

Sounding Like an Angel, Attacking Like a Viper: Victimhood Construction in Scam Emails

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Abstract

Given the security and economic risk it poses to the global space, the phenomenon of cybercrime has enjoyed scholarly attention from different disciplines. However, no serious attention has been paid to victimhood construction in scam emails, particularly how scammers deploy linguistic/discursive resources to portray themselves as victims of ‘false’ circumstances to get the better part of their targets. Thus, this study, resting on van Dijk’s Critical Discourse Analysis and a fusion of insights from four socio-cognitive approaches to theories of persuasion, investigates the discursive strategies for achieving victimhood construction in scam emails. Data comprised excerpts from 20 purposively sampled emails retrieved from the researchers’ spam folders. To appeal to emotional sentiments, scammers often project themselves as victims of terminal diseases, orphanhood, corrupt political space or widowhood. Findings revealed actor description, number game, evidentiality, situation description, self-denigration, and power strategies, are prominent discursive elements deployed in creating victimhood in scam emails.

Key words: victimhood, cyber scam, persuasion, emails, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Resumen

El delito cibernético, dado el riesgo económico y de seguridad que representa, ha atraído la atención académica de diferentes disciplinas. Sin embargo, no se ha prestado seria atención a la construcción de victimismo en correos electrónicos fraudulentos, en particular a cómo los estafadores utilizan recursos lingüísticos/discursivos para presentarse como víctimas de circunstancias "falsas" para obtener un mayor beneficio. Este estudio, basado en el Análisis Crítico del Discurso de van Dijk y en una fusión de cuatro teorías de la persuasión, investiga las estrategias discursivas en la construcción de victimismo en 20 correos electrónicos recuperados de las carpetas de *spam* de los investigadores. Los hallazgos revelaron que los estafadores suelen proyectarse como víctimas de enfermedades terminales, orfandad, espacio político corrupto o viudez y que emplean la descripción del actor, el juego de números, la evidencialidad, la descripción de la situación, la autodenigración y las estrategias de poder al construir victimismo.

Palabras claves: victimismo, ciberdelito, persuasión, correos electrónicos, Análisis Crítico del Discurso

1 Introduction

One fact that has been established in the literature is that cyber scam constitutes a major security and economic threat to the global community (Chawki, 2009; Ajayi, 2022; Aborisade, 2023; Aborisade et al., 2024). As such, the phenomenon has been explored by scholars across different disciplines in the global space. The coverage of such multidisciplinary scholarship has included linguistic and cultural aspects of scam messages, such as generic structure (Barron 2006; Blommaert & Omoniyi, 2006; Kich, 2005), lexical and other linguistic features (Onyebadi & Park 2012; Schaffer 2012), persuasion and trust (Freiermuth 2011), globalisation (Blommaert & Omoniyi, 2006; Nikiforova & Gregory, 2013), and their contextualisation in post-colonial contexts in terms of power and identity (Nansen 2008). Others have focused on cybercrime from the economic, sociological, technological and information implications (Chawki 2009; Chilwa, 2009; Isacenkova et al., 2013, 2014; Ogunsanya 2015; Alake, 2017; Olajimbiti, 2018, Ajayi, 2019, 2022; Akinrinlola et al., 2023). These studies have practically created awareness as to the various strategies employed by cyber scammers in their activities. However, despite all these scholarly efforts, many are still, as of this day, falling victim to cyber scams (See Aborisade et al., 2024). This is not unconnected with the fact that these fraudsters continue to develop novel manipulative strategies to perpetrate their dastardly acts. Ajayi (2022) notes that ‘Cyber scammers keep devising more linguistic means and strategies daily to ‘beat’ their victims to the game’ (Ajayi, 2022, p. 1). This study seeks to investigate ‘victimhood construction, another notable strategy deployed by cyber scammers, with the aid of discursive/linguistic resources, in their illicit enterprise. In particular, the study examines victimhood construction strategies in scam discourse, drawing analytical insights from van Dijk’s Critical Discourse Analysis and aspects of the socio-cognitive theories of persuasion. Following Govier’s (2015, p. 37) definition of a victim as ‘a person or agent harmed by an act of external element that is not deserved and not a matter of his or her will, but instead imposed by an external force or agent.’, we conceptualise victimhood in this study as a state of appearing helpless in the face of an untoward situation that calls for pity and sympathy.

The specific questions addressed in this study are:

- What linguistic and discursive elements are deployed for victimhood construction in scam emails?
- What socio-cognitive resources are employed by scammers in driving victimhood-related persuasion in scam emails?

The study, apart from coming as a pragmatic addition to existing studies detailing theoretical arguments on the workings of cyber scammers, provides fresh data and insights into the discursive pattern of scam emails.

2 Literature review

This section reviews existing studies on the discourses of victimhood and persuasion strategies in cyber scam discourse in Nigeria and globally. Naksawat et al. (2016) examine some persuasion strategies fraudsters employ as a compelling force to achieve their communicative purpose of lures and deceptions. The study reveals two major types of deceptive techniques in scam emails: framing-rhetoric triggers, disguised as the traditional genre of electronic communications,

and human weakness-exploiting triggers, intended to incite recipients' emotions. As noted by US-CERT (2008), these strategies work by getting the victim to take the initial bait, then slowly convincing him or her of the legitimacy of the plot through a series of forged documents, carefully crafted communications, and even visits by the victim to the country of origin of the scammer for meetings with bogus 'officials' in phony 'government offices'. At key junctures in the process, the perpetrators will ask the victim to pay some money in advance as 'business' fees or bribes. Additionally, they may extract what amounts to an extortion payment by threatening to cut the victim out of the plot. Once the perpetrators believe they have got all they could from the victim, they cut off communication and vanish (US-CERT, 2008). Whitty (2017) investigates romance scam emails. The study characterises the psychological features of romance scam emails, notably comparing romance scam victims with those who had never been scammed by Mass Marketing Frauds (MMFs), establishing the fact that the scam victims in this case tend to be more impulsive (seeking sensation and urgency on a high scale), having an addictive disposition.

