Editorial Introduction

Romance fraud uses the mechanism of a relationship to obtain financial rewards. It devastates the lives of millions globally and results in significant financial and non-financial losses for victims. Proliferation in the use of technology to establish relationships and communicate with others has seen the number of potential romance fraud victims increase exponentially.

This briefing paper provides an overview of romance fraud, including definitions, how it is perpetrated, its effects, challenges regarding prevention and the need to remove social stigmas associated with victimisation.

 Overall, this paper highlights how romance fraud occurs and the need to improve prevention for those targeted.

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A Guide to Understanding Romance Fraud
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Introduction

Romance fraud uses the guise of a legitimate relationship to deceive someone for a financial benefit. It is also known as an online dating scam, online dating fraud, dating and relationship fraud or sweetheart swindles. Each year, victims collectively lose millions of dollars, with over US$475 million lost in the United States of America alone in 2019 (IC3, 2021). During 2020, over £68 million was lost in the United Kingdom (Wakefield, 2021) and C$18.5 million was reported lost in Canada (CAFC, 2021). Losses in Australia are likewise significant, with over A$123 million lost to romance fraud in 2020 (ACCC, 2021), up from A$83 million in 2019 (ACCC, 2020). Romance fraud has consistently represented high levels of financial loss for victims in Australia, being in the top two categories of financial loss in 10 out of 11 years since 2010 (dropping to number three in 2019) (ACCC, 2020, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated a notable increase in the number of reports of and financial losses associated with romance fraud, with offenders effectively exploiting the increase in social isolation, loneliness and internet usage resulting from government responses to curtail the virus's spread (Buil-Gil & Zeng, 2021, p. 8).

Understanding romance fraud

Romance fraud is defined as instances where 'criminals pretend to initiate a relationship via an online dating site or social networking site with the intention to defraud their victims' (Whitty, 2013, p. 666) or 'instances where a person is defrauded by an offender/s through what the victim perceives to be a genuine relationship' (Cross et al., 2018, p. 1304). The key element of romance fraud is deception through the mechanism of a relationship to facilitate financial reward for the offender. Presently, romance fraud is primarily perpetrated through the internet, though it is important to note that offenders use all methods of communication (internet, email, text messaging, telephone and even face to face) to maintain the ruse of a relationship. The evolution and increased use of technology and a corresponding increased acceptance of online dating websites and social media platforms to meet potential partners has exponentially increased the potential number of victims available to offenders (Cross, 2020).

Successful strategies of romance fraud

Offenders use a variety of techniques to establish trust and rapport in the first instance, and then to maintain their control in the relationship.

These include grooming the potential victim (Whittle et al., 2013), social engineering tactics (such as use of authority in their selected identities and claiming urgency in the need for money to be transferred) (Drew & Cross, 2013) and psychological abuse techniques (such as isolating the victim from their family and friends and continually degrading the victim to make them feel unworthy) (Cross et al., 2018). The importance of language cannot be underestimated in the approaches and communications of offenders, which are deliberately designed to elicit a positive response from victims (Carter, 2021).

While it is arguable that there are 'endless plotlines' (Cross & Kelly, 2016) available to offenders in their communications and each victim will experience something of a unique set of circumstances tailored to their situation, there are identifiable commonalities across victimisation experiences.

One typical commonality is the offender's chosen identity, with them often selecting professional identities to increase their attractiveness (such as engineer, lawyer or doctor). The adoption of military profiles by offenders is also prominent (Cross & Holt, 2021), as is a widower status (with or without children).

Requests for money are characterised by business operations (needing money to pay for some aspect of their employment), medical needs (needing money to pay for injuries or illnesses suffered by them or their children), or criminal justice needs (having been arrested and requiring payment to make bail) (Cross & Holt, 2021; Whitty, 2013).

Each of these scenarios effectively enforce a sense that payment is urgent and leave little room for victims to consider the request in its context.

The stages of romance fraud

In exploring the ways in which offenders conduct romance fraud operations, Whitty (2013) proposes a seven-stage model encompassing the main trajectory of many victim experiences. These seven stages are summarised below.

Stage one—motivated to find their ideal partner

The potential victim is willing to meet a partner and is open to being contacted on their site of choice.

Stage two—presented with the fake profile

Offenders are unlikely to use their own identities and will either use the legitimate identity of another person or misappropriate photos and create a fictitious identity to connect with a victim (Cross & Layt, 2021).

Stage three—grooming process

Once a victim and offender connect, the offender will work hard to establish trust and rapport with the victim, to gain confidence in their ability to successfully request money. The concept of grooming is well established in the context of child sexual exploitation (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2011), and similar methods are arguably observed in romance fraud.

Stage four—the sting

It is critical that the offender asks for money. This may involve a small amount at first and will revolve around the scenario they have created. There will always be a sense of urgency associated with this, and offenders put in a lot of effort to increase their odds of success.

