

In Puppet Master's Hand: Discursive Manipulation Strategies in Socio-semiotic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

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This paper linguistically investigates the main character of the Tinder Swindler documentary film. Simon, the main character discursive strategies designed to manipulate girls' minds into accepting, even doing anything that he said to get profit to fulfill his luxurious lifestyle. Regardless of the scientific and technological tools utilized by swindlers, language is the primary communication. From a socio-semiotic standpoint, this research shows that criminal suspects use discourse resources to fabricate false information and construct false identities through discursive practice, with the goal of gaining victims' trust, tricking, deceiving, and manipulating them into giving out confidential information and funds. Using dating apps scam discourse as an example, this study investigates the dynamic process of selecting and building identities in the social-cultural context by altering associated discourse resources and techniques. This research also offers a socio-semiotic strategy for preventing online scams. The result shows that Simon tries to make a dynamic process of selecting and building identities.

Keywords: *discursive manipulation; film; identity; scam; socio-semiotic*

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has promoted social contact and the search for a soul mate since its inception. There was a lot of discussion in the early research on whether it was possible to develop "genuine" relationships with "strangers" online or whether such relationships were meaningless and might even be damaging psychologically. Scammers must be skilled in three areas, according to Blommaert and Omoniyi (2006). The first requirement is the capacity to "control, explore, and exploit" the opportunities for global communication. The second requirement is a certain degree of "cultural competence," and the third requirement is linguistic proficiency, which enables them to produce messages that reflect their projected identity (Blommaert &

Omoniyi, 2006). The research of Blommaert and Omoniyi covered the scope of email fraud but it's able to cover the general fraud. In contrast to other Internet and telecom scams, the romance scam causes "double harm" for victims, who lose both money and relationships (Buchanan, 2012).

The number of friendship platforms or commonly referred to as social media today makes it very easy for users to be able to communicate with anyone, from anywhere, even across countries. In the information age of globalization, internet users must be wiser in sharing their information, especially personal information. User negligence will provide benefits for fraudsters in cyberspace (Salman et al., 2013) . These scammers typically target people seeking an established romantic partner as victims, often via dating websites, apps, or social media by pretending to be potential friends. Scammers usually create fake online profiles designed to lure victims to view their photos and communicate (Kopp et al., 2016). Sindy R. Sumter etl. (2016) explain in their journal Love me Tinder: untangling emerging adults' motivations for using the dating application Tinder published in Telematics and Informatics, Elsevier that their study shows that Tinder should not be seen only as a hookup application which is fun with no strings attached, but as a multifunctional tool that meets a variety of emerging needs among adults. The negative impact has not been explained in detail there (Sumter et al., 2017). In this study, the use of the Tinder application will be explained in full in relation to the cases that are currently circulating

Research on victims has been an effective method of preventing telecom and Internet scam due to the intricacy of cross-border crimes and challenges in collecting digital proof. Numerous research has been done to look at the psychological traits of romance scam victims (Buchanan, 2012; Fischer et al., 2013; Whitty, 2015). According to Clark, when someone experiences bad luck, others may either view them as "sympathy worthy" or "blame" them for their predicament (Clark, 1987). Are victims of romance scams deserving or undeserving of compassion?

A line with the explanation above, the documentary film, *Tinder Swindler* shows the real fact about love scams. Three women recount how they were conned by convicted conman Simon Leviev (real name Shimon Hayut) after meeting him on the dating app in the top-rated Netflix documentary *The Tinder Swindler*. The film provides a thorough and intensely intimate description of how Leviev connected with his victims using Tinder before defrauding them for hundreds of thousands of dollars. What does the *Tinder Swindler* tell us about romance fraud, and how can the other person prevent being the next victim? *The Tinder Swindler* is a potent

example of what may go wrong. This warrants the examination of the connections between love and discursive manipulation as a starting point. In other words, it is vital to disaggregate discursive manipulative types to demonstrate their differential, love scam impacts.

Talking about this film, social semiotics is the perfect perspective to know more about the issues. It along with the statement about socio semiotics as texts are viewed as multimodal complexes in social semiotics since more than one mode makes up each text. Modes are the tangible tools for clearly expressing meaning. Examples include writing, speaking, gesture, music, dance, and layout (Gualberto & Kress, 2019).

