
AMID THE THREAT OF CYBERCRIME: Pastoral Care's Role in Combating Online Romance Scams

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Abstract

Online romance scams have emerged as a pervasive and emotionally devastating form of fraud in the digital age. These scams exploit individuals emotionally, financially, and psychologically, leaving victims traumatized and financially crippled. Online romance scams involve perpetrators assuming false identities to establish fake romantic relationships with unsuspecting individuals, ultimately leading to financial exploitation. This research delves into the concept of pastoral care as a holistic approach to mitigating the risk of online romance scams and supporting victims. Online romance scams represent a modern challenge with profound emotional and financial consequences. Internet love scams are a sort of organized crime that takes place on the internet. It may be viewed as a crime involving a deliberate breach of the law using deceit in order to obtain monetary advantage from specific victims. Many examples of Internet love scams go undetected. Pastoral care, with its holistic approach, offers a promising avenue for prevention and support. By addressing emotional, psychological, spiritual, and financial aspects, pastoral care can empower individuals and communities to guard against these scams and provide much-needed solace and recovery for victims. Additionally, the impact of pastoral care contributes to the resilience of communities in the face of this evolving threat.

Keywords: Pastoral care, Online romance scams, Cybercrime, Digital violence

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the internet has brought about a profound transformation in how people connect and form relationships. Amid the vast opportunities for genuine human connection, a darker and more insidious phenomenon has emerged: online romance scams.¹ At the heart of these scams lies digital deception, a complex web of falsehoods and manipulations that prey upon the hopes and emotions of individuals seeking love and companionship in the virtual world. Internet-based social media and smartphones are becoming increasingly important in our personal and social lives. Rosenfield argues

¹ Edith Huber and Roman H. Brandtweiner, "Cyberstalking," in *Encyclopedia of Criminal Activities and the Deep Web* (IGI Global, 2020), 628–39, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-9715-5.ch043>.

on whether new technologies increase or harm our primary partnerships' commitment and duration.²

Relationships development have altered dramatically since the emergence of the Internet, social media, and other technology. This is especially true when it comes to seeking romantic or "hook-up" partners. Bryant mentions that along with traditional dating, online dating services have become popular means to meet new people. Online dating websites and mobile dating apps ("apps") are examples of cyber-dating.³ Online dating services are distinguished by extensive profiles, the ability to search and view many dating matches, and the ability to search for particular criteria.

The methods by which online dating sites commonly implement access, communication, and matching services do not necessarily promote romantic outcomes; in fact, they can impair such outcomes. In terms of accessibility, meeting potential partners through online dating profiles reduces three-dimensional people to two-dimensional displays of information, and these displays fail to capture the experiential aspects of social interaction that are critical to determining compatibility with potential partners. Furthermore, having instant access to a huge pool of possible mates might evoke an evaluative, assessment-oriented attitude, leading online daters to objectify potential partners and possibly impair their readiness to commit to one of them. It can also lead to people making rash, ill-advised selections when choosing from a big pool of possible mates.⁴

Finkel mentions the additional causes that may have prompted an increase in online dating include (a) technological changes that make the Internet more accessible, efficient, and fun; (b) the pervasiveness of media messages, including testimonials from successful couples, about finding the perfect partner through dating sites; and (c) social network diffusion effects, which are facilitated by social network sites and in which behavioral tendencies propagated from person to person.⁵ Online daters are more likely to be employed than non-daters, although they are not always paid well. Those with

² Michael Rosenfield, "Marriage, Choice, and Couplehood in the Age of the Internet," *Sociological Science* 4 (2017): 490–510, <https://doi.org/10.15195/v4.a20>.

³ Katherine Bryant and Pavica Sheldon, "Cyber Dating in the Age of Mobile Apps: Understanding Motives, Attitudes, and Characteristics of Users," *American Communication Journal* 19, no. 2 (2017), <https://www.csus.edu/faculty/m/fred.molitor/docs/cyber-dating.pdf>.

