

Chapter 10

Discursive Manipulation Strategies in Virtual Scams in Global Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how online fraudsters explore the experiential, interpersonal, and textual language metafunctions in the crafting of their emails for global audiences. A critical study of international virtual scam emails over a period of time shows that these scammers tend to improve on how they construct their messages as they rely on experiential knowledge of what they believe will appeal to their audience. Recent scam emails use fewer pressure tactics, and writers present their identity as that of a non-confident, naïve, vulnerable, and ignorant persons, thereby increasing the discursive power of their addressees in the interaction. Scammers also use different forms of politeness strategies to bait their victims.

INTRODUCTION

The arrival of the Internet has had a great impact on language to the extent that the medium has led to the evolution of new genres that appear to be suitable only in the context of online discourse. Linguists in particular have focused different aspects of the features of language used in computer-

mediated communication (CMC) – basically, the orthographic and discourse features (Herring, 1999; Thurlow, 2003; Park, 2007; Holmer, 2008). Apart from identifying the unique orthography and structure (Crystal, 2006), the issue of identity has been a major focus of internet researchers (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Harrison & Thomas, 2009).

Due to the relative anonymity of interlocutors in online interactions, the Internet has encouraged all sorts of uninhibited discourse behavior.

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These behaviors include uninhibited verbal and sexual behavior, trolling, flaming, identity theft, internet fraud, and so forth. In social psychology, the concept of online disinhibition explains that, in online communication, there is a loosening of social restrictions and inhibitions that are typically observed in offline communication contexts. This loss of inhibition brings alive the concepts of dissociative anonymity and invisibility; that is, users can operate without any indication of identity (Suler, 2004). As online access spreads across the globe, these behaviors increasingly made their way into international online exchanges, perhaps the most notorious of which involved Internet crimes perpetrated in global contexts.

Since the early 1990s, large number of scam messages are sent around the world every day. Despite the fact that many of the recipients of these emails ignore them, a few individuals do respond to these messages and get baited by the scammers. In the process, they lose their money or get their identity stolen. As online media allow scammers to target victims anywhere there is computer access, the scope of these scams has become global in nature. And as more parts of the globe gain online access – be it through computer terminals or mobile phones, the international field for such crimes will only increase. Perhaps the most common of the global-reaching online scams is “Advance fee fraud,” also known as “419,” and this scam is named after a statute of the Nigerian criminal code.

This chapter explores how online scammers use Halliday’s (1973, 1985) metafunctions of language (experiential, interpersonal, and textual functions) in their mails and the discursive strategies used by these online fraudsters to make their communication relevant across cultures. To examine this phenomenon, the author analyzed two hundred scam mails sent over a period of four years (2005-2009) and focused in particular on language metafunctions in scam mails. In this chapter, the author presents the results of that

research while also providing an overview of certain uninhibited behaviors common in online communication in general and found in virtual scamming in particular. The author also briefly discusses future research directions in virtual behavior.

UNINHIBITED ONLINE BEHAVIOR

Online communication encourages the inflicting of malicious behavior through different channels of digital media including email, instant messaging, and text messaging. Some behaviors are typically associated with the online culture. Such behaviors are said to be encouraged by the context of online communication, which makes users feel insulated and anonymous. Such feelings of isolation and anonymity, in turn, can cultivate what social psychologists generally refer to as *deindividuation*. Deindividuation means the loss of the sense of individual identity. This loss, which is also associated with a loosening of normal inhibitions, often promotes behavior that violates social standards (Joinson, 1998). Several uninhibited online behaviors have been identified over time, but for the purpose of this chapter, we shall discuss four of them: cyberbullying, flaming, spamming, and scamming.

Cyberbullying, or online bullying, involves the dissemination of harmful or cruel speech or engaging in other forms of social cruelty using the Internet or other information communication technologies (Willard, 2007; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Patchin and Hinduja, (2006) also define cyberbullying as willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text. According to Ramirez, et al. (2010: 731), cyberbullying often includes everything from voice, text, picture, or video information exchanged via cellular phones to e-mail, instant messaging, Websites, or online chat rooms. It also entails the

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