Discursive Manipulation Strategies in Tinder Swindler Documentary Movie: Socio-Semiotic Perspective

Dini Anggraheni[1*], Anandha [2]

Universitas Semarang (USM), Semarang, Indonesia

Email: [1]dinia85@usm.ac.id

Abstract: Someone's life is significantly impacted by love. Someone searches for a romantic relationship when they are in love. Romantic love can grow even without regular or in-person interactions, such as those with a stranger from a dating app. As a new form of contactless crime, telecom and internet fraud have increased in public danger as criminals target numerous unwitting victims. This study examines the Tinder Swindler documentary's lead character from a linguistic perspective. Simon, the main character, uses persuasive techniques to convince girls to like him and follow his instructions to earn money for his opulent lifestyle. Despite con artists' scientific and technological devices, language is still the main form of communication. From Halliday's socio-semiotic perspective, this research demonstrates how criminal suspects use discourse resources to create false information and fake identities through discursive practice, earn the trust of victims, fool, deceive, and manipulate them into providing private information and money. In this study, linked discourse materials and procedures are changed to examine the dynamic process of choosing and creating identities in the social-cultural setting. This study also provides a socio-semiotic method for avoiding dating application and internet fraud.

Keywords: discursive manipulation, film, identity, scam, socio-semiotic

1. Introduction

Since its conception, the Internet has encouraged interpersonal interaction and the search for a soul mate. The early research heavily debated whether it was possible to form "genuine" relationships with "strangers" online or whether such relationships were meaningless and might even be psychologically harmful. Blommaert and Omoniyi assert that con artists must be adept in three areas (2006). The first prerequisite is the ability to "manage, examine, and utilize" the possibility for global communication. The third criterion is a linguistic skill, which enables people to create messages that match their projected identity. The second prerequisite is a certain level of "cultural competency" [1]. Blommaert and Omoniyi's research covered the extent of email fraud, but it also applied to other types of fraud. The romance scam harms victims "double-time," as they lose money and relationships, in contrast to other Internet and telecom scams [2].

It is quite simple for users to contact with anyone, from anywhere, even across nations, thanks to the abundance of friendship platforms, also known as social media, nowadays. Internet users need to share their information more carefully, especially their personal information, in the information era of globalization. Cybercriminals will profit from user

ignorance [3]. These con artists frequently prey on people looking for a committed relationship via dating services, apps, or social media by posing as potential friends. Scammers typically construct fake internet profiles to entice victims into viewing and chatting with them [4]. Sindy R. Sumter et. (2016) write in their article Love me Tinder: Untangling Emerging Adults' Motivations for Using the Tinder Dating Application, published in Telematics and Informatics, Elsevier, that their research demonstrates that Tinder should be viewed as a multifunctional tool that meets a variety of emerging needs among adults rather than just as a fun, no-strings-attached hookup app. The detrimental effect is not entirely explained [5]. This study will thoroughly explain how the Tinder app is used in relation to the prevalent cases.

Due to the complexity of cross-border crimes and the difficulties in gathering digital proof, research on victims has shown to be an effective means of preventing telecom and Internet scam. Numerous studies have been conducted to look at the psychological characteristics of victims of romance scams [2], [6], [7]. When someone has terrible luck, Clark claims that people may either think they are "sympathy worthy" or "blame" them for their situation [8]. Are romance scam victims deserving or unworthy of compassion?

In keeping with the description provided above, the documentary Tinder Swindler reveals the truth about romance frauds. In the highly regarded Netflix documentary The Tinder Swindler in 2022, three women describe how they were defrauded by convicted conman Simon Leviev (actual name Shimon Hayut) after meeting him on the dating app. The movie gives an in-depth and incredibly personal account of Leviev's use of Tinder to connect with his victims and swindle them out of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

What can we learn about romantic scams from the Tinder swindler, and how can the other person avoid becoming the next victim? A good illustration of what could go wrong is the Tinder Swindler. This question calls for a closer look at the relationships between romantic love and discursive manipulation. The illustration of different types of discursive manipulation affects love scams; it is crucial to break down these sorts.

2. Material and Method

2.1. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative method to analyze the documentary movie from a socio-semiotic perspective. The study draws from the interpersonal and literary elements of the documentary film as well as the scam's method for describing, interpreting, and explaining the linguistic and visual modalities of texts. In this way, the movie's analysis of the love scam and discursive manipulation was influenced by methods including framing, salience, classification, and visual positioning of the players.

The sample consists of one Netflix documentary film from 2022 called Tinder Swindler. This time frame is noteworthy since it spans Simon's 2018–2020 tenure as Puppet's master. Thus, time serves as a window through which several women suffered. The 19 data were chosen after careful observation and research.