Online dating scams and fraud are instances of cybercrime. Ignatius (2020) examines cybercrime as it relates to online dating scams and fraud. The study argues that the prevalence of romance scams is attributable to factors, including greed, inadequate awareness of cybersecurity measures, socioeconomic disparities, undesirable personality traits, and a propensity for sensation-seeking. Cyberscammers use different narrative approaches to target their victims. In connection to this, Florian (2015) discusses linguistic narrative strategies in scam emails. He catalogues linguistic and cultural indexicals employed by scammers in shaping a sense of identity and mutual relationship between them and their targets. These include the 'first-, second-, and third-person' narratives, laced with some cultural references, deployed by scammers to make their targets less suspicious of their 'harmful' intentions.

In addition, Florian notes that narratives in scam emails feature a display of quite elaborate and artful traits that involve prototypical functions of traditional fairy tales. Chilwa (2009) profiles politeness strategies in hoax emails. He holds that such emails, sent with the intention to deceive (Blommaert, 2006; Alake, 2017; Belli and Bernal, 2018; Olajimbiti, 2018; Jones et al., 2019), are coated in positive and negative politeness strategies by scammers to harm their unsuspecting victims. He, however, notes that one tell-tale sign of such emails is 'grammatical errors'. This observation has been confirmed by Kperogi (2018). Focusing on the overarching characteristics, historical evolution, and linguistic attributes of scam emails, Schaffer's (2012) investigation into the Nigerian 419 scam emails reveals recurrent thematic elements within the emails' content, notably narratives featuring substantial monetary transactions originating from the perpetrator's home country and necessitating external assistance for transfer.

Adopting an ethnographic approach to the studies of cybercrime in the Nigerian context, Ajayi (2019) draws insights from Halliday's concept of antilanguage to investigate the linguistic strategies employed by cyber scammers in southwestern Nigeria. The study uncovers linguistic phenomena such as slangy coinages, overlexicalisation, relexicalisation (semantic extension), and the deployment of sub-strategies such as reduplication, clipping, blending, and acronym usage (initialism). These features characterise the language employed by cyber scammers in the region (Falade, 2023). Addressing the origin of scam emails, Ajayi (2019), and Ojilere & Oraegbunam (2017) have noted that, while Heyd (2008) and Holt & Graves (2007) hold the position that such mails are known as 'Nigeria mails/419 scams', it might be difficult to precisely identify Nigeria as the origin of such emails. However, a fact that has been established among scholars is that "the high level of socio-political and economic problems resulting in poverty, unemployment and frustration in the country", has made a lot of Nigerian youths resort to all manner of social vices,

mainly cyber scam which seems the only available ‘easier’ option for them (Ojilere & Oraegbunam, 2017). Chafe (2005) opines that one reason Nigeria may have been singled out is the apparently comical, almost ludicrous nature of the promise of West African riches from a Nigerian prince, often observed in certain scam emails. Ajayi (2022) explores the discursive-manipulative strategies in scam emails and SMS from the Nigerian perspective. His findings reveal that the use of false alarm (FA), self-denigration, formulaics or formulaic expressions, and evocation of theistic and religious context are used by scammers to deceive their victims. Ajayi’s (2022) conclusion echoes Belli and Bernal’s (2018) observation that scam emails primarily create emotional imbalance in the recipients. Akinrinlola et al. (2023) look at the role of Nigerian hip hop artists in the glamorisation and promotion of cyberscam subculture within the Nigerian space. They argue that Nigerian hip hop artists, through the deployment of linguistic resources such as metaphorisation and ‘commonisation’, for instance, subtly identify with cyberscam practices among Nigerian youths.

While the aforementioned studies have described the technological, linguistic and socio-cultural perspectives and implications of cyberscams, there is a need to further examine the linguistic strategies of victimhood construction in scam emails. This is the major focus of the current study. In this regard, the present study is an attempt to adopt critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2006) and persuasion theories: Sherif & Hovland’s (1961), Petty & Cacioppo’s (1986), Fisher’s (1984), and Festinger’s (1957) socio-cognitive approaches to persuasion in identifying and describing the strategies adopted in scam emails within the context of victimhood.

3 Analytical Tools

This study adopts two analytical tools in its data engagements and analysis, namely van Dijk’s model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and insights from a fusion of approaches to persuasion theories by Sherif & Hovland (1961), Petty & Cacioppo (1986), Fisher, (1984), and Festinger (1957). While CDA is useful in detailing the discursive strategies of victimhood construction in scam emails, persuasion theories are useful in demonstrating how the identified discursive strategies drive persuasion in the sampled scam emails.

