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The Psychological Impact of Online Romance Fraud

Introduction

Online romance fraud has become a major cybersecurity issue, especially as scammers increasingly impersonate U.S. military members to gain trust. The YouTube report “*Romance scammers exploit military members to bilk civilians out of big bucks*” presents real victims who were targeted by individuals pretending to be deployed soldiers. These scams combine technical deception with deep emotional manipulation. Using this specific incident as a case study shows how social science perspectives help explain why these scams work and how severely they affect victims.

Analysis

Psychology plays a huge role in understanding romance fraud. In the video, victims describe how scammers used the respected image of the military, constant communication, and emotional storytelling to build trust. Scammers take advantage of basic human needs: wanting to feel seen, valued, and connected. This aligns with Whitty’s (2018) findings that romance scammers often use emotional mirroring and fabricated intimacy to lower a victim’s skepticism. One victim explained that the scanner claimed he couldn’t video chat because he was “on deployment,” a common tactic highlighted in the report. When victims discover the truth, many experience shock, anger, shame, and even self-blame. These reactions can make it hard to trust others or feel comfortable online again.

From a sociological perspective, the case reflects how scammers exploit cultural respect for military service and the loneliness many people feel in digital spaces. The internet blurs the line between genuine connection and manipulation, which gives scammers more room to operate. The video also shows how scammers steal real soldiers' photos, creating a false sense of legitimacy that makes victims more vulnerable.

Solutions

Addressing romance fraud requires both technical tools and social science insight. On the technical side, platforms can strengthen identity verification, improve scam-detection algorithms, and make reporting systems easier to use. The video emphasizes that many victims did not know how to report the scam or where to seek help, showing the need for clearer reporting pathways. But technology alone isn't enough. Education grounded in psychology and sociology can help people recognize grooming behaviors, emotional manipulation, and common red flags. Awareness campaigns specifically about "military romance scams" could help prevent cases like the one shown in the video.

Barriers and Ways Forward

One of the biggest barriers is shame. Many victims stay silent because they fear being judged or blamed. In the video, victims said they felt "embarrassed" and "foolish," which kept them from reporting the scam immediately. This silence allows scammers to keep operating. To overcome this, prevention efforts need to be empathetic and non-blaming. Messaging should emphasize that scammers are skilled manipulators, not that victims are "careless." Collaboration between experts, counselors, and social scientists can create support systems that address both the technical and emotional sides of recovery.

Reflection and Conclusion

This case study shows that fake-soldier romance scams are not just digital crimes; they are emotional and social violations. A multidisciplinary approach helps us protect not just people's data, but their well-being. Understanding the human side of cybersecurity makes our solutions stronger, more compassionate, and more realistic for the world we live in today.

References

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