⁴ Eli J. Finkel et al., "Online Dating," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 13, no. 1 (January 7, 2012): 3–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612436522>.

⁵ Finkel et al.

lesser salaries are somewhat more likely to date online. Much of this disparity might be attributed to the overall youth of online daters, who have not yet reached their prime earning years. There are no statistically significant variations in online dating use across racial and ethnic groups or education levels, which may be attributed to the very small sample size.⁶

While family and friends are the most trustworthy social relationships, Internet dating and hookup applications like Tinder, Match.Com, and eHarmony are owned by faceless businesses. Why would people rely more on Tinder or Match.Com matches, and why might a rise in online dating displace rather than enhance the function of dating advice from one's mother, friend, or friend's friend?⁷ The apparent substitution of meeting through friends by meeting online reflects a technologically driven disintermediation trend. Personal mediators, generally friends or family members, were once required to introduce individuals to new people. Friends and relatives are used less as intermediaries now that the Internet provides a vast selection of possible companions. For most of the late twentieth century, the function of the family as a matchmaker was already in decline, as later marriage ages and young adult independence removed dating and matching from parental supervision.⁸

Even while most online daters have good perceptions of the practice, many have had terrible experiences with it. Half of online daters (54%) believe that someone else significantly misrepresented themselves in their profile. More severely, 28% of online daters have been harassed or made uncomfortable by someone they met through an online dating site or app. Women are far more likely than males to have had uncomfortable contact through online dating sites or apps: 42% of female online daters have had this form of contact at some time, compared to 17% of men.⁹ Targets in cybercrime might include personal information or financial assets, whereas guardians

⁶ Mary Madden and Amanda Lenhart, "Americans Who Are Seeking Romance Use the Internet to Help Them in Their Search, but There Is Still Widespread Public Concern about the Safety of Online Dating" (Washington, D.C., 2006), https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/media/Files/Reports/2006/PIP_Online_Dating.pdf.pdf.

⁷ Michael J. Rosenfeld, Reuben J. Thomas, and Sonia Hausen, "Disintermediating Your Friends: How Online Dating in the United States Displaces Other Ways of Meeting," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 36 (September 3, 2019): 17753–58, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908630116>.

⁸ Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Hausen.

⁹ Aaron Smith and Maeve Duggan, "Online Dating & Relationships" (Washington, D.C., 2014), <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Online-Dating.aspx%0A>.

can include computer users, antivirus software, identity authentication, or third parties such as network administrators and financial organizations.¹⁰

As a result, Internet dating programs touch a large number of individuals in today's society. An individual may not be directly affected, but even if they do not utilize online dating, their friends, siblings, and peers may be. This introduces kids to online dating without actively engaging them, but it might pique their interest in online dating and its nature. To emphasize a previous point, the recent development in online dating will expose and influence more people than is already the case.¹¹ While there are several reasons why people choose to engage in online dating, little is known about the reasons why people utilize mobile dating apps. As a result, this study employs pastoral care with a holistic approach to preventing online romance scammers. The purpose is to demonstrate pastoral care for the victims of online romance scammers.

Systematic reviews are critical in social research. They can not only assist in summarizing current knowledge on a specific topic, but they can also uncover flaws within primary research, which helps influence how future studies are done. By bringing together efforts to answer various problems that may be difficult to answer within individual research, they can also aid in the development of more developed theoretical frameworks or expose shortcomings in existing ones. However, such assessments have limits in that the procedure that makes them thorough and transparent may leave out crucial findings that fall out of scope. We conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the literature to determine the present level of knowledge concerning online romance scams. Through a thorough review, we hope to focus the pastoral care eye on the problem. Systematic reviews extend beyond standard literature reviews to include systematic, organized, and clear processes for obtaining and assessing relevant current knowledge.

¹⁰ Isabella Voce and Anthony Morgan, *Online Behaviour, Life Stressors and Profit-Motivated Cybercrime Victimization* (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.52922/ti77062>.

¹¹ Lindsey Bryden T., "Online Dating Applications and the Uses and Gratifications Theory" (Eastern Washington University, 2017), <http://dc.ewu.edu/theses>.