CDA is an interdisciplinary field that concerns with social problems. With its interest not being on language per se, CDA explores the linguistic character of social and cultural processes and structures (Wodak, 1996). According to Fowler (1981, p. 25), ‘critical discourse analysis is a careful analytic interrogation of the ideological orientations through which a society constitutes and maintains itself and the consciousness of its members’. Olateju (1998), commenting on Fowler’s view on CDA, highlights that it seems to be concerned with objectivity, normality and factuality. Thus, text must be probed, to discover hidden meaning and value structures. This rests on the belief that society is a set of groups and institutions structured through discourse (Olateju, 1998). The current study adopts van Dijk’s (2006) model of Critical Discourse Analysis. Van Dijk (2006) outlines discursive strategies such as actor description, categorisation, euphemism, evidentiality, example/illustration, generalisation, hyperbole, lexicalisation, metaphor, self-glorification, number game, polarisation, presupposition, topos, syntax, local coherence, and victimisation to project positive self-representation or negative other-representation. Actor Description defines individuals in discourses based on ideological stances. Syntax and lexicalisation imbue ideological nuances, while polarisation segregates into in-group (us) and out-group (them). Implication leaves aspects implicit for recipients to infer from shared knowledge or attitudes. Additional strategies include evidentiality, empathising with in-group members, employing illustrations/examples, comparisons, the number game for credibility, argumentation

for credibility, situation description, synonymy, and metaphor. These analytical categories enhance narrative analysis, emphasising the cognitive interplay between discourse and social structures. Through the exploration of these discursive strategies, the researchers are able to uncover the underlying ideologies present in scam mails that shape discourse and contribute to broader social dynamics.

Sherif & Hovland's (1961), Petty & Cacioppo's (1986), Fisher's (1984), Festinger's (1957) classical theories of persuasion are four: social judgment theory, the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), cognitive dissonance, and the narrative paradigm that highlight the various methods employed in crafting persuasive messages. Petty & Cacioppo (1986) emphasise the importance of strong, logical arguments for persuading a motivated and able audience; Sherif & Hovland's (1961) social judgment theory proposes that the pre-existing attitudes an audience might hold about a topic must be put into consideration by persuaders before creating a message. Thus, the theory holds that 'messages that fall within the audience's latitude of acceptance will be viewed positively, and messages that fall within the audience's latitude of rejection will be viewed negatively.' True persuasion is therefore a question of whether the persuasive message falls within a receiver's latitude of noncommitment or at the edges of his or her latitude of acceptance. Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) explains that persuasion goes beyond an attempt to witness the result of injecting new or refined beliefs into others. Rather, CDT predicts that influence is often an intrapersonal event, occurring when incongruence between our attitudes and behaviour creates some tension that is resolved by altering either our beliefs or our behaviours, thereby effecting a change. On the other hand, the 'narrative paradigm' stresses the effectiveness of influence through narration—that is, persuasion through storytelling (Fisher, 1984, 1987). With the argument that human beings are fundamentally storytelling creatures and that this makes us unique from other creatures, Fisher strongly believes that narratives that convince us of 'good reasons' can shape attitudes.

These theories illuminate the various persuasive strategies for espousing victimhood in scam emails. The theories collectively offer valuable insights into the language and communication strategies that shape victimhood and deception in the context of online scam emails.

4 Methodology

The work employed both qualitative and quantitative research designs. The data used for the research were excerpts elicited from 20 purposively selected emails from the over 250 scam emails retrieved from the researchers' spam folders. The selection of the emails sampled for analysis in this study was predicated on their manifest projection of victimhood in various forms. Data were subjected to pragmatic analysis, with particular reference to CDA and persuasion theories, complemented with simple percentage descriptive statistics.

5 Data Analysis

This section focuses on data analysis, conducted in two phases. The first phase involves identifying forms of victimhood in scam emails, while the second phase examines the discursive resources deployed in driving victimhood discourse. In doing these, the data collected are essentially subjected to a critical analysis, identifying the different discursive strategies typical of scam emails as well as the use of persuasive power in creating and driving victimhood discourse.

5.1 Victimhood in scam emails

5.1.1 Victim of widowhood

This section presents an analysis of scam emails where scammers construct themselves as widows (one who has lost her husband). The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary describes a widow as ‘a woman/person whose spouse has died (and who has not remarried)’. Within the socio-cultural context of Africa, being a widow is treated as a highly sensitive and emotion-driven fact. Samuel (2015) opines that ‘unarguably, every enduring marriage ultimately ends with the death of either the man or woman or even both. However, the death of a spouse may be the most extreme of life’s crises as this severs most of the deepest emotional bonds established in a lifetime.’ For instance, the Yoruba society in Nigeria displays a deep level of sympathy towards the widow especially because of the shared cultural knowledge that the responsibilities of two (husband and wife) have now become that of one person (the man or woman, as the case may be). As such, preferential emotional treatments are usually given to widows (although there are few cases of deviation from this practice). Furthermore, in the African context, while the death of a spouse undoubtedly brings grief to both partners, the impact on women widowed by their deceased husbands often appears to be more severe. This disparity can be attributed, in part, to the potential trauma and disruption experienced by women as they navigate the complex and sometimes burdensome widowhood rituals that follow their loss (Samuel, 2015). Samuel’s explanation gives evidence of a possible reason why scammers, in presenting a widowhood victim persona, prefer to adopt a female persona/face in their scam emails.

