

<b>Institution: University of Westminster</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 4 Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience</b>
<b>Title of case study: Internet Fraud</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>This project had a direct impact on <b>practitioners and services</b>, influencing police practice, police training, and judicial cases involving a relatively new and under-reported crime: The Online Dating Romance Scam. It also impacted on <b>society, culture and creativity</b> by stimulating public debate via extensive media coverage. The research established that prevalence was much higher than previously believed, and that existing ideas about typical victim profiles were incorrect. It shed light on psychological risk factors, the processes underlying the scam, and effects on victims. Documenting the emotional effects led to changes in how victims are treated by law enforcement.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>This was the first significant academic work on the Online Dating Romance Scam, a serious financial fraud affecting individual victims. The crime involves international organised gangs who target users of dating websites, creating fake profiles and trying to establish trust with victims in order to extract large sums of money. The police consider it a serious crime, but almost no previous research had examined it. The project set out to identify risk factors and characteristics of victims. It also generated knowledge on prevalence rates; how victims were emotionally affected by the scam; and the psychological processes involved in the scam. It found that scam victims often did not believe they were being defrauded, and were susceptible to re-victimisation.</p> <p>The work represents collaboration between Buchanan (Professor of Psychology at Westminster) and Whitty (at Leicester). All the research and impact took place since 2008 and was shared across the two collaborating institutions. Buchanan led on the first study and contributed significantly to all work described here.</p> <p>The first study (Buchanan &amp; Whitty, 2013) involved large online surveys of scam victims and non-victim dating website users. Findings included:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Psychological variables predicted victimhood only to a limited extent. While victims' beliefs about romance were associated with victimisation, attempts at prevention by targeting vulnerable individuals were unlikely to be successful;</li> <li>Previous police beliefs about those most likely to be targeted (older heterosexual women) were incorrect and other demographic groups were equally at risk;</li> <li>Considerable emotional distress was caused even among victims who had not lost money, due to their attachment to the scammer, which has important implications for the treatment of victims.</li> </ol> <p>The researchers also designed a survey (which polling organisation YouGov was commissioned to conduct) of national prevalence rates and public awareness of online dating scams. This found prevalence of romance scams was much higher than previously thought, with estimates of 200,000 victims in the UK (Whitty &amp; Buchanan, 2012). This attracted considerable media coverage.</p> <p>A further study involved interviewing victims about their experiences, with findings that reinforced those described above. Furthermore, it was found that victims were highly vulnerable to both follow-up scams and revictimisation. The work also examined persuasive techniques employed by scammers.</p> <p>When victims report this crime the local police are often unsure of how to deal with it and do not comprehend the victim's trauma. To date, victims have not been treated differently to any other fraud case - the legal system does not recognise the stress they experience over and above that of financial loss. Given the lack of understanding of the trauma endured by victims of this crime, there has been uncertainty as to how to treat them. Therefore, a second phase of the academic work sought to apply the findings from Phase 1 in practical settings. Funded by an ESRC follow-on grant, this involved working directly with partners including the Serious Organised Crime Agency and the National Policing Improvement Agency, to improve current policing practice in dealing with</p>

victims of the online romance scam.

### 3. References to the research

The body of work that identified risk factors for, and outcomes of, romance fraud victimisation is contained in two peer-reviewed papers in established international journals:

- Buchanan, T., & Whitty, M. T. (2013). The online dating romance scam: causes and consequences of victimhood. *Psychology, Crime and Law*. doi:10.1080/1068316X.2013.772180. [2012 impact factor 1.305, official journal of European Association of Psychology and Law].
- Whitty, M. T., & Buchanan, T. (2012). The Online Romance Scam: A Serious Cybercrime. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(3), 181-183. doi:10.1089/cyber.2011.0352. [2012 impact factor 1.842. Paper published as a short report to fast-track publication, given the importance of its findings; law enforcement partners wanted rapid dissemination and media coverage].

The work reported in these papers was funded by two ESRC grants awarded in open competition. Buchanan was co-investigator and co-wrote both applications.

- Whitty, M. T., & Buchanan, T. (December 2010-November 2011). *An examination of the online romance scam*. Research project supported by ESRC Award No.: RES-000-22-4022, £79,552.51
- Whitty, M. T., & Buchanan, T. (February 2012-April 2013). Development of the online romance scam toolkits for the public sector. Follow-on project supported by ESRC Award No. ES/J010863/1, £77,544.81.

The end-of-award report for the first grant was rated as “*Outstanding*” in the final ESRC evaluation.

'Introducers' comments from the ESRC evaluation process for the second grant specifically mentioned the impact value of the project: *"All reviewers strongly supportive of proposal in terms of impact on user communities. Overall an outstanding, timely and potentially high impact proposal."*

Findings were featured in the ESRC publication 'Society Now' (summer 2012). The main project findings were also press-released by the British Psychological Society in 2012 and by the ESRC in 2013.

