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# No Romance Without Finance, They Say

Romance Scam in Ghana and Ivory Coast, or how West African youngsters manage to charm Westerners of all ages to the point of making them pay astronomical sums through their fake love messages on the Internet.

by Valentina Peri

*You think that I don't mean a single word I say.  
It's only words and words are all I have  
to take your heart away.  
Elvis Presley, Words, 1969*

**A** romance scam is a confidence trick involving feigning romantic intentions towards a victim, gaining their affection, and then using that goodwill to get the victim to send money to the scammer under false pretenses or to commit fraud against the victim. These scams can be perpetrated by organized criminal gangs, who work together to take money from multiple victims at a time, or single individuals.

Romance scams often take place through online dating websites, but scammers may also use social media like Instagram, Facebook, Google Hangouts or email to make contact. They create fake personal profiles using stolen photographs of attractive people. Love scammers strike up a relationship with their targets to build their trust, sometimes talking or chatting several times a day. They will express strong emotions in a relatively short period of time, and will suggest moving the relationship away from the website to a more private channel, such as phone, email or instant messaging. They often claim to be from Western countries, eventually the country of the victim, but traveling or working overseas. Romance scammers are very adept at knowing how to “play” their victims – sending love poems, presents, sex games in emails, building up a “loving relationship” with many promises of marriage and a future together.

My fascination with this phenomenon was ignited through my work as an independent curator, artist, and anthropologist. Over the course of the last decade, I have extensively investigated the role of technology in contemporary culture, focusing on love and intimacy in the digital age, through curated exhibitions, writings, books, and lectures. One of the highlights of my exploration was the traveling exhibition titled *Data Dating*, that I have presented in many cities since 2018, including Paris, London, Brussels, Geneva, Tel Aviv, and Brescia.<sup>1</sup> That exhibition served as a platform to interro-



Book cover *The New Romance Scammer's Instructor* Book, 2022. Courtesy Valentina Peri



Interview with two brouteurs, Abidjan 2023. Photo by Valentina Peri

gate the meaning of love in the Internet age, examining the implications of new technologies for the future of romantic relationships and exploring the ways in which screens influence our intimacy. However, it wasn't until 2021 that a new chapter in my research journey began. This pivotal moment was triggered by my viewing of Ben Asamoah's film *Sakawa* (2018), which sheds light on the world of romance scammers in Ghana. Remarkably, the film unveiled the real faces behind the online scams, dispelling my previous belief that these activities were only run by hackers or mafia-like organizations. Instead, the director, a Ghanaian-Belgian himself, portrayed individuals driven to cyber fraud out of urgent economic necessity or because alternative avenues of income were not sufficiently profitable in the face of endemic economic difficulties. This eye-opening film inspired my research and led to two research trips in Ghana in 2022, followed by a journey to Ivory Coast the following year.

Achille Mbembe's Abiola lecture (2016) served as a thought-provoking call to direct attention towards the digital realm and its impact on the transformation of African subjectivities, social structures, political landscapes, and economies. It encouraged us to examine these emerging virtual dimensions through a decolonized lens on African knowledges. Adopting that lens implies departing from viewing African societies solely through the lens of Western categories, theories, and values, and engaging with African knowledge systems on their own terms, recognizing the diversity, complexity, and richness of the continent's intellectual traditions. This approach also encompasses a reevaluation of power dy-

namics and historical narratives. Mbembe emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the agency and contributions of Africans throughout history, challenging stereotypes, deconstructing colonial biases, and empowering African narratives. In this paper, I try to engage with the above-mentioned perspective, and aim to underscore the pivotal role played by online romance scams in shaping the agency and socio-economic mobility of urban youth in Ghana and Ivory Coast. Additionally, I explore how it contributes to fostering entrepreneurship among young people in West Africa. Online scammers operate within a space of access and utilization facilitated by grey market processes, involving the redirection of technology, such as the use of secondhand computers,<sup>2</sup> and the misuse of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and several online dating websites. These applications have been harnessed by a user population and within a context of usage that was entirely unforeseen by the developers within the US-centric high-tech industry. The concept of decolonization of the virtual claimed by Mbembe is particularly significant in this case, if we consider that this space is dominated by the interests of Silicon Valley's predatory capitalism.