Accordingly, this study asks: How does the socio-semiotic show the manipulation in dating applications? This article aims to: (i) investigate how love scams can occur in online dating apps, and (ii) advocate for the centrality of hope to find 'true' love as the starting point for the investigation of various types of manipulations. To explore Simon's identity from the victims' perspectives, and give meaning and interpretation, a social semiotic method could be applied. The authors present the rest of the study as follows: theoretical background, finding and discussion, and conclusion. The authors present the rest of the study as follows: theoretical background, finding and discussion, and conclusion.

Online Dating

Online daters are frequently required to complete personality tests, surveys about their hobbies, and questions about the qualities they want in a spouse. From there, compatibility scores are frequently assigned to matches. In Tinder apps, one of online dating application, with 55 billion matches to date, Tinder makes it easy to meet new people. Tinder got features designed to make you stand out and increase your matchmaking potential, but it's up to you if and when you make a move. Start with Bio, your bio is a snapshot of who you are. If writing isn't your thing, you can make a list of things you like or want. Keep it light and talk about your hobbies or go deep and talk about what you're looking for in a match.

Other websites let users search for their own matches but doing so requires them to go through a sea of profiles. Online daters frequently compare appealing profiles for hours, according to researchers (Whitty, 2015, 2021). Whitty has claimed that online daters, like those who place newspaper advertising, are motivated to 'commodify' themselves by putting forth a persona that others will feel obligated to 'purchase' into (Whitty, M.T., Baker, A.J., Inman, 2007). Researchers have discovered that some of the qualities that online daters find significant to exhibit are their appearance, interests and hobbies, personality, humor, occupation, intelligence, uniqueness, and goals and dreams (see (Whitty, M.T., Baker, A.J., Inman, 2007).

Contrary to what the hyperpersonal hypothesis would suggest, dating site relationships between strangers are frequently not intimate or close. The characteristics of the area and the regular progression of linkages from these places both contribute to this explanation. Creating a profile takes more time for online daters than actually getting to know one another, as was just mentioned. In actuality, the processes involved in dating differ greatly from those that Walther and others saw, where people spend a lot of time online chatting and revealing private aspects of themselves.

Discursive Manipulation

As was mentioned in the introduction to this article, there were two opposing theoretical perspectives on online relationships in the early days of the Internet: one held that these relationships were vapid and pointless, and the other held that the Internet offered new, radical opportunities for building relationships. When thinking about these beliefs, we must keep in mind that the Internet was not what it is today, and the types of people that used it did not reflect most of the society. Most of the virtual environment was composed of text, where users controlled their online personas (Whitty, 2015).

It is essential to first look at the social context of manipulative discourse to comprehend and analyze it. We've already assumed that one of the traits of manipulation, as opposed to persuasion, is that it entails dominance and authority. An examination of the level of control that some social actors or organizations have over others is part of an analysis of this power dimension (Van Dijk, 2006). We also assumed that such control is first and foremost, control of the recipient's mind, specifically, their beliefs, and, secondarily, control of the recipient's behaviors based on those manipulated beliefs.

A dating application user must be clearer about the type of manipulation that they wish to explore before moving on to a more theoretical account and the analysis of some data. As implied, manipulation, as used in this context, is an interpersonal and communication behavior in which a manipulator exerts power over another, typically against their will or against their best interests. In common parlance, the word "manipulation" is associated with unpleasant things because doing so goes against societal norms (Van Dijk, 2006).

In this definition, manipulation occurs through discourse in a broad sense, which includes non-verbal cues like gestures, facial expressions, text formatting, images, sounds, music, and so on. However, keep in mind that as such, discourse structures are not manipulative; they only serve these purposes or have these effects in particular communicative contexts and in

accordance with how participants understand these contexts in their context models (Van Dijk, 2006; Whitty, 2015). As stated, manipulation, which involves dominant and dominated groups, institutions, and their clientele, is an example of a social practice of power abuse. Accordingly, the "same" discourse (or discourse fragment) may theoretically be manipulative in one scenario but not in another (Van Dijk, 2006). Power is involved in manipulation, but misuse of power, or dominance, is also a factor. That is, manipulation denotes the use of discourse to exert an illicit type of influence. Manipulators lead people to believe or act in ways that are detrimental to the interests of the manipulated and favor the interests of the manipulator (Van Dijk, 2006).

Language, Semiotics, and Identity

Most people believe that semiotics is the "science of signs." (Chandler, 2002). There are two pioneers who have significantly advanced the field of modern semiotics throughout its history. The first is Swiss linguist Saussure, whose "theory of the sign" provides a "dyadic" or two-part model of the sign and describes the total that arises from the relationship of the signifier with the signified.