Widowhood victim persona is particularly projected in the excerpt below:

‘...I married to Mr.James Gupta who worked with Tunisia embassy in Burkina Faso for nine years before he died in the year 2014.We were married for eleven years without a child. He died after a brief illness that lasted for only five days. Since his death I decided not to remarry, When my late husband was alive he deposited the sum of (USD 850.000) in a Bank. Presently this money is still in bank...’ (Excerpt1)

5.1.2 Victim of terminal illnesses or health challenges

As illustrated in excerpts 2 and 3 presented below, scammers sometimes construct themselves as victims of serious medical conditions or terminal health challenges. These health challenges are known to be mostly terminal, capable of leading to the eventual death of their hosts. In excerpt 2, for instance, the scammer begins by claiming to have been diagnosed with a severe health condition (*‘I have been diagnosed of Cancer illness’*) as a way of evoking sympathy from the prospective scam victim (PSV). Furthermore, reference was made to writing his/her will due to cancer and stroke (*‘my Cancer and Stroke illness’*), depicting the severity of ‘her’ purported condition. This is in line with the ideals of persuasion theory, particularly the way in which persuaders use emotional preferences in shaping the beliefs and actions of ‘the persuaded’. The scammer in excerpt 3 also begins the mail by strategically presenting a health victim persona who is terribly sick, using the situation description technique of CDA as seen below:

‘I have been diagnosed of Cancer illness’... my Cancer and Stroke illness’ (Excerpt 2)

‘I instructed the doctor here in this hospital to help me email you and i believe that you will be honest to fulfill my final wish before I will die... my doctors have courageously advised me that I may not live beyond 3 month; this is because the cancer has reached a critical stage’, ‘I have since lost my ability to do anything myself and my doctors have told me that I have only 3 month to live’. (Excerpt 3)

5.1.3 Victim of Orphanhood

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines an orphan as ‘a person, especially a minor, both or (rarely) one of whose parents have died’ or ‘a person, especially a minor, whose parents have permanently abandoned them’. UNAIDS (1999) describes an orphan as a child under 15 years of age who has lost, either their mother (maternal orphan) or both parents (double orphan). From these definitions, it is safe to define an orphan as a child who finds him or herself in a state of orphanhood (a state of having lost either one or both parents). In excerpts 4 and 5, for instance, the senders deploy the actor description strategy that perfectly projects orphanhood victimhood for persuasive effects. In excerpt 4, the sender, ‘a 23-year-old orphan’, presents her late mother, ‘Miss Lorna Laboso’, as a former Kenyan Assistant Minister of Home and Affairs. And, due to the death of her mother, she needs a trusted person who can help her retrieve a sum of \$8.5 million that she is entitled to, as willed to her by her mother. In excerpt 5, the sender describes himself as the only surviving son of his father, a proposition which implies that his parents had had other children who died due to unfortunate circumstances. Orphanhood victimhood as expressed in excerpts 4 and 5:

I am by name Miss Shanie Edwards Lorna Laboso, 23 years old girl from Kenya, yes my Mother was Late Miss Lorna Laboso the former Kenyan Assistant Minister of Home and affairs who was among the plane that crash board in the remote area of Kalong’s western Kenya. (Excerpt 4)

My name is Isaac. Kyesi. *I am the only surviving son of my father (Excerpt 5)*

As could be observed from excerpt 4 above, and excerpt 6 below, scammers often (though not always, as evident in excerpt 5) adopt the identity of young female characters to achieve persuasive effects. For instance, the choice of *Miss Shanie Edwards Lorna Laboso* (Excerpt 4) and *Miss Manuella Warlord Ibrahim Coulibaly* (Excerpt 6) is instructive, reinforcing the shared global ideological construction of females as being ‘susceptible to harm’ in many African climes.

I am Miss Manuella Warlord Ibrahim Coulibaly, a woman of 24 years of the Republic of Ivory Coast, West Africa, daughter by the late Chief Sgt. Warlord Ibrahim Coulibaly (aka General IB). (Excerpt 6)

In a study on the effect of child sexual abuse on the Nigerian girl-child, for instance, Adedeji et al. (2019) hold that ‘Although child sexual abuse involves both the male and female children respectively, the girl-child suffers more abuse than the male. This is because of their vulnerability and sensitivity to sexual matters in society.’ Scammers use this background knowledge to evoke or seek pity from the PSV.

5.1.4 Victim of Corrupt Political/Social Space

In some instances, senders of scam emails construct themselves as victims of a corrupt political space and poor socio-economic system. This is done with the sole aim of evoking pity from their prospective scam victims. Describing an aspect of this kind of victimhood experience, Kemsley (2003) affirms that ‘419 scheme starts with a mail claiming that millions of U.S. dollars are trapped in a bank account in countries like Nigeria or South Africa and a foreign bank account is needed to free the money. It is often stated that the person receiving the mail was chosen for his “trustworthiness”. The writers emphasise that the matter is urgent and requires absolute secrecy. At some stage, the victim will be required to pay some money upfront while in some cases the victim may be requested to travel to Nigeria with forged travel documents. This illegal entry will later be used as leverage to force the victim to release money’ (Maledo, 2011, p. 115).

The scam email in excerpt 7, for instance, starts with an endearment strategy as the persuader begins with the greeting ‘My dearest one’. Using the narrative paradigm framework, a well-crafted story is presented detailing the circumstances that depict the sender as a victim of the error of the (Northern) Syrian government —‘Kobani massacre’, carried out by Daesh/ISIS fighters.

Subject: Sincere Greetings

My Dearest One,

*I sent this mail praying it will find you in a good condition as i know it will be a surprise to you since we haven't known or come across each other before considering the fact that I sourced your email contact through the Internet in search of trusted person who can assist me. My name is Ms. Amira Omran Hussain Ibrahim and I'm a young girl of 24 year old from Kobani a city in the Aleppo Governorate in Northern Syria and presently, **I'm residing in the Republic of Burkina Faso as a refugee due to killing of my parents by the ISIS fighters on the year 2015** popularly know as "Kobani Massacre" that was carried out by the Daesh/ISIS fighters. Please don't be discouraged for hearing this. I believe deep down inside me that you will never break my heart or let me down in anyway. (Excerpt 7)*

5.2 Discursive-persuasive Strategies for Constructing and Driving Victimhood Discourse in Scam Emails

Here, six persuasive strategies adopted by scammers in driving victimhood discourse in scam emails are presented and analysed.