DISCUSSION

Online Romance Scams: A Modern Betrayal

Online romance scams are a type of fraud that has become more common in many nations as social media and dating applications have grown in popularity. Scammers construct bogus Internet accounts and engage in a romantic connection with the victim for 6-8 months, forming a strong emotional tie to extract financial resources in a manipulative dynamic. Victims of online romance scams suffer the combined agony of losing money and a relationship, and they frequently feel humiliated when they discover the deception.¹²

Online dating services are accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, allowing daters to remotely peruse profiles at their leisure, and the Internet's anonymity feature allows individuals to participate quietly in dating without the scrutiny of others or the fear of stigma. Cyberstalking, cyberbullying, and romance fraud are all new types of crime that have infiltrated our daily lives. Individuals who fall victim to one type of online deception tend to be more prone to fall victim to another, and digital literacy and cognitive reflectiveness can indicate general vulnerability to online deception.¹³

Some analysts believe that the Internet dating market got off to a poor start due to the early stigma, which included unfavorable attitudes based on printed personal adverts. Because early adopters of online dating were stigmatized, users were embarrassed to admit they were trying it, and as a result, "the industry for a long time enjoyed almost no benefit of word-of-mouth referrals and moved along at a painfully slow growth rate, taking that much longer to reach a critical mass."¹⁴

Lazarus argues with the internet expansion in many regions of the world, particularly in clusters where online romance fraud is frequently blamed, such as West Africa, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe.¹⁵ Although the broad idea of "romance fraud," "fraud," or "scams" in general predates the introduction of internet technology, publications focus on pastoral care in the context of romance scammer victims. Instead,

¹² Anna Coluccia et al., "Online Romance Scams: Relational Dynamics and Psychological Characteristics of the Victims and Scammers. A Scoping Review," *Clinical Practice & Epidemiology in Mental Health* 16, no. 1 (April 20, 2020): 24–35, <https://doi.org/10.2174/1745017902016010024>.

¹³ Finkel et al., "Online Dating."

¹⁴ Finkel et al.

¹⁵ Suleman Lazarus et al., "What Do We Know about Online Romance Fraud Studies? A Systematic Review of the Empirical Literature (2000 to 2021)," *Journal of Economic Criminology* 2 (December 2023): 100013, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeconc.2023.100013>.

the emphasis here is on new (digital) means of forming relationships, which have inevitably increased the opportunities for offending by allowing fraudsters and their victims to interact more easily and across greater geographical distances, as well as making subterfuges easier, for example, through profiles that bear no correspondence to the offender's appearance, characteristics, or even sex.¹⁶

Based on these investigations, Whitty identified seven stages of online romance fraud. The steps are as follows: (1) victim motivation to seek an ideal mate, (2) presentation of an ideal profile to victims, (3) grooming process, (4) sting, (5) scam continuance, (6) sexual abuse, and (7) re-victimization. These steps combine to produce the 'scammers persuasive methods' paradigm. This leads to the identification of three important fraudsters' techniques: "foot-in-the-door," "door-in-the-face," and "sexual image-based abuse."¹⁷ Online romance scams represent a sophisticated form of fraud in which criminals assume false identities, posing as potential romantic partners, often on dating websites or social media platforms. Their primary aim is financial gain, achieved by cultivating a sense of intimacy and trust with their victims, who are unaware of the deceit. These scams typically follow a well-worn pattern:

1. False Identities: Scammers create fictitious profiles, complete with fake names, photos, and personal stories. They may use stolen images to craft an attractive persona. Individuals who conduct online romance fraud employ a variety of techniques depending on the gender they pretend to be on their profile. To lure potential victims, female profiles frequently utilize alluring images from the internet or of themselves. Female profiles convey their disdain for money by claiming to be the kid of "a king or tribal leader." Male profiles, on the other hand, usually focus on portraying an "elitist status" and talking about their numerous trips to develop an appealing and glamorous character. They can construct bogus internet accounts and appear to be someone they are not in the virtual world.¹⁸

¹⁶ Aunshul Rege, "What's Love Got to Do with It? Exploring Online Dating Scams and Identity Fraud," *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* 3, no. 2 (2009): 494–512, <https://www.cybercrimejournal.com/pdf/AunshulIJCCJuly2009.pdf>.

