2. COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE DATING ROMANCE SCAM

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is defined as a communication or human interaction that occurs using computer technologies to convey messages (Susan et al, 2015). This communication take place over telecommunication network such instant messaging, smart phone text, online sites or messaging applications. CMC is significant to moderate and scrutinize certain social boundaries and relationship intimacy on telecommunication networks. As such, Social Information Processing (SIP) theory and the Hyperpersonal Model of CMC can explain how the scammers establish a strong relationship which is similar or better than face-to-face communications.

According to Walther (1996), CMC overcomes some limitations posed by face-to-face interactions, by providing a context in which anyone can interact with relative anonymity (or pseudonymity). Therefore, by using the online medium, the scammers can plan, create and edit their personal information more deliberately than they are able to do by face to face communications. They do not have to be worried about

their apparel or body language or whether their messages are true or false. (Toma, Hancock & Ellison 2008). Walther (2007) asserts that the communicators are motivated to develop interpersonal impressions and affinity regardless of any medium and non-verbal cues and able to adapt encoding and decoding of social information into language, sometimes through emoticons such as “smiley face”. Thus, this theory will elaborate in depth how does patterning and characteristics of language would influence the victims to fall for this scam.

Further in online world, an intense self-disclosure will through uninhibited communication would easily build an online hyperpersonal relationship as the level of communication anxiety is low due to lack of physical presence (Anderson & Emmers-sommer, 2006; Walther, 1996). As a consequences of that, the scammers utilizes the information given by the victim to create personalities that the victims prefer in building and maintaining the relationship online. Since text is the only medium which the scammers and the victims have online to share information about oneself, so it is the only way that the scammers can plan and get close with the victims. Unlike in real life, it is different where one is able to meet and spend time with the other person (Henderson, 2005; Walther & Parks, 2002), This implies that spending time together, and sharing experiences in real life brings couples closer whereas in the online world, only words are shared.

By using the widely recognized Walther’s Hyperpersonal model (Walther, 2007) and SIP, it explains that in CMC, an individual selectively self-presents, idealizes a partner and carefully chooses between channels to optimize the available features of the medium in one’s favor and a feedback loop may intensify or inflate these social processes. Figure 1 shows the model comprises of four communication components to address how a hyperpersonal relationship is built based on CMC (Walther, 2011).

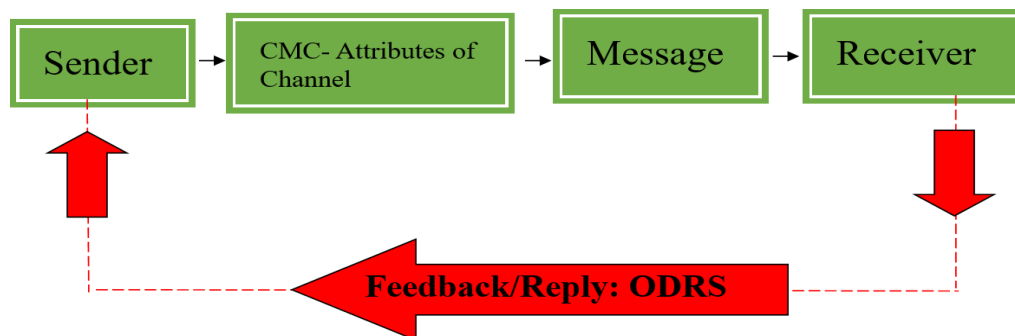


Figure 1 Hyperpersonal Model by using Social Information Processing Theory

(Source: Kalaivani et al. 2017)

As shown in Figure 1, the sender (also referred as the scammers in current research) tend to reveal the best attitudes in a socially desirable manner (Walther 2007). In other words, the scammers may construct messages that portray themselves in certain preferential ways and persuasively communicate in a manner that invites preferential reactions from the victims. The amount of time that the sender ruminates on each statement may be extended, as the asynchronous nature of communication allows one to spend minutes constructing a statement without fear of being socially inappropriate (Sassenberg, Boos & Rabung, 2005). In online dating romance scams, the scammers create false persona to persuade the victims by pretending either they are an authority or likeable persona which increases the trust of the victims towards the scammers. By virtue of this, the scammers build impressions or perceptions of a more positive characteristic of themselves. For example as reflected in sample 3, the scammer’s conversation begins by

introducing himself as a highly credible person, rich and popular figure of a certain industry or a country.

