

Victims of online dating scams feel doubly traumatized

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Online dating scammers groom their victims by developing 'hyper-personal' relationships which can leave victims feeling doubly traumatised.

This is one of the findings of a study by Professor Monica Whitty, of the University of Leicester, who presents her research at the British Psychological Society Annual Conference today, held at the Grand Connaught Rooms, London (18-20 April).

The research, part of a larger study supported by the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA), focused on fraud where criminals set up fake identities using stolen photographs (often of models or army officers) and pretend to develop a [romantic relationship](#) with their victim. This is often done using [online dating sites](#) and [social networking sites](#). At some point during the relationship they pretend to be in urgent need of [money](#) and ask for help. Many [victims](#) have been persuaded to part with large sums of money before their suspicions are aroused.

To find out what techniques scammers use 15 victims were interviewed (11 women; four men). Professor Whitty asked them about their relationship history; what [psychological state](#) they were in before the [scam](#); the full description of the scam; why they believe they were persuaded to part with money (if they did); details of what happened after the scam (e.g. how police dealt with it); how they were psychologically affected by the scam; and what their current state is.

The results showed that basic marketing techniques were used to groom victims, increasing the feelings of a genuine relationship and leaving victims susceptible to fraud.

Professor Whitty said: "Our data suggests that the numbers of British victims of this relatively new crime is much higher than reported incidents show. It also confirms law enforcement suspicions that this is an underreported crime, and thus more serious than first thought.

"This is a concern not solely because people are losing large sums of money to these criminals, but also because of the [psychological impact](#) experienced by victims of this crime. It is our view that the trauma caused by this scam is worse than any other, because of the 'double hit' experienced by the victims – loss of money and loss of 'romantic relationship.'"

Elsewhere in the study Dr Tom Buchanan (University of Westminster) looked at the psychological characteristics of victims. Over 1000 participants answered an online questionnaire. The responses showed that people with strong romantic beliefs, who idealised romantic partners were most likely to fall prey to online scammers.

Provided by University of Leicester

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