5.2.1 Actor Description Complemented with Self-denigration

The actor description strategy is used to drive victimhood discourse in excerpt 8. The sender (disguising as a widow) describes extensively, who the late husband was. This description is geared towards appealing to the socio-cognitive sense of the receiver, potentially leading him/her towards the acceptance of the sender’s request. This is illustrated in the excerpt below:

‘I am Mrs. Maureen Greaves, married to Late Alan Greaves (PhD) who worked with (Total S.A.) the French Multinational Integrated Oil and Gas Company and one of the five "Super major" oil companies in the world as their Africa drilling rig supplier for 17 years before his death On Christmas Eve 2013. We were both are born again Christians, lay ministers and former social workers, and my late husband, Alan Greaves, was the Church organist for 40 years before being attacked and was picked up with a pickaxes on his way to midnight mass at St Savior's Church in Sheffield and died in hospital three days later...’ (Excerpt8)

The choice of phrases such as ‘French multinational’, ‘Oil and Gas company’, ‘Super major oil companies’, in the excerpt is strategically aimed at painting her husband as being very rich and prosperous, riding on the shared situational knowledge that an ‘oil and gas’ driven economy in many countries, especially in Africa, tends towards boom and national wealth, with immense opportunities. By using this strategy, the sender seeks to ensure that the persuasive effect of her message is driven to the PSV’s latitude of acceptance, as Social Judgement theory suggests. The scammer further projects herself and her husband as being ‘born again Christians’ in order to concretise the image of ‘a trustworthy and sincere personality’ already established in the previous

lines of the email. The choice of this strategy is predicated on the kind of prestige and social acceptance theism ensures and promotes within the African context in particular. Thus, to prove her genuineness and her claims, the sender makes recourse to activities that typify ‘born again Christianity’: ‘*We were both are born again Christians, lay ministers and former social workers, and my late husband, Alan Greaves, was the Church organist for 40 years...*’. To maintain the emotional impact on the recipient, the sender employs evidentiality in reporting how her husband passed away, claiming he was attacked at ‘*St Savior’s Church in Sheffield*’, dying three days later. By referring to this ugly scenario using evidentiality strategies, the sender intends to project a picture of martyrdom to the PSV, showing that her ‘rich’ husband was a faithful Christian who died ‘while serving the Lord’. This further reinforces Ajayi’s (2022) submission that the evocation of theistic sentiments is a pragmatic manipulative cum persuasive strategy in scam emails.

In excerpt 9, the scammer employs the actor description technique, presenting himself/herself as a widow, Mrs. Elliana Gupta, married to the late Mr. James Gupta, who worked at the Tunisian embassy in Burkina Faso for nine years before his death in 2014. The choice of Tunisia in this description is intended to evoke a sense of respect in the PSV, given the background understanding that the recipient is African and may feel sympathy for a fellow African in a pitiable condition. Tunisia, located in the Northern region, is identified as one of the richest countries in the continent by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, with its wealth reaching \$177 billion in 2022 (Yahoo Finance, 2023). Conversely, Burkina Faso, in the Western region, is described by the BBC (1993) as ‘a poor country even by West African standards; landlocked Burkina Faso has suffered from recurring droughts and military coups.’ Given this context, the scammer references working at the Tunisian embassy in Burkina Faso to impress the PSV, portraying her husband as an affluent individual. This is illustrated below:

My Name is Mrs Elliana Gupta and I am contacting you from my country Tunisia I want to tell you this because I don't have any other option than to tell you as I was touched to open up to you:I married to Mr.James Gupta who worked with Tunisia embassy in Burkina Faso for nine years before he died in the year 2014.We were married for eleven years without a child. He died after a brief illness that lasted for only five days. Since his death I decided not to remarry, When my late husband was alive he deposited the sum of (USD 850.000) in a Bank. Presently this money is still in bank.’ (Excerpt 9)

The use of actor description in the excerpt above is geared towards evoking pity from the PSV. In like manner, the scammer in excerpt 10 (below) adopts the actor description strategy, presenting a widowhood victim picture to the PSV. In doing this, the scammer describes himself/herself as ‘Mrs Juliette Morgan’ married to the late ‘Mr Sami Morgan’ who worked with Norway Embassy in Burkina Faso for nine years before he died in 2011.

I married to Mr. sami Morgan. Who worked with Norway embassy in Burkina Faso for nine years before he died in the year 2011.We were married for eleven years without a child He died after a brief illness that lasted for only five days. Since his death I decided not to remarry, When my late husband was alive he deposited the sum of € 8.5 Million Euro (Eight million, Five hundred thousand Euros) in a bank in Ouagadougou the capital city of Burkina Faso in west Africa Presently this money is still in bank. He made this money available for exportation of Gold from Burkina Faso mining. (Excerpt 10)

It is worthy of note that there is a similarity in the pattern of description adopted by scammers in constructing victimhood for persuasive effects. In this regard, a vital tool of persuasion adopted alongside the actor description strategy, as evident in many of the sampled emails, is ‘self-denigration’. Several scholars (Gu, 1990; Yu, 2013; Kim, 2014; Ajayi, 2022) have described this concept in the literature. According to Gu (1990), ‘self-denigration’ implies denigrating the *self* as a mark of modesty, and elevating the *other*, as a mark of respect. Yu (2013) argues that self-denigration has to do with self-mockery or belittling oneself to achieve certain goals. For Kim (2014), it is self-depreciation, that is, lowering or humbling the self towards the other. Ajayi (2022), like Yu (2013), notes the face-saving function of self-denigration in interactional exchanges.