Many scholars understand the origins of scamming as a response to the political and economic marginalization experienced by young people in urban Africa. Despite the digital divide, West Africa emerged quickly as a hub from which many scammers known by various names such as *Yahoo-boys* or *419* in Nigeria, *feymens* in Cameroon, *Gays mans* in Benin, or *brouteurs* in Ivory Coast, implemented their deceptive tactics and tricks. Online romance scams had already emerged in the early 2000s, with the advent of online dating sites. However, it is worth noting that scam strategies and procedures were carried out prior to the Internet using technologies like fax, telephone, or postal mail, through the 1980s and 1990s. The type of deception opportunities available online are constantly changing as technology develops.

The history of cyber-scramming in West Africa is interrelated with Nigeria, where the practice of Advance Fee Fraud<sup>3</sup> has been perpetrated since the 1970s. Initially, it was conducted through traditional postal services and later transitioned to the Internet. In the 2000s, Nigeria introduced Article 419 in the Penal Code, which established legal provisions aimed at combating this form of cybercrime. To evade the increasingly stringent law enforcement measures in their own country and expand their operations beyond English-speaking regions, the *yahooboy*s established themselves in neighbouring countries. In doing so, they disseminated techniques and strategies for Internet scamming.

In the initial phase of this phenomenon, the central venues for conducting fraudulent activities were Internet cafés. In my interactions with interviewees, one of whom I encountered in Agona Swedru, Ghana, I gained insights into the pivotal role played by these spaces in shaping the practice of scamming within the country. One of the informants I interviewed suggested that the origins of this activity in Ghana can be traced back to this city at the beginning of the 2000s, influenced by the presence of Nigerians, before spreading in the rest of the country. Internet cafés represented an entirely new realm of mediated exposure for African youth. As Jenna Burrell underlines in her book *Invisible Users. Youth in the Internet Cafés of Ghana*:



On the trotto to Agona, Swedru Ghana. Photo by Valentina Peri.



youth struggled with an immobility that was in part a product of the way certain foreign governments regarded Ghanaians (and other Africans) with a particular bias against these young nonelites (as liable visa overstayers). These youth also sought to define and claim spaces apart from the determination of local authorities, apart from parents, teachers, preachers, and politicians whose surveillance and disciplining were so all-encompassing elsewhere. This translated into a distinctive approach to inhabiting the Internet café and engaging online that focused on bypassing these blocks on agency, approximating a cosmopolitan self through electronic travels (2012: 52).

The public space of Internet cafés held the groundbreaking capability of facilitating encounters across vast distances and enabling foreign connections at the cost of an internet connection fee. The ability to establish connections with individuals from other countries, which was once the privilege of the elite in many African countries, was suddenly made accessible to a broader segment of the population through the relatively affordable and accessible space of Internet cafés.

Since the 1990s, numerous researches have highlighted the opportunities provided by virtual spaces and social networks for individuals in the Western world to explore and experiment with their own identities (Hancock 2007; Donath 1998; Turkle 1995; Joinson 2009). Many artistic works in recent decades have embraced and critically engaged with the concept of playing with one's online persona.<sup>4</sup> However, in West Africa, the Internet's fluidity and anonymity have been harnessed in markedly different ways compared to users in the Global North.

The freedom offered by the ability to manipulate aspects such as race, gender, age, and location in chat room conversations and online profiles has led African youth to construct alternative identities through text and images. This process of digital self-fashioning has enabled them not only to carve out spaces distinct from traditional authorities – in-



Original Bigwig drawing the cover of the book at pIAR Residency, Kumasi Ghana. Photo by Valentina Peri.

cluding parents, teachers, religious leaders, and politicians – but also to engage in Internet scams. The type of fraud that prevails in the cybercrime business both in Ghana and Ivory Coast, the countries of my research until now, is precisely romance scam, the most prevalent and prolific format since the years 2010.