Sample 3 (taken from a real time conversation)	
<b>Scammer 15:</b>	I live in Austin Texas, I am a <b>US army section commander</b> of the 82 <sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, 1-504 <sup>th</sup> PIR, Division Peace keeping force, currently in Syria with NATO's military organization in Syria for peace keeping... I have <b>dedicated eighteen years of my life to serving and protecting the dignity of my beloved country and the course I believe...</b>
<b>Victim 15:</b>	Waaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh...u are army? 🥰 🥰 Emrrmmmmmm

(Source: Google Hangouts, 2018)

The lines “ US army section commander” and “dedicated eighteen years of my life to serving and protecting the dignity of my beloved country and the course I believe” in sample 3 would an impression to the victim that the scammer is an individual with prominent career, loyalist and discipline as he served as an army in his beloved country.

As the next step, the channel or medium of CMC is significant in ODRS as it enables the scammers to plan and prepare as well as to take their time to construct, edit and compose their messages at their convenience with its sophisticated features. Currently, most of the social media are updated with the latest emoji or pictorial representations of facial features, animals, and objects to clarify and strengthen the message between the sender and the receiver (Tossell et al, 2012; Jayme Hill 2016). Emoji are becoming an increasingly popular tool in CMC and has now become an extensive language that is proposed to have the ability to carry more authority than words alone (Jayme Hill, 2016). A message with an additional smiley or emoji is more positively perceived and the sender or receiver is thought to be happier than a plain text (Derks, Bos and Grumbkow, 2008). By having this attributes, the victims would then construct idealized or exaggerated imagines of the scammer's messages. This can be seen in the reply of the victim in Figure 1 where the victim used love eye emoji as a way to express her adoration towards the scammer's introduction and imagined the scammer is a credible person.

Imminently, the message that the scammers crafted for the victims would increase the trust in the mind of the victims. This is because the extra time and effort that the scammers spent on crafting the message also supports the believability of the scammers on the victims. The scammers would try to move their conversation to the next level by recommending the use of personal email, instant messaging, and video chat or even by phone calls. The scammers' keenness and effort to call or chat with the victims may increase the trust level of the victims for the scammer and presume that these audio and visual conversations are unfeigned (Koon, 2013). These customized and personalized texts over a period of time would enable the scammers to establish hyperpersonal relationships in order to groom their victims to be defrauded of a large sum of money later on. In this stage, the scammers often use declare their love, portrayal as a romantic and passionate lovers and frequent compliments (Koon, 2013).


Sample 4, 5 and 6 show how the scammers portray themselves as very romantic and passionate lovers by using romantic words such as baby, honey and dear (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012).

Sample 4 (taken from a real time conversation)	
Scammer 8:	Dear you are looking <b>so beautiful like an angel</b>
Victim 8:	Thank you

(Source: Instagram, 2018)

Sample 5 (taken from a real time conversation)	
Scammer 3:	Honey I am so sorry for my late reply because I started my duty immediately when I dropped message to you in the morning, <b>You always look beautiful and charming, I love all the pictures you sent to me and I cant wait for the special day I will able to hold you tight in my arms and gaze into your eyes to tell you how much I love you</b>

(Source: Viber, 2018)

Sample 6 (taken from a real time conversation)	
Scammer 15:	<b>Don't call me sir, honey.</b>
Victim 15:	 ok dear.

(Source: Google Hangout, 2018)

The victims trust these air castle words and illusionary promises by the scammers without a single doubt. At this stage, the scammers try to attract the victims with compliments or appealing phrases so that it can strengthen the intimacy in the relationship (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012).