¹⁷ M. T. Whitty, "The Scammers Persuasive Techniques Model: Development of a Stage Model to Explain the Online Dating Romance Scam," *British Journal of Criminology* 53, no. 4 (July 1, 2013): 665–84, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azt009>.

¹⁸ Lazarus et al., "What Do We Know about Online Romance Fraud Studies? A Systematic Review of the Empirical Literature (2000 to 2021)."

2. Grooming and Emotional Manipulation: Once a connection is established, scammers employ psychological tactics to groom their victims emotionally. They shower them with affection, compliments, and promises of a future together, creating a deep sense of attachment. After winning the victim's confidence, the 'foot-in-the-door' strategy entails initially asking for a little payment and then creating situations needing larger quantities. The 'face-in-the-door' method entails first asking for a large quantity of money. Following the initial request, the victim is asked for less money to persuade them to give over their finances. Following the grooming phase, the offender generally initiates a crisis phase. This includes them purposely fabricating fake information, such as the victim losing their parents, requiring travel documents, or having a loved one in the hospital and being requested to pay money. Another tactic used by criminals is to get sexually explicit webcam videos of the target individual under the guise of a love relationship. Following that, the offender uses this approach to extort money from the victim (i.e., image-based sexual assault).¹⁹

3. The Financial Sting: As the emotional bond strengthens, scammers introduce financial requests, often framed as urgent and distressing situations. Victims, believing they are helping a loved one, willingly send money, gift cards, or even personal information. This confession of love, and maybe the commencement of reciprocal affirmations, is frequently the trigger for the following stage of the hoax. The scammer will provide an imagined scenario that will serve as a believable framework for a money request. The scammer is forced to fly to another nation for some particular or terrible cause, such as a sudden death. When this 'emergency' occurs, the victim is requested to transfer money overseas to assist in a variety of ways. One option is to pay medical costs or fees or to buy a plane ticket to see the victim. The fraudster will claim that there is now no money accessible or that the scammer does not have access to them.²⁰

4. Revelation and Devastation: Eventually, the scammer's true intentions become clear. The victim is left not only heartbroken but also financially devastated, having often lost substantial sums of money. The primary goal of criminals in Internet love scams is to get money from their victims. Despite the length of the grooming process, Internet

¹⁹ Monica T Whitty, "Anatomy of the Online Dating Romance Scam," *Security Journal* 28, no. 4 (October 11, 2015): 443–55, <https://doi.org/10.1057/sj.2012.57>.

²⁰ Christian Kopp et al., "The Role of Love Stories in Romance Scams: A Qualitative Analysis of Fraudulent Profiles," *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* 9, no. 2 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.56227>.

love scams are quite lucrative, with criminals receiving huge quantities of money in a relatively short period of time. It is inexpensive since attackers just require basic computer literacy, access to computing equipment, and an Internet connection to entice potential victims.²¹ False identities, therefore, complicate possible arrests. Khader asserts that the yearning for an intimate companion is not limited to one gender, both men and women may be perpetrators of internet love frauds.²² The ability to use fraudulent credentials on online dating sites also enables criminals to adopt gender identities that differ from their own. Furthermore, men and women may establish scam groups to efficiently con victims of both genders, since women are said to be more competent than men at emotion-related communication online, whilst males are more inclined to be forceful and risk-taking than women.