Online dating and romance scams are in many cases “man-woman format” or “gender-swapping”: they involve “male switching” scammers faking as females online through fictitious profiles and accounts that bear erotic images and videos of women, mainly actresses, models or influencers to lure victims into relationships. They consistently collaborate with their girlfriends, sisters, and friends, especially when victims demand face-to-face interaction or phone calls. Many scammers, recognizing the suspicion they were increasingly generating by identifying as African with the individuals they were connecting online, started to pose often using a white persona, using false social media profiles that often cross racial, gender, class, and geographic boundaries.

The cover illustration of the first book I edited in 2022, *The New Romance Scammer's Instructor*, highlights these digital performances as a contemporary diversion of Fanon's “white masks,”<sup>6</sup> as scammers temporarily shed their appearance in order to hijack the wealth of the Global North. This shedding of identity and adopting new digital personas allows scammers to engage in deceptive practices, recalling Fanon's theories on the psychological effects of colonialism. Instead of colonised individuals adopting the cultural norms and identity of the colonisers in order to adapt and be accepted, in a remarkable twist, fraudsters adopt false digital identities to gain access to resources and financial gains.

Scammers often target individuals or entities from wealthier regions, exploiting the imbalances, which can be seen as a form of digital resistance or retribution, echoing some of Fanon's ideas about resistance to colonialism.

In their deceptive tactics, as soon as the scammers feel they have connected with the victim enough to ask for money, they prey on the victim's false sense of a relationship to lure them into sending money for months, even years, waiting for opportunities to invent emergencies that require money to be wired. These requests may be for gas money, bus or airplane tickets to visit the victim, medical or education expenses. There is usually the promise the scammer will one day join the victim in the victim's home country. Sometimes they twist the relationship into one of blackmail. According to the Federal Trade Commission of the United States, the reports of these online scams have nearly tripled in the past years, and in 2020 alone victims lost around 304 million US dollars from being swindled by their cyber sweetheart. That's up about 50% from 2019. The BBB 2019 Scam Tracker Risk Report indicates that romance scams are riskiest to people in the 55-64 age group, and women are more receptive than men.

The scammers I interviewed both in Ghana and Ivory Coast, do not define scamming as theft. Instead, they see themselves as young entrepreneurs, who managed to emerge from a complicated economic situation thanks to their skills and intelligence. Many see scamming as a temporary activity, which allows them to save money and then invest in legal and profitable businesses. Anthropologist Sasha Newell (2021) pinpoints that the new social figure of the *brouteur* epitomises the transformative power of the Internet, and underlines the appeal for the scammers of the Afro-futuristic prestige of outsmarting the former colonists at their own technology, as they claimed that their vast and highly visible wealth was repayment for the “colonial debt”. One of the interviewees in Abidjan referenced to the famous zouglou song *Dette coloniale* released in 2010 by Vieux Gazeur, one of the pioneers of this music genre in Côte d'Ivoire. The song sums up the different types of exploitation by the colonists in sub-Saharan Africa in general, and evokes the fictitious “SRDC”, the *Service Recouvrement de la Dette Coloniale* (Colonial Debt Recovery Service).<sup>7</sup> In *Invisible Users*, Burrell underlines that in a way similar to what Michel de Certeau defines as a *tactic*, Internet scammers sought to subvert and transcend a disadvantageous position within society and the world using [in their scam] the very representations of Africa and Africans defined apart from and against them (2012: 77).

Often scammers follow specific scripts, for example they say they are working on an oil rig, in the military, or as doctor with an international organization, and ask their targets for money to pay for a plane ticket, other travel expenses, surgery and medical expenses, customs fees to retrieve something, gambling debts, or pay for a visa or other official travel documents. This is because love scammers use pre-written

texts, known as “formats,” that they can buy from other experienced scammers or download from specific websites and copy-paste them into their conversations with their “victims” (*mugu*). A format consists of both the story and the procedure of a certain type of fraud. In other words, a format is both about content, for instance a tale about a big amount of money on a bank account, and the script, for instance the use of an arc of suspense in romance scams.