Halliday explains social semiotics in "Language Social Semiotics." Social semiotics is a branch of the study of signs that explicitly examines the sign system humans produce

in the form of symbols and words. In other words, social semiotics examines the sign system of language [9]. Halliday mentioned that language representation, language representation plays an essential role in the construction of meaning [10]

2.2. Online Dating

Online daters must complete personality tests, questionnaires about their hobbies, and inquiries about the characteristics they seek in a partner. From there, matches are typically given compatibility scores. With 55 billion matches to date, one online dating app called Tinder makes meeting new people simple. Tinder has features to help you stand out and improve your matchmaking potential, but whether you initiate contact is entirely up to you. Start by writing your biography; it serves as a summary of who you are. Keep it lighthearted by discussing your hobbies or get serious by outlining your ideal partner.

In order to find their matches on other websites, users must sift through a sea of profiles. Online daters frequently spend hours comparing attractive profiles, according to studies [7]. Online daters, according to Whitty, are driven to "commodify" themselves by presenting a character that other people will feel compelled to "buy" into [11]. According to research, some characteristics that online daters find important to display are their attractiveness, interests and hobbies, personality, humor, occupation, intelligence, uniqueness, and aspirations and dreams (see (Whitty, M.T., Baker, A.J., Inman, 2007).

According to the hyperpersonal notion, dating site connections between strangers are typically not intimate or close. This hypothesis is influenced by the local characteristics and the regular progression of linkages from these locations. As previously said, internet daters spend more time constructing their profiles than actually getting to know one another. In reality, the dating procedures are very different from what Walther and others observed in [7], where people spend much time online chatting and disclosing their private elements.

2.3. Discursive Manipulation

There were two opposing theoretical viewpoints on online relationships in the early days of the Internet, as was mentioned in the introduction to this article: one held that these relationships were pointless and vapid, and the other held that the Internet offered new, radical opportunities for forming relationships. When considering these ideas, it's important to remember that the Internet was not what it is now, and its users didn't necessarily represent the majority of society. The majority of the virtual environment was text, and users were in charge of their online personas [7].

The social context must first be considered for understanding and analyzing manipulative discourse. In contrast to persuasion, manipulation involves dominance and authority, which is one of its characteristics. Analyzing this power dimension involves looking at the degree of influence certain social actors or organizations have over others [12]. We also hypothesized that such control primarily consists of mental, specifically beliefs, control over the recipient, and behavioral control over the recipient based on those modified beliefs.

Before moving on to a more theoretical account and data analysis, a user of a dating program needs to be more precise about the kind of manipulation they desire to investigate. As mentioned, manipulation, as used in this context, is an interpersonal activity in which a manipulator exerts power over another person, usually against that person's will or best interests. The term "manipulation" negatively impacts everyday speech since it deviates from accepted social norms [12].

This concept includes non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, text formatting, visuals, sounds, music, and more. Manipulation generally takes place through conversation. However, remember that discourse structures are not manipulative as a result; they only serve these functions or have these effects in specific communicative settings and follow how participants understand these circumstances in their context models [7], [12]. As previously mentioned, manipulation is an example of a social practice of power abuse because it includes powerful groups, institutions, and patrons. In light of this, it is theoretically possible for the "same" discourse (or discourse fragment) to be manipulative in one situation but not in another [12]. Manipulation involves power, but misuse of authority, or dominance, also plays a role.

2.4. Socio-semiotics and Love Scam Identity Construction

The institutional orientations hidden behind different interpretations of the same sign can be revealed through a socio-semiotic method [13]. The combined effect of the social and linguistic symbol systems cannot be separated from a socio-semiotic perspective. Through a review of the differences in language and writing systems, the authors look at the impact on language selection, language development, and the use of language to build social identity.

In order to gain the trust of their victims and commit fraud, love fraudsters pose as pals. It typically occurs on a social networking site or an online dating site. Rarely do the victim, and the offender speaks to one another. As The Tinder Swindler shows, it may also happen in relationships that are conducted in person.

Table 1. Dynamic Process of Identity Construction of Online Love Scam.

Scam Timeline identity	Develop a trusting relationship with the scammer	Be scammed out of money and report to the police	Post-scam trauma
	Romantic and loyal Partner	Love and money loser	Victim (un)deserved sympathy
Triple hit			

Source: (Cheng et al., 2020)

We find that, in contrast to the "double hit" suggested by Whitty and Buchanan (2012, 2016), the "triple hit" results in the identity formation of scam victims going through three steps (Table 1).

3. Result and Discussion

The data was taken from a documentary on Netflix. It used purposefully selected words, gestures, symbols, and utterances from the scene where the significant protagonists first meet (Simon, Cecilie, Pernilla, and Ayleen). They begin dating and have a climactic moment when Interpol detains Simon for using a false passport and taking the name David Sharon.