Process of Romance Fraud

Anesa mentions scammers begin relationships with the purpose of defrauding their victims and frequently use appeals to visceral emotions, resulting in decreased motivation for information processing. In this regard, self-representations are explicitly positive and tend to center on stereotypical traits of masculinity, such as money and prestige, or, conversely, of femininity (e.g., beauty and caring qualities).²³ The appeal to strong emotions is critical to the correspondence's success. The scammer tries to improve his reputation as someone who isn't just trying to flirt, and he concentrates on personal affinities that appeal to romantic fantasies. In the courting stage, closeness grows, and trust is established, and this stage is linked to Whitty quotes from Anesa that refer to the grooming stage. Relationships of an ideal future relationship are provided, and the victim's psychology is thoroughly analyzed, so that the fake stories delivered correspond to their wishes and dreams.²⁴

The scammer always acts sympathetically and seeks to give the victim the feeling that the two are perfectly aligned in their shared perspective on life. The scammer's claims get increasingly romantic, and some authors claim that a confession of love is

²¹ Majeed Khader and Poh Shu Yun, "A Multidisciplinary Approach to Understanding Internet Love Scams," in *The Psychology of Criminal and Antisocial Behavior* (Elsevier, 2017), 523–48, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-809287-3.00018-3>.

²² Khader and Yun.

²³ Patrizia Anesa, "Lovextortion: Persuasion Strategies in Romance Cybercrime," *Discourse, Context & Media* 35 (June 2020): 100398, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100398>.

²⁴ Anesa, "Lovextortion: Persuasion Strategies in Romance Cybercrime".

made within two weeks of initial contact.²⁵ The offenders' method is to construct phony identities on online dating sites or social media, each of which is geared to attract certain sorts of victim profiles. The next stage is to reach out to potential victims. Once an emotional connection with a victim is developed, attackers urge victims to private communications by using chat or email services that are not offered by the original dating or social networking sites. After establishing an exclusive communication channel, perpetrators progressively enhance closeness in the connection over time. As a result, trust grows to the point where criminals feel their victims would comply with money requests. This process varies from victim to victim, lasting anywhere from a few weeks to months or even years. Internet love scammers use blackmail as an alternative tactic.²⁶

Tan asserts strong emotions are a sign of a genuine connection, which is built on romanticized archetypal love stories. Scammers also persistently and continuously build the target's dependency in order to create a type of emotional addiction. Because they believe they are in a genuine, intimate connection, they are unable to detect the indications that indicate the communication is false. This thus explains how victims respond positively to substantial monetary solicitations.²⁷

Although Advance Fee Fraud, from the standpoint of hackers, is similar to online romance fraud in terms of financial rewards, the effect on victims may differ. Romance fraud entails a level of emotional and sexual connection not often found in other forms of fraud, implying a higher direct influence on victims. Offenders, like victims of monetary losses, prefer to minimize the emotional suffering suffered by victims of romance fraud. This might be because these perpetrators regard internet fraud as "a game," "hunting," and "not a crime." Understanding the intricacies of online romance fraud necessitates addressing the different aspects involved, such as the offenders' attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews.²⁸

²⁵ Coluccia et al., "Online Romance Scams: Relational Dynamics and Psychological Characteristics of the Victims and Scammers. A Scoping Review."

²⁶ Anesa, "Lovextortion: Persuasion Strategies in Romance Cybercrime."

²⁷ Koon Hooi Tan and Yoong David, "Preying on Lonely Hearts: A Systematic Deconstruction of an Internet Romance Scammer's Online Lover Persona," *Journal of Modern Languages* 23, no. 1 (2017): 28–40, <https://jml.um.edu.my/article/view/3288>.

²⁸ Lazarus et al., "What Do We Know about Online Romance Fraud Studies? A Systematic Review of the Empirical Literature (2000 to 2021)."

The regular activities theory, proposed by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979), may also be beneficial in comprehending fraud. The idea focuses on criminal activities and the opportunity to do them. According to Cohen and Felson (1979), crime is situational and happens when three circumstances collide.²⁹ The first aspect is that perpetrators are motivated. These are those looking for a criminal opportunity. Victimization risks are thought to be proportional to an individual's exposure to offenders. The second aspect is desirable aims. Human targets are tempting to criminals, whether it be a vulnerable human or something valuable to take. Finally, there is a scarcity of skilled guardians. These are people "who, if present, would discourage a crime from occurring."³⁰

The Role of Pastoral Care

Christians must devise systems to either assist or protect themselves from this worldwide communication shift. The introduction of digital technology poses several obstacles to Christians' private, public, and professional lives. Many individuals are unaware of the presence of cyber violence. The majority of Christians in their safe havens of businesses, church meetings, and homes are unaware of their vulnerability to digital predators. This is because many individuals have never been personally exposed to cybercrime. Similarly, few individuals are aware of the processes put in place to deal with malicious cyber thieves.