In 2022, I embarked on an artistic residency in Ghana at pIAR in Kumasi, which is run by the internationally renowned performance artist and LGBTQ+ activist, Va-Bene Fiatsi.<sup>8</sup> The choice of an artistic environment seemed to me the ideal starting point for my research journey, allowing me to explore the intricate landscape of illegal practices and understand how far I could go with my independent research. While my initial objective was not to personally encounter romance scammers, given the limited duration of my stay in Ghana, my focus was on unearthing the original texts. I was looking precisely for these formats with the idea of publishing them as a collection of texts, following the tradition of the love letters-writing manual of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, also known as *The Lover's Instructor* in the UK, *Secrétaire Galant* in France, and *Segretario Galante* in Italy.

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These terms refer to guides to composing love letters, that offer examples of correspondence, templates of love letters, sets of tips to support many lovers who did not have great linguistic possibilities or imagination. Most people who used letter-writing manuals had not received a classical or extended education, and so needed help with expressing themselves according to the conventions of the day. These practical manuals contain a collection of fictional letters, compliment cards, and dialogues between relatives, all on the subject of love. These were intended as templates for readers to use during courtship, enabling the reader to see how a relationship between two individuals might develop. We can see letter-writing manuals as an early form of self-help book. The genre was part of the expansion of popular publishing and survived until the 1960s. They had an affordable price, low paper quality, and used illustrated covers.

The parallel between these publications and the formats of the scammers seemed evident to me. After a few days in Ghana, I managed to find many of the formats used by romance scammers thanks to the help of one of the interns at the artistic residency, who posed also as a model for the book's cover illustration. I gave him my Telegram account and received several files full of texts, procedures, lists of dating websites, and so on. I edited this big amount of data while I was still in Ghana and published them in the book *The New Romance Scammer's Instructor*. I decided to publish the texts without any corrections, with sometimes inaccur-



rate grammar, spelling mistakes, and punctuation errors. In some cases the conversation does not flow or make much sense, in others there are moments of pure poetry. Following the publication of the book in 2022, I returned to Ghana to commence a series of interviews with freelance scammers. My objective was to gain deeper insights into their motivations, profiles, personal stories, and how they portrayed themselves and their activities. It is important to note that the individuals I interviewed occupied a low tier of freelance scamming, distinct from the organized crime networks where leaders oversee subordinates with advanced technical skills in their pursuit of victims. During the interviews, I offered them copies of my book, as I was curious to gauge their reactions to the idea of publishing the tools of their business. To my surprise, those I met seemed somewhat pleased to receive the book and learn about my motivations behind its creation and my desire to understand their activities better.

In spring 2023, I continued my research, this time in Ivory Coast, as an independent researcher without any affiliation. The main goal was to procure a similar corpus of romantic texts used by local *brouteurs* (scammers in vernacular nouchi language) and their operating procedures in a Francophone country. That research culminated in a second book in French, titled *Le brouteur galant. Manuel de l'arnaqueur sentimental* (Peri, forthcoming) slated for publication by Editions UV in 2024. Also in Ivory Coast I did a series of interview with *brouteurs* of all genders. The outcome of these interviews is still unpublished and in progress.

Researcher Etienne Franck-Stéphane Adou explains the emergence of *brouteurs* in Ivory Coast as the development of a deviant urban youth subculture characterized by a subcultural contestation style. According to him, this subculture is rooted in a hedonistic ethos that forms the core of the *brouteur* identity, acting as the cohesive element for the “*brouteur* self” (2022). What is typical of the scammers ethos, both in Ghana and Ivory Coast, is that money gained with cyber-frauds does not accumulate but is spent on consumer goods such as branded clothing, cars, and expensive accessories. I joined parties in the *makis* of Abidjan (precisely in Yopougon neighborhood), where scammers gather to drink champagne and other alcoholic drinks. During the night, they listen to local DJs and pay them by ostensibly throwing money at them in exchange for publicly praise on the microphone. The goal is to showcase success and a refined tastes in the festive settings, fleeting pleasures, casual social interactions, and more.<sup>8</sup> Within this identity, there is a clear desire for recognition, apparent in their language, clothing choices, showing off, models of success, and adopted values. Adou concludes that the deviant nature of this subculture becomes evident in the stark contrast between the *brouteurs'* extravagant lifestyles and societal expectations at large. Scamming represents a social phenomenon that gives rise to novel forms of social interaction and learning, establishes uncharted career paths and life trajectories, redefines cultural characteristics, and presents a renewed manifestation