In presenting the picture of a victim of a corrupt political space, the scammer in excerpt 11 (below) constructs the identity of a victim of circumstances beyond her control, thus appealing to the recipient’s sense of empathy and sense of moral obligation to come to her aid. Reference is further made to real-world events (the Kobani Massacre, a conflict at the Turkey-Syria border) to anchor the narrative in current geopolitical realities and consequently to lend credibility to the sender’s claims. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

Maryam Al Khaled Yassin Sameer maryam.alkhaled189@gmail.com

My beloved friend

Dearest,

*Good day and how are you doing today. I'm really delighted to communicate with you and I believe we can achieve everything together and create something great in nearest future. My name is Ms. Maryam AlKhaled Yassin Sameer. and I'm a young girl of 24 year old from Kobani a city in the Aleppo Governorate in Northern Syria and presently, I'm residing in the Republic of Burkina Faso as **a refugee due to killing of my parents by the ISIS fighters on the year 2015** popularly know as "Kobani Massacre" that was carried out by the Daesh/ISIS fighters. **Please don't be discouraged for hearing this.** I believe deep down inside me that you will never break my heart or let me down in anyway. My beloved father (Mr. AlKhaled Yassin Sameer) was the Mayor of the city of Kobani and also the Head of Aleppo Investment Authority. The brutal killing of my father took place one early morning by the Daesh/ISIS fighters as a result of the ongoing civil war in Syria. I was in my first year in the University of Aleppo studying Arts and Humanities before the sad incident and that led to the death of my beloved father.(Excerpt 11)*

A consideration of the excerpt above from the power dynamics angle further reveals how the sender projects him/herself as the vulnerable one (a young girl from Syria) who needs help, and the recipient as the privileged one who possesses the financial and legal ability to help.

5.2.2 Evidentiality as a victimhood construction strategy in scam emails

Van Dijk (2006) explains that evidentiality is the use of evidence or proof to make opinions, claims or points of view more plausible, reliable and credible in news reports. According to van Dijk (2006), providing evidence and giving credibility to opinions influence the mental models of recipients/readers by persuading them to accept views as real and true. In using this discourse strategy, proofs from eyewitnesses/victims or references to authorities are provided to authenticate ideological positioning.

Evidentiality is employed in excerpt 12 as the scammer supplies the link to a website to prove that her ‘supposed’ husband, Alan Greaves, was murdered, as shown below:

*‘...A year after his murder, organist Alan Greaves’ widow...you can confirm this link as below:
www.dailymail.co.uk’ (Excerpt 12)*

The recurrent use of evidence to appeal to the PSVs’ socio-cognitive is a persuasive strategy that aligns with Petty & Cacioppo’s (1986, p. 123) Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion Theory. According to this theory, there are two possible routes to achieve influence on others: a ‘central route’ and a ‘peripheral route’ to persuasion. The central route, also known as the elaborated route, adopts ‘wealth of information, rational arguments, and evidence to support a particular conclusion’.

5.2.3 Appeal to religious sentiment for in-group representation

The adoption of theism and an appeal to theistic bias is strong in scam emails. Several studies (Adejumo et al., 2015; Çancı & Odukoya, 2016; Chukwuma, 2017; Ajayi, 2020) have identified the high level of theism and religiosity among Nigerians. Ajayi (2022) suggests that Nigerians, like many other Africans, ‘often demonstrate their sense of theism by identifying with one religion or the other’. This sense of theism and religiosity manifests in their language use. This is often used to project ‘the identity of godliness and authenticate the genuineness of their actions.’ (Ajayi, 2022, p. 189). This is illustrated in the excerpts below:

*Thanks and Remain blessed in the Lord.
I Remain yours sister in Christ.
Mrs. Maureen A. Greaves
(Church Army evangelist). (Excerpt 13)*

*‘I grew up as an Orphan and I don't have any body as my family member, just to end endeavor that **the house of God** is maintained. Am doing this so that **God will forgive my sins and accept my soul** because these sicknesses have suffered me so much’ (Excerpt 14)*

In excerpt 13 above, for instance, the *subscript* adopted by the sender typifies a recourse to theism as a persuasive strategy. Furthermore, the expression ‘*I Remain yours sister in Christ*’ is a way to present a perspective that reflects an in-group religious identity, given the background assumption that the mail receiver is also a Christian (from the receiver’s name). This pattern is similar to what is observed in excerpt 14 where the sender makes reference to God. Making reference to ‘God’ proves Ajayi’s (2022) observation that scammers who target African PSVs understand that Africans ‘demonstrate a high sense of theism and religiosity’, and as such leverage this knowledge to appeal to their socio-cognitive sense. This practice reflects Sherif & Hovland’s (1961) and Sherif et al.’s (1965) argument within the Social Judgement Theory that the knowledge a persuader has about the attitude of the person being persuaded towards a subject becomes useful in going about their persuasion efforts. As evident in this excerpt, the sender might have assumed that theism, or religiosity, falls within the PSV’s ‘latitude of acceptance’ hence, by making reference to it in the email, the receiver is more likely to fall victim to the scam.