Cyber violence manifests itself in the everyday lives of Christians on several fronts. Christians frequently use email to communicate sensitive and critical information to family members, friends, coworkers, and employers, among others. The crime scene is the finest place to identify a culprit and connect him to the crime in real-world criminal investigations. However, in automation or cybercrime, there may be no crime scene or multiple crime scenes, with shredded proof of the crime dispersed throughout

²⁹ Marcus Felson, "Routinely Activity Theory: The Theorist's Perspective.," in *Encyclopedia of Criminology and Deviant Behavior, Volume I: Historical, Conceptual and Theoretical* (Brunner-Routledge, 2001).

³⁰ Keith Durkin F. and Brinkman Richard, "FRAUD: A Crime Without Borders in A Postmodern World," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 35, no. 2 (2009), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41421358>.

cyberspace.³¹ Their main target is anyone, anytime, and anywhere in the world exposed to the internet.

My curiosity was piqued when I watched the investigative documentary produced by CTV W5, focusing on a daughter whose mother had fallen prey to a romance scam. Within this investigation, the daughter recounted the harrowing experience of her mother, a long-time widow who had been deceived twice by online romance scammers. The second deception led the mother to end up incarcerated in Hong Kong on drug smuggling charges, despite her being an unwitting victim in an online romance. To this day, she awaits judgment on her fate in a foreign land, far from her homeland, her status as a kind-hearted Christian contrasting sharply with the harsh reality of her victimization.³² This narrative unveils the grim reality that romance scams are intricately organized criminal activities, orchestrated by formidable syndicates operating behind the scenes.

To gain further insight into these scams, an examination of digital violence becomes imperative. Our online habits and confidence in digital technologies leave us vulnerable to cybercrime. To begin, understanding the methodology of committing crimes as well as the characteristics of specific crimes is crucial for reducing our vulnerability to advance-free fraud. The primary precepts of avoiding fraudsters are vigilance, caution, and skepticism, as you will question the legitimacy of calls, emails, blogs, and websites, among other features that may appear peculiar or need the disclosure of sensitive information. Jesus Christ's doctrine is against violence, and to avoid such uncalled-for violence while enjoying the benefits of digitalization, Christians need to be vigilant.³³ This vigilance involves in being cautious of potential scams and deceitful schemes from the cyber space.

It is a prevalent misperception that educated people are less prone to be victims. However, in the context of Internet love scams, intelligence and level of education are criteria that are independent of victim vulnerability since offenders' use sentimentality and emotional methods. Internet love scammers take advantage of the human urge for

³¹ Arap Chepkwony and Adam Kiplangat, "Violence in the Age of Technology: Theological Reflections on Cyber Crime," *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 5, no. 2 (April 13, 2022): 32–39, <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.5.2.613>.

³² Official W5. "The Cocaine Buttons: Romance Scam Victim in A Hongkong Prison for Drug Smuggling." YouTube Video, 44:37. March 5, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVww72qbKy0>

³³ Chepkwony and Kiplangat.

love and attachment in order to get money. As a result, people who are typically unable to meet this demand satisfactorily may become susceptible. Individuals who live alone, express widespread loneliness, stress, and/or emotional loss, have a history of violent relationships, and a tendency to idealize their romantic partners may be more vulnerable to victimization.³⁴ As a result, the victims of online romance scams often experience severe emotional distress, such as shame, grief, and betrayal, which can lead to prolonged psychological trauma.³⁵