Discourse analyses have progressed in the direction of analyzing discourse as a genre by connecting discourse structures to communication goals. Genre analysis is a more focused type of discourse analysis that examines any recurring linguistic features of conventionalized forms that people use to build groups, communicate, and accomplish tasks. Such improper influence may be used with images, photos, movies, or other forms of media in a broader, semiotic meaning (Leeuwen, 2005).

Methodology

This study employs qualitative method of socio-semiotic analysis of documentary film. The analysis is based on the description, interpretation and explanation of the linguistic and visual modes of texts, drawing on the scams process, interpersonal and textual features of the documentary film. In this regard, strategies such as framing, salience, classification, and visual positioning of the actors were factors which informed the investigation of love scam and discursive manipulation in the film.

The sample comprises 1 Netflix documentary Film entitled *Tinder Swindler* published 2022. This period is significant because it covers the story of the Simon as Puppet's master in 2018-2020. The period therefore serves as a window through which many women became the victims. The 20 data were selected through deep watch and analysis.

Socio-semiotics and Love Scam Identity Construction

A socio-semiotic approach can help to reveal the inter-semiotic interaction between signs and other sign systems as well as the institutional stances that are concealed behind various readings of the same sign (Cheng et al., 2020). According to a social semiotic theory, meaning is the result of a social agent's (the rhetor's) prompt, whose meanings are semiotically articulated by a designer and are materialized by a producer (Gualberto & Kress, 2019). From a socio-semiotic vantage point, the mutual influence of the social system and language symbol system cannot be separated. The authors examine the impact on language selection and development as well as the use of language to create a social identity through a review of the variations in language and writing systems.

Love scammers pretend to be friends to earn the trust of their victims and commit fraud. Usually, it takes place on a social networking platform or dating service online. The victim and the perpetrator hardly ever truly interact. It can also occur in face-to-face relationships, as The Tinder Swindler demonstrates.

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

Scam Timeline identity	Develop a trusting relationship with 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 of sympathy
Triple hit			

Source: (Cheng et al., 2020)

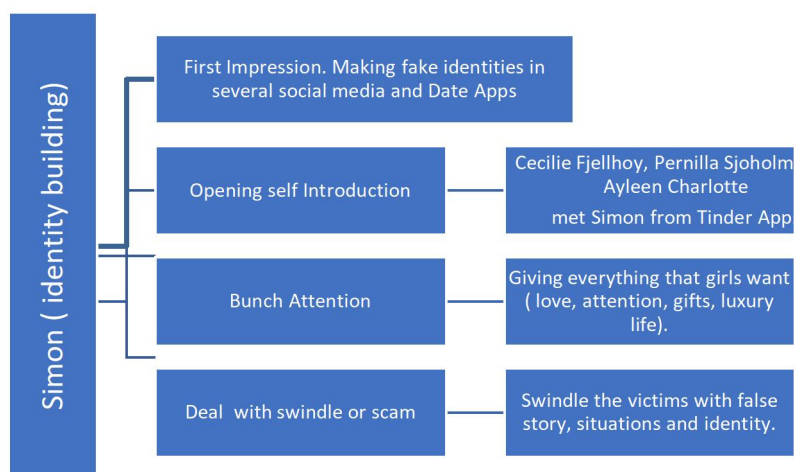
We discover that, in contrast to the "double hit" proposed by Whitty and Buchanan (2012, 2016), the scam victims' identity construction goes through three stages because of the "triple hit" (Table 1).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This research focused on how love scams can occur in online dating apps, and advocate for the centrality of hope to find 'true' love as the starting point for the investigation of various types of manipulations. This research is a part of a qualitative case study for its depth analysis of love scam and the subject of the documentary movie for socio-semiotic analysis.

The data gathered from Netflix documentary movie and took some purposive samples of utterances, gestures, symbols, and dialogues from the scene when the main characters, Simon, Cecilie, Pernilla and Ayleen, started their relationship until they ended it with a climax of the arrested of Simon by Interpol on a fake passport, under the name David Sharon.

Figure 1. Simon's Identity Building



First Impression

Resorting to psychology tactics to lure women, Simon set up a profile on the world-famous dating app Tinder, where he verified his identity by including the handle to his official Instagram account and pictures of himself traveling in private jets, flying planes, enjoying the most expensive and lavish restaurants and hotels all over the world.