The feedback or reply of the victims towards the messages of the scammers through mutual interactions initiates the process of ODRS scams. After establishing a stable relationship with the victims, the scammers prepare to ask for money by narrating some issues such as to retrieve the luxurious gifts at the customs, illness, accident, business failure and so on. The scammers request money to test if the victims are compliant enough or willing to help their supposed “life-partner” (Koon, 2013). They give various reasons to make the situation urgent so that the victims would not have much time to rationalize the reason given by them. The scammers portray that they are helpless to solve the problem. One of the common reasoning spotted in most of the conversations is the gift or parcel is disallowed at customs of Malaysia and an amount needs to be paid as clearance fees to the officer in-charge via an online transaction.

Sample 7 illustrates the scenario where the scammer urge the victims to find solutions to make the transaction.

<i>Sample 7 (taken from a real time conversation)</i>	
Scammer 6:	<p>... I am sorry for my late reply, it was due to my limited access to internet over here at my offshore location. .... I am so devastated right now, I don't know what to do, please dear I want you to try to comply with them, so that they can make the delivery to you immediately because at present I cannot send money to you dear as I am away from the main land (on offshore out of London) so I cant do anything now and I cant possibly ask my mum I do not want her to know about this or else she will kill me.</p> <p>I am very restless now. I cant even concentrate on my job because of this problem. I do not have access to western union at the moment, please please dear you have to do something about this.</p>

(Source: Yahoo mail, 2017)

In this case, the scam was unsuccessful as the victim intelligently declined to reply the scammer and the conversation ended when the scammer had knowledge that the victim was reluctant to do the transaction.

### 3.0 PERSUASIVE STRATEGIES

Persuasive language strategies also play a major role in connecting people easily (Azianura et al, 2017). Persuasion and language are inseparable because persuasion is one of the most essential aspects of communication. Language is regarded as one of the essential tools or medium to convey a message, idea or expression of someone. Persuasion can be in the form of strategies to achieve something either positive or negative (Naksawat 2016; Dyrud 2005). For instance, persuasive communication can be used in public service campaigns such as recycling, and pollution awareness which can lead to a better change and improve people's lives. However, persuasive communication like in the previous samples of communication can also be dangerous as the scammers use persuasive language to convince victims to fall prey to their scams. The scammers employ persuasive elements in their messages to attract the victims to fall into the trap of ODRS. According to Naksawat (2016) there are seven persuasive elements as identified by Dyrud (2005) and Manson (2011) that makes a scam successful. These strategies are studied to add to our understanding of how the scam progresses and to explain how the scammers carefully groom the victims.

#### 3.1 Personalizing the scam

The scammers try to create a friendly communication with the victims in the hope of making the victims fall for their fake stories. By having a little knowledge about the victim, the scammer can personalize stories according to the victim's suitability (Naksawat, 2016). The scam is tailored according each victim's basic information and interests since the victims information, preferences and interest are disclosed on dating sites and social media (Kalaivani et al, 2017).

### 3.2 Sympathy-Generating Messages

The scammers plot tragic situations that can impact the victims' feeling of sympathy. For instance, they claim that they are in an emergency situation, tragedy or difficult circumstances. The scammers add on that they are helpless to find a solution or money for the emergency situation that they face (Koon, 2013). By doing this, the scammers lead the victims to sympathize on the scammers and to help the scammers in humanitarian terms.

### 3.3 Provoking an intuitive desire for possessing a lot of money

The scammers have learnt to predict human beings' natural feeling of wanting a lot of money and keeping it for themselves (Naksawat, 2016). The scammers have set some alluring conditions to stimulate human greed, or cause a sense of excitement to the recipient (Atkins & Huang 2013). For example, the scammers use triggers that make the victims focus on huge prizes or luxurious gifts. The victims who have a strong desire to get rich quickly would easily fall for this scam (Lea, 2009).