Pastoral care, rooted in religious and spiritual principles, offers a unique form of support for victims by addressing their emotional and spiritual needs. The most powerful effect on self-efficacy was protective mechanism awareness. This shows that the more informed an online dater is about protective systems, the more confident they are in their ability to use them. Awareness of protective instruments was also linked to a higher impression of the mechanism's efficiency.³⁶

Pastoral care can be an important resource for victims of online romance scams. Victims of these scams often experience a double trauma of losing money and a relationship and may feel ashamed upon discovery of the scam. Here are some ways that pastoral care can help victims of online romance scams:

Provide emotional support. Victims of online romance scams may feel embarrassed or ashamed and may be hesitant to talk about their experience with friends or family. Pastoral care can provide a safe and non-judgmental space for victims to share their feelings and receive emotional support. Victims of online romance scams may feel embarrassed or ashamed and may be hesitant to talk about their experience with others. Pastoral care providers can provide a safe and non-judgmental space for victims to share their feelings and receive emotional support.

Wang mentions online dating fraud is a severe offense with serious consequences for the victim. The victim sustains a significant blow to his or her property and psyche, resulting in a sequence of anomalous psychological disorders and mental diseases. Although many victims go through the full fraud process online, many victims claim

³⁴ Whitty, "Anatomy of the Online Dating Romance Scam."

³⁵ Elisabeth Carter, "Distort, Extort, Deceive and Exploit: Exploring the Inner Workings of a Romance Fraud," *Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (ISTD)* 61 (2021): 283–302, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azaa072>.

³⁶ Veronica Luu, Lesley Land, and Wynne Chin, "Safeguarding against Romance Scams – Using Protection Motivation Theory," *Proceedings of the 25th European Conference on Information Systems*, 2017, 2429–44, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/301372423.pdf>.

comparable experiences to offline traumas such as actual relationship breakups and sexual assaults. Severe PTSD, sadness, and suicide ideation are among them.³⁷ There is little question that victims of fraud require more sophisticated psychological and spiritual care.

Offer spiritual guidance. For victims who are religious or spiritual, pastoral care can offer guidance and support that is grounded in their faith tradition. Pastoral care providers can help victims understand that they are not alone in their experience and that many people fall victim to online scams. This can help victims feel less ashamed and more empowered to seek help. Pastoral care providers can listen actively to victims of romance scams. They can create a safe space where victims can share their experiences and feelings without fear of judgment. By listening actively, pastoral care providers can help victims feel heard and understood. Pastoral care providers can provide comfort to victims of romance scams. They can offer words of encouragement and support, and they can help victims find meaning and purpose in their lives. Forgiveness can be an important part of the healing process for victims of romance scams. Pastoral care providers can encourage victims to forgive themselves and others involved in the scam. They can help victims find peace and closure through forgiveness. Pastoral care providers can provide hope to victims of romance scams. They can help victims see that there is a future beyond the scam, and they can help victims find ways to move forward with their lives.³⁸

Help victims process their experience. By practicing spiritual practices, victims of scams can find comfort, healing, and hope. Pastoral care providers can help victims of scams cope with their experiences by providing emotional support, encouraging professional help, helping victims rebuild their self-esteem, providing spiritual guidance, and connecting victims with resources. Victims of online romance scams may struggle to make sense of what happened to them and may have difficulty trusting others in the future. Pastoral care can help victims process their experience and work through any lingering feelings of betrayal or mistrust. Victims of online romance scams may struggle to make sense of what happened to them and may have difficulty trusting others in the

³⁷ Chenyang Wang, "Online Dating Scam Victims Psychological Impact Analysis," *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 4 (November 17, 2022): 149–54, <https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v4i.2740>.

³⁸ Wang.

future. Pastoral care can help victims process their experience and work through any lingering feelings of betrayal or mistrust.

