

<b>Institution: University of Leicester</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 36 Communication Cultural and Media Studies
<b>Title of case study:</b> Confronting online dating scams: working with police and the industry
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Online dating scams have claimed an estimated 230,000 victims in the UK. This study demonstrates how research by the Unit has substantially increased understanding and public awareness of this relatively new and under-reported crime, and helped the police and the online dating industry to address it more effectively. The major beneficiaries of the research, which has attracted international attention, have been:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the police, nationally and internationally, through assistance, training and advice received on combating the crime and supporting victims;</li> <li>- the victims, through improvement in the quality of support available to them;</li> <li>- the public generally, through heightened awareness of the scam.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>This research was the first significant academic work on a serious mass-marketing fraud known as the Online Dating Romance Scam. This type of fraud involves international, organised criminal gangs who target users of dating websites and social networking sites, creating fake profiles and trying to extract large sums of money from victims.</p> <p>Professor Monica Whitty (University of Leicester from December 2010) was the Principal Investigator on two ESRC projects. Professor T. Buchanan (University of Westminster) was the co-investigator.</p> <p>The first project included both quantitative and qualitative studies, involving the surveying and interviewing of victims and conducting an analysis of their online accounts. The principal findings and outcomes were:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The development of a model used to explain the stages and persuasive techniques employed by criminals, which has important implications for prevention of this crime (1);</li> <li>b. The type of profile criminals created in order to attract victims had important implications for prevention of this crime (1,2);</li> <li>c. The strong attachment to the criminal formed by the victim made the scam difficult to break and often led to re-victimisation (2, 6);</li> <li>d. The psychological impact on both financial and non-financial victims (e.g., suicidal feelings, post-traumatic stress) was considerable, due to their attachment to the fake persona and the loss of money. This had important implications for the treatment of victims and sentencing of criminals (3,6);</li> <li>e. Some victims suffered sexual abuse, sometimes accompanied by blackmail, which had important implications for the treatment of victims (4,6);</li> <li>f. Support for victims from family, friends and law enforcement officers was often lacking, the blame attached to the victim being a contributory factor (4);</li> <li>g. Victims were inclined to transfer their affections from the criminal to law enforcement officers with important implications for police practice (3, 6);</li> <li>h. Psychological variables predicted victimhood only to a limited extent (5);</li> <li>i. The previous assumptions of law enforcement about those most likely to be targeted (older heterosexual women) were incorrect and other demographic groups were found to be equally at risk (5, 6).</li> </ol> <p>In July 2011, Professor Whitty, together with the Serious Organised Crime Agency and Professor Buchanan ran a survey with YouGov (funded by the University) to determine the national prevalence rates and public awareness of the scam (3). This revealed that the prevalence rate was</p>

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approximately 230,000 in Great Britain, which was much higher than originally thought. Action Fraud - the UK's national fraud and internet crime reporting centre - had estimated 900 victims. The third project (commencing December 2011), led by Whitty and with Buchanan, and in conjunction with the Serious Organised Crime Agency, Northern Ireland Police Authority, Association of Chief Police Officers and Buchanan, involved the development and evaluation of training packages for the police in the UK. This was funded by the ESRC as a follow-on grant specifically intended to support "knowledge exchange and impact generating activities from a specific piece of research". Findings from the previous studies were incorporated into training packages designed to improve 'public protection' (see section 4).

**3. References to the research**Grants:

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. (December 2011-November 2012). 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.

Publications:

1. Whitty, M. T. (2013). The Scammers Persuasive Techniques Model: Development of a stage model to explain the online dating romance scam. *British Journal of Criminology*. doi:10.1093/bjc/azt009
2. Whitty, M. T. (2013). Anatomy of the online dating romance scam. *Security Journal*. doi:10.1057/sj.2012.57
3. Whitty, M. T., & Buchanan, T. (2012). The Online Dating Romance Scam: A Serious Crime. *CyberPsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 15(3), 181-183. doi:10.1089/cyber.2011.0352
4. Whitty, M. T., & Buchanan, T. (2012). The Psychology of the Online Dating Romance Scam Report. University of Leicester. [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)
5. Buchanan, T., & Whitty, M. T. (2013). The online dating romance scam: Causes and consequences of victimhood. *Psychology, Crime & Law*. doi:10.1080/1068316X.2013.772180
6. Whitty, M. (2012). True Romance? Executive feature. *Police Professional*, July 19, 2012. [www.policeprofessional.com](http://www.policeprofessional.com)

**4. Details of the impact**

As many as 200,000 people living in Britain may have fallen victim to online romance scams – mass market fraud where criminals set up fake identities using stolen photographs (often of models or army officers) – and pretend to become romantically involved with their victim. At some point during the 'relationship' – which is often conducted via dating and social networking sites – the fraudsters claim to be in urgent need of money. Many scam victims have been persuaded to part with large sums before their suspicions are aroused.

Law enforcement agencies believe that this type of crime often goes unreported; usually because victims feel embarrassed at being duped and sometimes because victims still hope the relationship might turn out to be genuine.

According to SOCA's [text removed for publication] Senior Manager for Fraud Prevention, some victims "have lost nearly every penny they had, been robbed of their self-respect, and in some cases, committed suicide after being exploited, relentlessly, by these criminals".

