

Romance Scam Research Center

SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY AND SAFETY FOUNDATION

LIVING EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS

Grooming and Trust Development

Grooming and Trust Development in Relationship-Based Fraud: Evidence Synthesis

Across the reviewed evidence, grooming in relationship-based fraud is best characterized as a staged, interactional process in which offenders cultivate perceived intimacy and credibility through sustained, often asynchronous communication, staged disclosure, platform migration to private channels, and progressive financial escalation. Studies consistently report that declarations of affection and frequent contact are central grooming moves that precede requests for money, but the tempo of grooming varies widely across cases and subtypes. The corpus provides coherent descriptive patterns linking sustained affective persuasion to compliance and to isolation from third-party scrutiny; however, authors also emphasize heterogeneous methods, limited dyadic interaction data, and other evidence gaps that constrain causal inference and population-level generalization.

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PUBLICATIONS	EVIDENCE STATEMENTS	CITED SOURCES	SYNTHESIS VERSION
30	125	30	77

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Staged process and temporal variability

Multiple studies within the reviewed corpus describe grooming as a staged, interactional sequence in which early rapport-building and declarations of affection precede platform migration and later financial requests. Detailed qualitative analyses and conversation-corpus work document repeated patterns of sustained contact, affective expression, and stepwise escalation toward monetary extraction. [\[1\]](#) [\[3\]](#) [\[10\]](#)

Reported tempos vary: some investigations document monetary requests within days or a week, while other studies and case analyses record grooming lasting many months (six to twelve months or longer) before investment or larger extractions occur. The evidence therefore supports a staged model but also emphasizes tempo variability across subtypes and contexts. [\[5\]](#) [\[6\]](#) [\[7\]](#)

Persuasion mechanics and linguistic tactics

Linguistic and discourse analyses in the evidence identify recurrent persuasive devices used during grooming, including rapid declarations of love (love-bombing), future-oriented promises, religious framing, and need-based appeals that reframe transfers as charitable or caregiving acts. Corpus and conversation analyses show modal and lexical patterns (for example frequent use of 'will' to conjure a shared future) and repeated affectionate lexemes that support these interpretations. [\[11\]](#) [\[12\]](#) [\[13\]](#) [\[14\]](#)

Multiple studies document how asynchronous communication enables crafted, persona-consistent replies and selective disclosure: the extra time afforded by text-based messaging allows offenders to produce polished messages, selectively present desirable traits, and manage impressions in ways that increase perceived intimacy. [\[2\]](#) [\[10\]](#) [\[1\]](#)

Secrecy, isolation, and facilitating compliance

Several sources document tactics aimed at isolating targets and discouraging third-party disclosure: moving conversations to private platforms, reframing family or friends as unsympathetic or dangerous to the relationship, and explicit requests for secrecy. These isolation strategies reduce external scrutiny and are described as enabling larger or repeated transfers. [\[3\]](#) [\[4\]](#) [\[15\]](#)

Empirical and qualitative work shows scammers often move communication from dating apps to private messaging, build trust, and then present investment or emergency requests for cryptocurrency. Moving communication away from official dating sites into private channels increases victim isolation and reduces reporting or detection; it can also impede law-enforcement tracking and enable scammers to gather more personal information. [\[15\]](#) [\[4\]](#)

Financial escalation and operational subtypes

Empirical and qualitative studies consistently report progressive financial escalation: small gifts or test transfers are requested first and, when returned or accepted, are followed by larger requests framed as emergencies, investment opportunities, or joint projects. Offender-side experimental and interview work finds fraudsters adapt their presentations in response to reward signals and use follow-up after initial payments to draw victims further into schemes. [\[16\]](#) [\[5\]](#) [\[17\]](#) [\[18\]](#) [\[19\]](#)

The literature distinguishes at least two operational subtypes. Affection-focused romance scams (AFRS) typically emphasize rapid declarations of love, romantic narratives, and direct early solicitations in some cases; relationship-based investment scams (often labeled pig-butcher or romance-baiting) involve prolonged grooming that intentionally seeds and legitimizes investment opportunities (sometimes with staged small returns) before larger transfers. [\[1\]](#) [\[20\]](#) [\[21\]](#) [\[7\]](#) [\[22\]](#)

Victim experience, harms, and decision processes

Victim narratives and qualitative studies consistently report dual harms: material financial loss plus the traumatic loss of an experienced romantic relationship. Many victims retain emotional belief in the relationship after disclosure, which can enable continued payments or delayed recognition of fraud cues. [\[16\]](#) [\[23\]](#) [\[24\]](#)

Researchers describe how strong attachment, urgency framing, and reframing money requests as acts of care impair clear decision-making. Several qualitative accounts link sustained affection and staged vulnerability to impulsive compliance and difficulty disengaging when feelings are invested in a perceived partner. [\[25\]](#) [\[26\]](#) [\[27\]](#)

Methodological patterns, limitations, and evidence gaps

Methodological approaches in the reviewed corpus are heterogeneous: qualitative interviews with victims, corpus linguistics of scam messages, police and court-record case analyses, offender interviews, complaint-data studies, and a growing number of systematic and scoping reviews. This diversity yields rich descriptive detail on grooming processes but limits the ability to draw causal or population-level inferences. [\[1\]](#) [\[14\]](#) [\[8\]](#) [\[4\]](#) [\[28\]](#)

Authors explicitly note key evidence gaps and limitations: few empirical studies examine real-time interactions between scammers and victims on messaging platforms; some analyses rely on small or specialized samples (for example, one study selected 30 victim-scammer conversations for detailed linguistic analysis); and the reviewed literature is limited and mixed regarding deception detection, with studies indicating people generally still perform poorly at detecting online deception. [\[10\]](#) [\[8\]](#) [\[9\]](#)

Future directions supported by the evidence

Multiple authors recommend prioritized empirical work that directly examines actual offender-victim communications to identify specific linguistic indicators and temporal patterns that enable trust formation and exploitation. Evidence-based calls emphasize conversation- or discourse-level methods and digital-ethnographic approaches to capture prolonged grooming dynamics and offender adaptation. [\[12\]](#) [\[29\]](#)

The reviewed corpus highlights three findings supported by the sources: few empirical studies have examined interactions between scammers and victims on messaging platforms; victims reported emotional manipulation that impaired clear thinking and decision-making; and at least one educational game's main narrative depicts a romance scam in which the protagonist, Claire, is progressively drawn deeper into the fraud, with surrounding conversation threads included to maintain social realism. [8] [25] [30]

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This AI-assisted synthesis is based on reviewed evidence records. It may contain errors or omissions. Follow the publication and DOI links, consult the original works, and make your own judgment about the evidence.

About this document

This living evidence synthesis was produced through AI-assisted analysis of approved RSRC publications. Claims are linked to supporting evidence and checked for source consistency. It may change as the corpus is updated. Readers should consult the cited publications when making research, policy, or practice decisions.

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