To help victims of scams cope with their experiences, pastoral care providers can suggest the following spiritual practices: Prayer and meditation can help victims of scams find inner peace and calm. These practices can help victims connect with a higher power and find comfort in their faith. Forgiveness can be an important part of the healing process for victims of scams. Pastoral care providers can encourage victims to forgive themselves and others involved in the scam. They can help victims find peace and closure through forgiveness. Practicing gratitude can help victims of scams focus on the positive aspects of their lives. Pastoral care providers can encourage victims to focus on the things they are grateful for, such as their health, family, and friends. Serving others can help victims of scams find meaning and purpose in their lives. Pastoral care providers can encourage victims to volunteer their time and talents to help others in need. Being part of a community can help victims of scams feel supported and connected. Pastoral care providers can encourage victims to participate in community activities and events, and to connect with others who have had similar experiences.

Connect victims with resources. Pastoral care providers can help connect victims with resources such as financial counseling, legal assistance, and support groups for victims of online scams. Religious leaders are in a unique position to assist victims, particularly those who refuse to expose the abuse to secular professionals such as cops, physicians, and social workers. Church leaders typically have deep and trustworthy ties, access to families' homes, are familiar with families' history, and are frequently the source of support for victims.³⁹

Raising Awareness about Romance Scam. To raise awareness about romance scams, church leaders should prioritize comprehensive education without compromising the privacy of victims within the community who may have fallen prey to romance scammers. This educational effort is essential in preventing digital violations caused by romance scams.

There are several Facebook groups dedicated to addressing the issue of online scamming. These groups have a dual purpose: to expose the online profiles created by

³⁹ Sung Seek Moon and Woochan S. Shim, "Bridging Pastoral Counseling and Social Work Practice: An Exploratory Study of Pastors' Perceptions of and Responses to Intimate Partner Violence," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 29, no. 2 (May 5, 2010): 124–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426431003708253>.

scammers and to provide the latest information on how individuals can safeguard themselves from scams. Notable examples of these groups include 'Imposters,' 'Scammers Busted,' 'We Fighting Scammers and Imposters,' and 'Scammers and Hoaxes.'⁴⁰ There are many other valuable sources that we can explore to enhance community awareness.

To sum up, pastoral care providers have a unique role to play in combating romance scams. They can offer genuine friendship and be a source of authentic love and support. By creating a welcoming environment where members can find real connections, the church helps individuals avoid falling into the trap of counterfeit love from the digital world. This sense of community and genuine care can serve as a powerful deterrent against the allure of romance scammers, ultimately fostering a safer and more supportive congregation.

CONCLUSION

The pastoral care role in combating online romance scams in the internet world represents a holistic and empathetic strategy aimed at protecting vulnerable individuals from falling victim to these deceptive schemes. In summary, this approach recognizes the emotional and psychological vulnerabilities that scammers exploit and seeks to provide support, education, and guidance to individuals to reduce their risk of falling prey to online romance scams. Recognizing that potential victims often experience loneliness, emotional distress, or a desire for companionship, the approach acknowledges the importance of addressing these underlying vulnerabilities. Researchers argue that pastoral care emphasizes building trust and rapport with individuals susceptible to romance scams. Establishing strong relationships helps them feel valued and heard, reducing their susceptibility to falling for fraudulent advances. Educating individuals about the tactics employed by online scammers is essential. This includes teaching them to recognize red flags, such as inconsistent stories, reluctance to meet in person, or requests for money. Providing emotional support and a non-judgmental environment is crucial. Victims of romance scams often feel ashamed and embarrassed, making it essential to offer a safe space for them to share their

⁴⁰ Jessica Louise Marshall, "The Challenges Posed by Scammers to Online Support Groups: The 'Deserving' and the 'Undeserving' Victims of Scams. In: *New Perspectives on Cybercrime*," *Palgrave Studies in Cybercrime and Cybersecurity*, 2017, https://clouk.uclan.ac.uk/31163/?template=default_internal.

experiences. Encouraging individuals to engage with supportive communities or peer groups can help reduce their isolation. These groups can provide emotional support, share experiences, and offer guidance on online dating safety. Offering pastoral counseling or counseling services with a focus on emotional healing can be beneficial for those who have already fallen victim to scams. This support can aid in their recovery and rebuilding of self-esteem.

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