5.2.4 Appeal to greed and number game strategies

The ‘appeal to greed’ strategy is recursive in various scam emails. This is due to its potential to serve as a bait by scammers to persuade their target PSVs. The appeal to greed strategy is deeply rooted in the notion that everyone is greedy as long as the promotion and actualisation of their personal interests are concerned. In other words, human beings are naturally configured to pursue, protect and work towards the realisation of their self-interests. And sometimes achieving this could mean getting involved in shady deals. Senders of scam emails often exploit this behavioural knowledge in reaching out to PSVs. This is illustrated in the excerpt below:

*‘My late husband deposited the sum of **USD 850,000** in a local bank while he was still alive. **Presently this money is still in bank.** Having known my condition I decided to hand you over this money to take care of the less-privileged people, you will utilize this money the way I am going to instruct here I want you to take **30 Percent of the total money** for your personal use While **70% of the money** will go to charity, people in the street and helping the Orphanage.’*
(Excerpt 15)

As a component of the actor description strategy observed in excerpt 15, the scammer employs the persuasive strategy of ‘appeal to greed’, adopting the evidentiality discursive strategy by strategically attesting to the fact that her late husband deposited the sum of USD 850,000 in a bank while he was still alive. A projection of hope on retrieving the said fund is given by the use of the expression, ‘*Presently this money is still in bank*’. Likewise, the sender of the mail ends with an ‘appeal to greed’ using the number game strategy (30%-70% share) as a form of ‘call-to-action’.

Excerpt 16 (below) exemplifies other ways of appealing to greed:

...As soon as I receive your reply I shall give you the contact of the bank in Burkina Faso and I will also instruct the Bank Manager to issue you an authority letter that will prove you the present beneficiary of the money in the bank that is if you assure me that you will act accordingly as I Stated herein. (Excerpt 16)

Evidentiality is adopted where the scammer mentions that he/she ‘*shall give you the contact of the bank in Burkina Faso and I will also instruct the Bank Manager to issue you an authority letter that will prove you the present beneficiary of the money in the bank*’ upon reply, indicating readiness to accept the (scam) offer. From a theistic perspective (which the scammer tries to project in the mail), the ideology of ‘money answereth all things’ (a biblical allusion: Ecclesiastes 10:19b) held amongst Christians, and also embraced by many adherents of other faiths, is also foregrounded by the sender to appeal to the receiver’s greed in this email.

5.2.5 Situation description strategy

The use of ‘situation description’ is also another discursive strategy evident in projecting victimhood in scam emails. According to van Dijk’s CDA, situation description is the depiction of actions, situations and experiences surrounding events to understand the causes and consequences of such events. As Fisher (1987, p. 57) suggests, ‘rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings’. Thus, for Fisher, the uniqueness of human beings lies in their ability and drive to tell stories. As such, instead of conceiving reason as being rooted only in fact and logical argument, Fisher argues that rationality—and therefore persuasion—stems from humans’ ability to create a coherent story. This is illustrated in the excerpts below:

‘Am 45 years old lady, am a widow’

'Now, the WAR in Iraq is over; and all possible problems that could have emanated from the shared money has been totally cleaned up and all file closed, all what was discovered in the Middle East is no more discussed, am now ready to retire from active services by the end of this month, but, i need a trustworthy person that can help me take possession of this funds and keep it safe while i work on my relief letters to join you so that we could discuss possible business partnership together with the money.'

'No compensation can make up for the risk we are taken with our lives.' (Excerpt 17)

In the excerpt above, the scammer creates a story that depicts vulnerability, weakness, and the need for help. The evidentiality strategy used in the mail adopts references to authority figures or institutions to make the opinions and claims expressed by the scammer seem more plausible. The pattern observed in excerpt 17 is replicated in excerpt 18 where the sender, through situation description, begins the mail by presenting a health victim persona who is terribly sick using the situation description technique of CDA:

'I instructed the doctor here in this hospital to help me email you and i believe that you will be honest to fulfill my final wish before I will die... my doctors have courageously advised me that I may not live beyond 3 month; this is because the cancer has reached a critical stage', 'I have since lost my ability to do anything myself and my doctors have told me that I have only 3 month to live'. (Excerpt 18)

In the particular scenario presented in the email above, situation description combines with self-denigration (the sender accentuating the power of the receiver to help while foregrounding his/her own helplessness) for persuasive effects.

5.2.6 Syntax and lexicalization strategies

Lexicalization refers to the deliberate selection of lexical elements in articulating opinions and attitudes grounded in ideology. Thus, 'lexicalization provides language with fresh referential and predicative content by recruiting new members for the lexical inventory' (Fowler, 1991, p. 142). Furthermore, Kaleem et al. (2022) assert that word choice depicts attitude and behaviours. They always demonstrate emotive and connotative meanings. They evoke either positive or negative responses from the audience, though they could be neutral in their origin. This is in line with van Dijk's view that lexical choices are never functionally neutral and the preference of one word over another always has significance attached to it.