Simon also created the website LLP Diamonds, making the company look legitimate, so that anyone who Googled him would see the link to the website and assume that he really was the son of a multi-millionaire. The data as follows:

Datum 1 (00:05:53) CECILIE, 29, IT consultant, MA 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. And he had his link to his Instagram. He had so many pictures and so many followers. Business meetings, parties, beaches. This guy is just having a very different life than I ever will experience. And I was just thinking that it would be kind of cool just to meet up. I decided to swipe right.”



Figure 2. Simon's profile picture in Tinder Apps

According to Figure 2, Simon looks so professional and stylist. The personal jet plane made the perfect impression on Cecilie and all the girls who seen it.

Datum 2 (00:22:02) Pernilla Sjöholm, 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.

Based on 3 data above, it really shows that Simon was prepare everything to make his profile perfect. Start from the outfit, social medias, photos, luxury activities and fake identity or history.

Opening self-introduction

Opening self-introduction deal with how Simon reacts with girls to start a relationship. Simon always just responds all the match girls fairly quickly and surprise them with a sweet attention.

The data as follows:

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?"*

Bunch attention

It's time to learn how Simon to get a girls' attention successfully and then keep it. Many guys struggle with women and want to figure out how to get a girl to notice him. The conversation text below will show how Simon gets women's attention the right way and make a great first impression. The data as follows:

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.*

Based on the data above Simon's personality is also important to make sure that he loves the girls. It is because girls like to be around guy who are fun, loyal, exciting, and interesting. Women quickly notice men like that and want to hang around them and to get to know them.

Deal with swindle or scam

Simons starts to give discourse resources to fabricate false information and construct false identities through discursive practice, with the goal of gaining victims' trust, tricking, deceiving, and manipulating them into giving out confidential information and funds.

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 time being he needed to stay away.

Datum 13 (00:28:33) Cecile

(Simon Text message) photo

Blood , Peter hurt

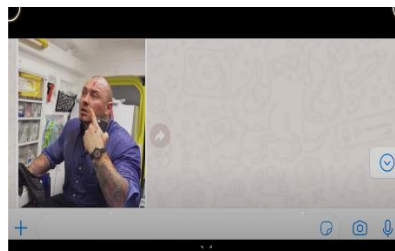


Fig 3. *The picture of bleeding bodyguard (Peter)*

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 (01:28:59) Ayleen Charlotte

The same day, he was flying to Oslo for a business trip, he was just going out to see her.

Datum 19 (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 20 (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.

What kind of scam was it?

Simon apparently 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. His accusers claim that, at a certain point. In a well thought out scheme that several women fell victim to, he would form an emotional connection with the women he matched with on Tinder, date them and pursue a relationship with them, which often took a couple of months, before asking them to lend him money because his “enemies” were after him.

To make them believe he was in danger, he would send them a picture of his so-called bodyguard Peter, bleeding with stitches on his forehead followed by a video of himself wearing a blood-stained t-shirt, sitting in an ambulance with Peter who was being tended to by a nurse. He used the same photo and videos to trick several women. The photo of his bleeding bodyguard (Picture 2) was sent to all woman to get a lot of money.

Simon Leviev never served any prison for the crimes he committed against Cecilie Fjellhøy, Pernilla Sjöholm, and Ayleen Charlotte. He (Shimon Hayut) was under arrest by Greek police because of traveling with a fake Israeli passport and was arrested at the Athens Airport.

CONCLUSION

This study adopted the social semiotic analytical approach to the analysis of how love scams can occur in online dating apps and advocate for the centrality of hope to find ‘true’ love as the starting point for the investigation of various types of manipulations. This was done with a view to unveiling the dialogues, gesture from the documentary film. This paper was able to establish that the Online Romance Scam is a very successful scam which causes considerable financial and emotional damage to its victim. All were negatively impacted by the crime, and some others regarded their experience as horrific. Due to the absence of support from friends and family, most victims had not developed coping mechanisms. Denial was found to be an

inadequate coping strategy, leaving the victim open to a second round of the scam (e.g., not admitting the fraud was real or being unable to distinguish the bogus identity from the criminal). The manipulation happened through oral, visual and gesture. As the woman who found true love, they must learn the background of the person in love apps. We assume that the same success factors found in normal relationships contribute to the success of the romance scam. It can be found from Cecilie's online love story, Pernilla's good relationship and Ayleen's pure love. Personal affinities related to personal romantic imaginations, which are described by personal love stories, play an important role in the success of a romance scam.

Simon tries to make a dynamic process of selecting and building identities with 4 kinds of online manipulatives profile. He created perfect first impression in his dating apps, gave romantic first impressions, gave bunch of attention and the last deal with the business (getting money from his victims).

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