### 3.4 Trust

The scammers try to impress the victims by disclosing some their personal details and private information to gain trust (Kalaivani et al, 2017). This will create a perception that the scammers are honest people who trust others with their personal information (Atkins & Huang, 2013). Indirectly, it will make the victim feel proud of being trusted. As a result of doing this, the scammer strengthens the relationship at every stage with trust so that the victims respond to the scammers' messages. Moreover, the victims trust everything the scammers say without any doubt and becomes confident in the sender (Naksawat, 2016).

### 3.5 Asking victim to make small steps of compliance

The scammers plot various small steps to draw the victims into continuing to comply with their deceitful plans such as revealing personal information, marital status, and phone number at initial stage or grooming stage (Whitty, 2013). This is actually to test whether the victim is attentive to the scammer's requests and eventually the victims end up transferring the amount requested by the scammer (Koon, 2013). Following that, the scammers ask the victim to do more tasks for the scammers such as transferring an amount to retrieve branded gifts from courier company, contacting the authority to obtain bank details and send proof of payment to the scammers.

### 3.6 Creating legitimacy and credibility

It is important to maintain legitimacy in ODRS as to gain the victim's trust and make it appear as if the arrangement is genuine. Hence, the scammers pretend to be a powerful figure such as an authority to liaise with the victim and make them to pay an amount of money. The scammers' representation as an authority is closely related with credibility where generally a person obeys them without any unnecessary questions (Koon, 2013).

### 3.7 Setting artificial deadlines

In ODRS, the scammers create a sense of urgency and prompt immediate action by the victims to prevent the victims to think or assessing the scammers' and the deceiving plot (Koon, 2013). They often use words such as "please" "quickly help me", and "waiting" to show urgency and pressure the victims to help the scammer immediately. Basically, the scammers trying to lead their victims to make decisions based on emotions and not rationally.



This persuasive strategies discussed above suggests the themes used by the scammers in exploiting the victims' weakness to manipulate them in order to perform the scammers' requests. Kopp (2016 & 2017) acknowledged Dyrud's Persuasive Elements, which create strong emotions such as love, care, lust, responsibility, friendship and trust as key factors in manipulating the success of romance scams, since romantic relationships involve multiple emotions such as possessiveness, excitement, hope, sadness and happiness. These techniques by Dyrud (2005) and Manson (2011) are significantly relevant to examine, explore and analyse the types of persuasive elements used in the messages of scammers through digital medium in building an online dating romance scam.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

Both CMC theories and persuasive strategies significantly help to map the reasons behind occurrence of online dating romance scam. By using these theories, it reveal that the scammers present desirable characteristics of themselves while utilizing the all the avenue available on social media to uncover the weaknesses of the victims, and employ suitable strategies together with a variety of persuasive words to play with the victim's emotions.

What is more worrying is the devastating impacts caused by scams to the victims where the victims are affected emotionally and financially. Unfortunately, some of the victims lose their entire savings and experienced a range of emotions including depression, anger and guilt. They feel embarrassed to seek help or advice after being scammed as the impacts traumatized the victims and lowered their self-esteem. One of major factors caused the victims to blindly comply to the scammers requests is the limited knowledge victims have about the risk of modern technologies. Thus, it is important for the individuals itself to equip themselves with the knowledge about this scam and practice precautionary steps before sharing information with anyone.

Underpinning everything is a shared responsibility to raise awareness and remove the misplaced stigma currently attached to scams. More support groups should be formed to assist the victims who are emotionally abused. It is hope that this paper will increase awareness in the society on the techniques used by the scammers in deceiving the victims.

On the other hand, these scammers are moving freely without any legal barriers as they use local individuals' bank account numbers to abet in this scam so that the authority cannot trace their whereabouts. In order to help prevent this scam, our recommendation to law enforcement agencies is that they should develop an awareness program to circulate the nature of this scam and the latest strategies employed by the scammers. Through this dissemination of salient information, the public will be more alert to this kind of scam.

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