*'...finally i **honestly employ you** to make sure that these funds are put to use only for this purpose, a good one you can agree with me, and remember these are **the demands of a dieing woman who has a life in the lord**. I now realize that **wealth without life in Christ is vanity and non-sense**.'* (Excerpt 19)

In the excerpt above, the scammer adopts the lexicalization and syntax discursive strategies in evoking pity/sympathy from the PSV. The use of words like '*...honestly employ you...*', '*...the demands of a dieing woman who has a life in the lord*', '*...wealth without life in Christ is vanity and non-sense*' is aimed at deceptively enhancing pity given the earlier presented description of widowhood, making the story 'look too real to be false'. The employment of the phrase, '*very expensive*', as subject of the mail in excerpt 20 is an attempt to use lexicalization in presenting a false alarm which is meant to influence the PSV to read the concerned email.

manuella warlord ibrahim < manuellarwarlordibrahim@gmail.com >

Bcc:michealtemitope@yahoo.com
Subject: Very expensive (Excerpt 20)

Meng & Kwok (2013) explain that false alarms increase the risk of making mistakes and reduce the likelihood of making accurate decisions. In describing false alarm, Ajayi (2022, p. 182) opines that ‘the creator of a false alarm could do so with the intention of getting an individual overly excited; it could be done to scare, overwhelm or raise a feeling of anxiety in an individual in order to achieve a particular goal. As such, a false alarm is a veritable tool deployed by cyber scammers for manipulative purposes in their scam emails and SMS.’

The statistical distribution of the discursive strategies employed to drive victimhood discourse in the sampled emails is represented in the tables below and the figure that follows.

Table 1: Frequency of distribution of victimhood discursive strategies in scam emails

S/N	Victimhood Discursive Strategies in Scam Emails	Frequency
1.	Actor description & self-denigration	14
2.	Evidentiality	3
3.	Appeal to religious sentiment for in-group representation	7
4.	Appeal to greed and number game	14
5.	Situation description	14
6.	Syntax and lexicalization	10
	Total	62

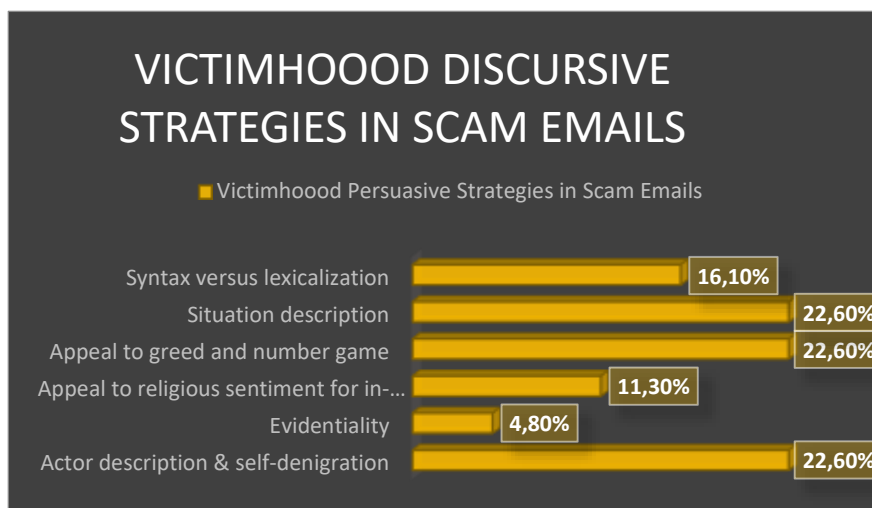


Fig. 1. Percentage distribution of victimhood construction strategies in scam emails

Table 1 above reflects the distribution of the victimhood construction discursive strategies deployed in the analysed emails. Table 1 shows that the six persuasive strategies used by senders of scam emails as earlier presented occurred 62 times across the 20 emails sampled in this study.

Furthermore, the simple percentage statistics shows that of the six strategies identified, situation description, appeal to greed and number game, and actor description with self-denigration strategies feature across all the sampled scam emails. This suggests that the three strategies hold relative significance in victimhood discourse in scam emails. Scam email senders carefully combine these strategies in the best order possible to appeal to PSVs' emotions. Figure 1 further depicts that the 'syntax and lexicalisation' strategy ranking next to the foremost three constitute 16.1% of the total occurrence of these persuasive strategies. This further suggests the important role that language use plays in driving victimhood discourse in scam emails, particularly as used by scammers in wooing the target PSVs. The 'appeal to religious sentiment for in-group representation' ranks next to the foremost four strategies found in scam emails, holding a 11.3% quota. As earlier pointed out, this is due to the strong theistic ideology that is associated with Africans. The evidentiality (4.8%) strategy is the lowest among the discursive strategies observed in the sampled emails. This distribution is indicative of the fact that scammers only use it to spice victimhood projection, as seen in the analysis. In sum, these statistical figures bring to the fore an understanding of how persuasive strategies in scam emails are patterned. This pattern can help PSVs and anti-crime agencies track scam intentions in emails, thus reducing the rate at which people fall victim to scamming, as perpetrated through emails.

5.4 Conclusion

This study has critically assessed the discursive strategies in driving victimhood discourse in 20 scam emails. The concept of victimhood in scam emails has been explored in this study through delving into the persuasive strategies employed by scammers in luring their PSVs. The six strategies identified across these scam emails include: 'actor description & self-denigration', 'evidentiality', 'appeal to religious sentiment for in-group presentation', 'appeal to greed and number game', 'situation description', and 'syntax versus lexicalization'. Findings reveal that on the end of CDA, strategies like actor description & self-denigration, number game, and evidentiality are the most commonly used by scammers as they adopt almost the same pattern across their ill-intended emails. Findings from this study lend credence to observations from previous studies (Ajayi, 2022; Meng and Kwok, 2013; Chiluba, 2009; Isacenkova et al., 2013, 2014, Alake, 2017; Olajimbiti, 2018), which suggest that scammers deploy creative and persuasive language to manipulate their targets. Understanding the aforementioned strategies and linguistic choices will help PSVs in familiarising themselves with and taking cognisance of the nature of scam emails so as not to fall in their trap. It also helps anti-crime agencies track scam emails in the fight against cybercrime.

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