University of Leicester research has played a key role in work in identifying the scale of this problem and developing effective strategies for supporting victims and preventing the crime.

Training

Training packages for the police (2011-2012): Findings from the University's research were incorporated into police training packages designed to improve 'public protection' in areas such as

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Child Abuse, Trafficking, Stalking and Fraud. First responders, CID and Fraud Academy officers were also issued with guidelines – tested in a UK court case – on how to treat victims of this particular crime.

London City Police National Fraud Course (2012 - ongoing): This three-week intensive course trains groups of 30-50 police in how to deal with fraud. In 2012 and 2013 Whitty presented her research in two training sessions and provided suggestions on how police might better deal with victims of online romance scams (e.g. by considering transference effect, psychological impact and re-victimisation).

Co-operation with law enforcement bodies

Metropolitan Police Operation Podium (2012-2013): A criminal residing in the UK was brought to trial and eventually pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit fraud by misrepresentation. Some 62 victims were identified (including 18 women willing to assist police with prosecution), from America, Canada and Trinidad and Tobago.

Using her project's findings, Whitty advised the Metropolitan Police on how best to debrief the victims and gave on-going support for an international prosecution. Victims were frequently in denial initially and needed encouragement to accept that the relationship had been fraudulent, as well as the support which their families could not always give.

Whitty advised on support agencies in the victims' countries, and alerted police to the 'transference effect'; an effect where a female victim transfers the romantic feelings she had for the criminal on to the male officer dealing with her case. In the light of Whitty's advice (and the fact that transference among three victims had been going unrecognised by police), a female family liaison officer was deployed to deal with these victims. The judge's sentencing decision was informed by Whitty's report.

Ghana prosecution by the Serious Organised Crime Agency (2011-ongoing): Whitty collaborated with SOCA in preparing victims appearing in a dating scam court case in Ghana. The prosecution team draw on the research's findings to refute defence arguments that the victims were 'mentally unstable' and therefore to blame.

Establishment of the Economic Crime Unit (for new National Crime Agency) (2012): Whitty and three other UK academics provided suggestions based on the research on appropriate priorities for the new Economic Crime Unit established in 2013. Whitty suggested that the Unit should investigate re-victimisation and the phenomenon of victims turning to crime to recoup their losses.

International Mass Marketing Fraud Working Group (2011-ongoing): This group consists of representatives of law enforcement agencies worldwide (e.g., Serious Organised Crime Agency, FBI, Federal Trade Authority, Secret Service, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Netherlands Police, the Queensland Police, Ghanaian police and Nigerian Police). Its members exchange information on mass marketing fraud and on strategies to prevent it. Whitty is the only academic representative and has presented her work to the group on several occasions. Her input has helped to develop strategies on how to prevent online romance scams and support its victims (for example, advising on the stages involved, prevention messages, which victims need to be considered as vulnerable and on what type of support victims need).

Victim Support

Breaking news to victims and providing support: SOCA and Devon and Cornwall police (2012-2013): Research revealed that those individuals who have been scammed often become repeat victims and lack the social support typically available to victims of other crimes.

SOCA initiated a trial to determine the best way to break the news to potential victims and support those who had fallen prey to the crime, once they had accepted they were victims.

With Whitty's help SOCA sent letters to 50 victims in one geographical area in the hope of preventing them from sending money to the scammers. All victims were encouraged to attend a meeting with SOCA, the police, Victim Support and Whitty. The five who attended, along with close friends and carers, were informed about the scam. A peer support group was formed and all

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but one of the victims who attended the event continued sending money.

**Raising public awareness and understanding**

Whitty and [text removed for publication] have made several appearances on radio and TV including BBC Breakfast, Today, The One Show and You've Been Scammed). At one point, the findings made third spot on the BBC News website and, surveys carried out by Whitty before and after the media coverage, revealed that public awareness had significantly increased (48% to 52% via television; 11%-15% via radio). Whitty receives approximately two emails a week from victims thanking her for media appearances and for helping to improve understanding of romance scams.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

*SOCA citing joint Leicester and SOCA research:*

<http://www.soca.gov.uk/news/357-romance-scams-200000-british-victims>

*Action Fraud website (some of the points here were advised from our research):*

<http://www.actionfraud.police.uk/fraud-az-romance-scams>

*ESRC (lists impacts for the first study):*

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-000-22-4022/read>

*Training packages for the police (2011-2012):*

Source to corroborate claim: Senior Training Manager at College of Policing

*Metropolitan Police Operation Podium (2012-2013):*

Source to corroborate claim: Detective Constable, Specialist Crime Directorate

*Breaking news to victims and providing of support and Ghana prosecution by the Serious Organised Crime Agency (2011-ongoing):*

Senior Manager, Fraud, Intervention; Serious Organised Crime Agency

*Establishment of the Economic Crime Unit (for new National Crime Agency) (2012):*

Source to corroborate claim: Director of Interventions, UK National Fraud Authority

*Raising public awareness and understanding (2011):*

Links to example media coverage can be found here:

<http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/media/people/monica-whitty/online-dating-romance-scam-project>

*London City Police National Fraud Course (2012-ongoing):*

Source to corroborate claim: Senior Lecturer, Economic Crime and Fraud Training Academy