This study examined the potential for love fraud in online dating apps and promoted the need of using the desire for "genuine" love as a springboard for examining various forms of manipulation. This study's analysis of love scams in-depth and socio-semiotic analysis of the subject of the documentary film make it a component of a qualitative case study.

Based on close watching, analyzing the structure of Simon's scam, and the language he used, the pattern of the love scam can be shown in the diagram below:
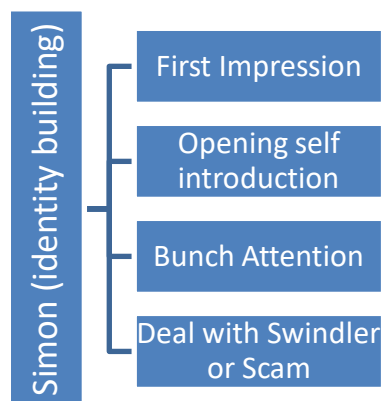

Figure 1. Simon's Identity Building

3.1. First Impression

Simon created a fake profile on the well-known dating app Tinder, where he verified his identity to manage his official Instagram account. He posted pictures of himself traveling in private jets, piloting airplanes, and enjoying the most expensive and opulent restaurants and hotels worldwide, all to attract women.

For anyone who Googled him to find the link to the website and believe he was the son of a multimillionaire, Simon also constructed the website LLP Diamonds and made the firm appear authentic.

Datum 1 (00:05:53) CECILIE, 29, I.T. Consultant, M.A. University of London

"When I saw Simon's pictures, he had the kind of look that I like. He was dressed very stylishly. I love a guy in a suit, and he had several of those. Moreover, he had a link to his Instagram. He had so many pictures and so many followers. Business meetings, parties, beaches. This guy just has a very different life than I ever will experience. And I was just thinking it would be cool just to meet up. I decided to swipe right."

Figure 2. Simon's profile picture in Tinder Apps

Datum 2 (00:22:02) Pernilla Sjoholm, 31, Sweden Stockholm

"*I got a match. He was here in Stockholm for business, but it said he was living in Amsterdam. He texts me and asks me if I want to come visit.*"

Datum 3 (01:27:09) Ayleen Charlotte, Fashion Designer

"*I also met him on Tinder. He also took me to a five-star hotel on the First Date.*"

The three data points above indicate that Simon took all necessary steps to ensure the accuracy of his profile. Start with clothing, social media posts, pictures, opulent activities, and fake history.

3.2. Opening self-introduction

How Simon feels about girls initiating relationships is the subject of the opening self-introduction. All the match girls receive prompt responses from Simon, who also surprises them with thoughtful care.

Datum 4 (00:06:44) Cecile

"*And then he just responds fairly quickly. "I'm leaving London tomorrow. Do you want to meet up?"*

When we text on WhatsApp, he asked me to meet him at the hotel that he was staying at, the Four Seasons...

[incoming message tone]

...and he just sent the Google Maps link, so I could know where I was gonna go.

This was just going to be, like, an hour-long coffee, 'cause I could just sense that this guy was a busy guy." *Very quickly, he'd become very personal. And that's what I really liked about it.*"

Datum 5 (00:06:44) Pernilla

"*And then he just responds fairly quickly.* "

"I'm leaving London tomorrow.

Do you want to meet up?"

3.3. Bunch Attention

It is time to learn how to capture and hold a girl's attention adequately. Many males struggle with women and wish to learn how to catch a woman's attention. We will demonstrate how Simon produces a terrific first impression and rightly attracts ladies for this reason.

Datum 6 (00:08:56) Cecile

When we were nearing the end of the date, he said, "I really want to get to know you better." They were traveling to Bulgaria for a business trip, and then he was asking me if I wanted to join them. We're traveling by private jet.

Datum 7 (00:09:28) Cecile

Simon asked one of his drivers to take me back home, so I could pack some stuff, get my passport, then they will drive me back. Suddenly, there's this Rolls-Royce waiting for me.

Datum 8 (00:10:30) Cecile

At the airport, there is the entire team waiting for us. A really tall guy, which I presume is the bodyguard. There's a couple of drivers, and you have his little daughter.

Datum 9 (00:17:34) Cecile
And then he just asked me,
"I am serious about you. Do you want to be my girlfriend?"

Datum 10 (00:22:25) Pernilla

He asked about my passport details, booked my flight ticket, which I thought was a nice gesture.
I get this confirmation from Simon Leviev at LLD Diamonds.

Datum 11 (01:27:33) Ayleen Charlotte
He was very thoughtful. He would remember every little thing.
I shared my whole heart with him.