### 4. Details of the impact

Impact was achieved via four main routes:

- A non-technical report summarising the research findings, sent directly to interested parties (e.g. UK and international law enforcement, Home Office, Trading Standards, dating companies).
- Targeted briefings (e.g. to Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA), Home Office, UK and overseas dating industry).
- Direct work with law enforcement (especially SOCA), including Buchanan's external collaborator acting in consultancy roles – in that way the research done at Westminster was exploited externally to achieve impact.
- Press releases to generate publicity.

The research impacted on **practitioners and services**, with *professionals using the findings in their work*.

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Research findings on victim experiences (potential for repeat victimization, disbelief that they were being defrauded – Buchanan & Whitty, 2013) informed a SOCA initiative, with Devon and Cornwall police in spring 2013, trialling a new way to treat romance scam victims. Following intelligence-led identification of likely victims, letters (content of which was informed by the research) were sent to 200 likely victims with the goal of preventing further financial loss. Feedback suggested the letters were effective in preventing further small sums being lost. Subsequently, victims losing large amounts of money, plus associates such as family, were invited to a meeting with SOCA officers, police and Victim Support to receive information and peer support.

Several alerts and advisories drawing on the findings have been issued. SOCA alerts sent to online dating companies (May 2011) and Neighbourhood Watch (July 2011) were informed by the research, as were other materials (Metropolitan Police fraud alert web pages; Action Fraud web pages).

Additionally, *professional training has been influenced*. City of London Police (national lead force on fraud) run 3-week intensive National Fraud Courses for groups of 30-50 officers. The findings were included in two sessions in 2012 and 2013, with advice given on dealing with romance scam victims (e.g. considering psychological impact, revictimisation).

The findings impacted the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA)'s design of a Fraud Learning Programme for delivery by the National Centre for Applied Learning Technologies to police forces across England and Wales. Buchanan's input to an NPIA meeting led to the learning descriptors for "First Responders" (the first Police officer / employee a victim comes into contact with) changing to include how to treat / support victims, including information about re-victimisation (Buchanan & Whitty, 2013). A scenario based on romance scams is also incorporated in course materials.

There was also impact on **society, culture and creativity**. In 2011, the prevalence findings were covered in newspapers (e.g. Guardian, Telegraph), online (BBC News, Channel 4 News, Sky News websites), radio (e.g. Buchanan was interviewed on BBC Radio London Breakfast and Dublin's Phantom 105.2, and a number of other broadcasts covered the findings) and television (e.g. BBC Breakfast, The One Show) coverage. On 28/11/2011 an article about the research was the 3<sup>rd</sup> most read on the BBC News website.

As a consequence, *public understanding improved*. Following the main television and radio coverage, a YouGov survey found the proportion of respondents knowing about online romance scams who had heard about them via these media had increased compared to an earlier survey. The proportion of people made aware of romance scams by television rose from 48% to 52%. The proportion hearing via radio rose from 11% to 15%.

Beyond reporting of the findings, *public debate was stimulated* without input from the researchers (e.g. discussion on Vanessa Feltz' BBC Radio London phone-in show), and even satirical comedy (Radio 4 News Quiz) drew on the work.

Media coverage also led a number of victims (or their relatives) to contact the researchers seeking advice. Direct guidance was provided to such individuals (e.g. they were fraud victims and should contact police).

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Impact on activities of the Serious Organised Crime Agency [text removed for publication].
2. Impact on Metropolitan Police [text removed for publication].

## Impact case study (REF3b)

3. Input to London City Police National Fraud Course can be corroborated by Contact 3 - Economic and Fraud Training Academy, City of London Police.
4. Input to National Policing Improvement Agency training materials design can be corroborated by Contact 4. As an alternative source, documents relating to the meeting are held on file at University of Westminster; including versions of the learning outcomes from before and after Buchanan's input.
5. Sources related to media coverage:
  - a) Portfolio of materials related to media coverage, held on file at University of Westminster, including: SOCA press release citing Westminster involvement (also available at <http://www.soca.gov.uk/news/357-romance-scams-200000-british-victims> ); details of sample media interview requests; copy of BBC website coverage (also available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-15093293> ); copies of various media coverage.
  - b) Copies of YouGov survey results from before and after media coverage, held on file at University of Westminster.
6. Copy of the non-technical report sent to key players (law enforcement etc.) as a route to impact:

Available from [http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/media/people/monica-whitty/Whitty\\_romance\\_scam\\_report.pdf](http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/media/people/monica-whitty/Whitty_romance_scam_report.pdf) and copy held on file at University of Westminster.
7. Contacts from, and direct guidance to victims and associates:

Samples of emails and letters from victims are held on file at University of Westminster.