Stage five—continuation of the scam

Once a victim has complied with an initial request for transfer of money, offenders will escalate both the amount and frequency of their financial requests. Offenders can use a range of techniques to maintain their power and control, and this stage can be sustained for weeks, months or years (Carter, 2021; Cross et al., 2018).

Stage six—sexual abuse

In a small number of circumstances, offenders will employ 'sextortion' (O'Malley & Holt, 2020) in an attempt to gain further money transfers from the victim. This usually revolves around a threat to expose an intimate image or recording obtained by the offender during the relationship. Referred to as 'image-based sexual abuse' (Powell & Henry, 2017, p. 120), this technique is not universally employed in all romance fraud cases.

Stage seven—revictimisation

Research indicates that once a person has been successfully victimised, they are more likely to be targeted and further victimised. This can occur through a new scheme and new offender, or through a recovery scheme, where the offender poses as an official who can retrieve any funds lost to the first scheme (Button & Cross, 2017).

The above stages demonstrate the complexity of romance fraud and the effort offenders make to attain financial reward. While an outside perspective may easily discern that the relationship is false and the person is being defrauded, offenders work hard to ensure that they are able to dictate the terms of the relationship, persuading the victim to continually send money in response to their requests for financial assistance.

Effects of romance fraud

The goal for all fraud, including romance fraud, is financial reward for the offender. However, the effects of romance fraud go well beyond pure monetary loss. Victims experience a range of non-financial harms in addition to any financial losses. These include a deterioration in physical health and emotional wellbeing, varying levels of depression, relationship breakdown, unemployment, homelessness and, in extreme cases, suicide (Button et al., 2009; Cross et al., 2016).

Further, unique to romance fraud is what has been termed the 'double hit' of victimisation, where victims must suffer the effects of any monetary losses sustained and grieve the loss of the relationship (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012). For many victims, the loss of the relationship causes greater trauma and is more difficult to cope with and recover from (Cross et al., 2016).

Victim-blaming discourses and romance fraud

Fraud victims as a whole, including those of romance fraud, are subjected to high levels of shame and stigma associated with their victimisation. Such individuals are seen to have been greedy, gullible and somewhat deserving of what occurs (Cross, 2015).

The high levels of victim blaming experienced by romance fraud victims act as a significant barrier to disclosure, with many victims fearful of telling their family or friends what has occurred (Cross et al., 2016). This extends to the reporting of offences, with victims experiencing additional trauma at the hands of the system in their effort to report (Button et al., 2009).

Victim blaming also hampers the effectiveness of any prevention messaging, with individuals refusing to believe they could be successfully defrauded.

Prevention of romance fraud

The prevention and disruption of romance fraud is fraught with challenges. In using a romantic relationship to gain money, offenders are able to subvert victims' ability to rationally process the situation in which they find themselves. Further, as noted, offenders employ a wide range of proven techniques to successfully elicit the financial rewards they seek.

Broadly speaking, prevention messages have focused on the instruction not to send money to people that 'you don't know' (Cross, 2020). However, this is difficult in the context of romance fraud, as victims believe they are in a genuine relationship with the offender. In the victim's mind, they are not sending money to a 'stranger' but to someone they are in constant communication with on an intimate level. Offenders use intimacy and the constant promise of a future together to manipulate and exploit victims financially (Cross, 2020).

Prevention advice has also centred on encouragement to meet in person as soon as possible. Again, this is difficult, with offenders employing a wide range of excuses and somewhat believable stories as to why they cannot meet in person.

In many cases, this aligns well with their selected identity; for example, in the case of an offender using a military profile, the inherent characteristics of military service enable them to resist efforts to meet and also justify measures to maintain secrecy, security and anonymity (Cross & Holt, 2021).

Further, the current COVID-19 pandemic bodes well for romance fraud offenders, with lockdowns and other physical restrictions encouraging relationships to remain online.

Conclusion

Romance fraud is a complex and dynamic offence type that devastates the lives of millions globally. Offenders use a sophisticated array of techniques to attract and engage victims in the first place, and then to maintain control and ensure compliance to monetary requests for as long as possible. Victims experience a wide range of financial and non-financial harms, and often find the loss of the relationship and associated violation and betrayal as more significant than any financial losses. While there are commonalities in the profiles used by offenders, offenders' techniques employed throughout relationships and stages of victimisation, there is also an inherent uniqueness to each experience tailored to exploit the specific weakness of the targeted individual.

At a societal level, it is important to remove the current shame and stigma around romance fraud victims. This stigma discourages the reporting of romance fraud and inhibits effective prevention messaging. Further, a victim's inability to disclose to family and friends further isolates them and increases their vulnerability to revictimisation. Sadly, offenders are known to trade lists of their victims and repeatedly target those who have previously sent money (Button & Cross, 2017). Therefore, it is imperative that we create a societal discourse that openly and constructively talks about romance fraud and the reality of victimisation to reduce offenders' power and control over victims.

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