Given the information above, Simon's personality is crucial for ensuring he loves the girls. Women prefer spending time with fun, dependable, exciting, and enjoyable men. Men like that attract the attention of women who want to spend time with and get to know them.

3.4. Deal with swindle or scam

Datum 12 (00:17:40) Cecile

He was just talking about this big deal that he needed to get done, and the deal was worth $70 million, but the diamond industry is a dangerous business. He had these threats surrounding his security. He had a security team in Israel. Peter was like the head of it. Threats had gotten worse. He showed me pictures of like they had gotten bullets in the mail. Funeral flowers had been sent. He had CCTV of an apartment in Tel Aviv. He had a break-in there. The security team told him that he wasn't safe in London anymore, and for the time being, he needed to stay away.

Datum 13 (00:28:33) Cecile

(Simon Text message) photo

Blood, Peter hurt

Figure 3. The picture of the bleeding bodyguard (Peter)

Datum 14 (00:29:19) Cecile

He just says that, "They were going after me. Thank God for Peter."

"If not, I would've been dead."

Datum 15 (00:29:38) Cecile

The next morning, Simon sends me a voice note.

(Simon) Because of the situation, with the security and everything, they told me I'm not allowed to use my credit card.

Datum 16 (00:53:19) Pernilla

[phone chimes]

A few days later, I can feel my phone buzzing. Simon is sending a lot of messages.

Oh, my God, what happened last night?

[Simon] Someone tried to stab me, and so Peter broke his hand.

[Pernilla] Jesus.

What do you mean tried to stab you? What is going on?

Simon said,

"This is my enemies behind this."

He was really concerned that someone was after him.

Datum 17 01:28:09 (Ayleen Charlotte)

He sent me the same video.

01:28:27 (Ayleen Charlotte)

He was sending exactly the same words to her as he did to me.

Datum 18 (01:29:16) Ayleen Charlotte

He told me that this business deal in Munich went wrong. But he was meeting Pernilla.

[Simon] Peter is down!

He sent exactly the same pictures to me, telling me that his enemies had beaten Peter up.

When I got those pictures, I was terrified.

Datum 19 (01:45:55) Ayleen Charlotte

He wouldn't travel under Simon Leviev because he was wanted for fraud.

I also make sure they had the name that I saw on the credit card, David Sharon.

3.5. *What kind of scam was it?*

Simon followed a pattern: He would match with a woman on Tinder, take her on a costly and impressive first date (in the case of Cecilie Schrøder Fjellhøy, a trip on a private jet), and slowly build their relationship while flying around the world and secretly dating other women. At a particular point, his accusers assert that. Simon would connect emotionally with the women he matched with on Tinder, date them, and pursue a relationship with them in a well-planned strategy to which multiple women fell prey. Because his "enemies" were after him, he frequently asked for a loan some months afterward.

He would send them a video of himself wearing a blood-stained t-shirt, sitting in an ambulance with Peter. The latter was being treated by a nurse, with a picture of his alleged bodyguard Peter bleeding and wearing sutures on his forehead to make them think he was in danger. He conned multiple women by using the same image and videos. All women received the picture of the bodyguard who was bleeding (Picture 2) to raise money.

4. Conclusion

This study used social semiotic analysis to examine how love scams can happen on dating apps and promote the importance of using the desire for "true" love as a springboard for examining various manipulations. This study was carried out to reveal the documentary film's gestures and conversation. This study proved that the Online Romance Scam is a very effective fraud that leaves its victim with severe financial and emotional harm. All were adversely affected by the crime, and several people found their experience horrifying.

Most victims did not have coping techniques since they did not receive help from friends and relatives. Denial was discovered to be a poor coping mechanism, leaving the victim vulnerable to a second swindle (e.g., not admitting the fraud was real or being unable to distinguish the bogus identity from the criminal). Oral, visual, and gestural manipulation was used. A lady who finds real love must find out about the person's online dating history. We presume that the romance scam's success is influenced by the elements that make normal relationships successful. The effectiveness of a romance scam depends heavily on personal affinities associated with particular romantic fantasies, which are described through personal love stories. It can be shown in Ayleen's unconditional love, Pernilla's healthy partnership, and Cecilie's online love story.

With four different types of online manipulative profiles, Simon seeks to create a dynamic process for choosing and constructing identities. He delivered romantic first impressions, heaps of attention, and lastly, dealt with business while creating the perfect first impression for his dating apps (getting money from his victims).

Here's the bottom line for avoiding online love scammers: Never give cash or gifts to a crush you haven't seen in person. Check the person's profile picture's reverse image

search results to determine whether it's connected to another name or to details that don't match — those are indicators of a hoax.

Acknowledgments

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