of its marginal status. It introduces a fundamental ambiguity, as the *brouteurs* collectively claim their deviance while being socially tolerated by their families. As the scammers told me during the interviews, if the acquisition of wealth leads to ostentation and excessive spending, they also engage in large redistributions that highlight their true social function within the society. Traditionally in West Africa, individual accumulation of wealth is considered abnormal, and there exists a kind of moral obligation to redistribute a portion of one's riches (Newell 2006). This traditional model of extravagance and redistribution, in turn, garners a certain level of respect for the donors, who acquire followers and a sort of fan base consolidating their reputation. Similar to Hanafi (Hanafi 2020) and the reevaluation of the concept of the “social banditry” put forth by Hobsbawm (1969) for interpreting the redistributive manners of many *brouteurs* in Ivory Coast, Adou suggests a thorough reassessment of the notion of delinquency in the context of the existing social norms. When I asked scammers if they ever had a crisis of conscience, a few responded that they saw themselves as a kind of therapist: «People in Europe are alone. They want to receive our messages and read what we write to them. They feel lonely and need someone to talk to them and be there whenever they need». Many scammers also shared the difficulties of a work demanding their attention 24/7, a prolific imagination, and planning, scheduling,

and anticipating skills. It is worth noting that despite the inaccuracies of the texts I collected, which the scam victims often received untouched, the communications of the scammers with their beloved victims are extremely successful. This is

the aspect of the phenomenon that intrigues me the most: How do West African youngsters, mostly between 18 and 30 manage to charm Westerners of all ages to the point of making them pay astronomical sums? There are multiple answers. A key aspect of scamming is the successful production of emotional attachment and intimacy. In his study of Second Life, anthropologist Boellstorff (2008) demonstrates the power of virtual worlds to produce actual intimacy, in some cases even enhanced forms of intimacy in relation to the physical one. Artist and activist Hito Steyerl (2017), refers to romance scams as a process intimately related to a timescape of simultaneous presence and absence, incongruously bridged by hope and desire, that perfectly resonates with an undecided temporality, which synchronizes both closeness and separation, past and present.

The role of desire is a significant factor in the objectivation of the distant relationship, and in the construction of the victim belief in the virtual relationship. In *Desire/Love*, Lauren Berlant describes desire as:

a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it. This gap produces a number of further convolutions. Desire visits you as an impact from the outside, and yet, inducing an encounter with your affects, makes you feel as

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Segretari Galanti Valentina Peri personal collection. Photo by Valentina Peri.

though it comes from within you; this means that your objects are not objective, but things and scenes that you have invested attachment-value in, in a way that converts them into objects that prop up your world. So what seems objective and autonomous in them is partly what your desire has created and therefore is mirage, a shaky anchor (2012: 6).

In the realm of online intimacy, the dynamics of desire and the principles of libidinal economy play a significant role. Libidinal economy, a concept introduced by French psychoanalyst Jean-François Lyotard (1993), delves into the distribution and exchange of desire within a societal framework. The online space has evolved beyond a mere facilitator of connections: it has become a marketplace where desires are negotiated, exchanged, and sometimes commodified. As technology seamlessly integrates into all spheres of our lives in the age of hyper-capitalism, the digital landscape becomes not just a conduit for connection but a dynamic arena where the ebb and flow of desire find expression in novel and evolving ways. According to French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, libido represents a life force that enables individuals to love themselves, fostering the capacity to love others (2011). However, in the contemporary late-capitalist information age, libido finds itself solicited to the point of scarcity, a notion underscored by various authors.<sup>10</sup> Desired objects and images are now a mere click away, accessible 24/7, and the immediacy of access has become both easy and rapid. Sherry Turkle, an expert on technology and loneliness, describes humans in the Information Age as tethered to ever-present communication devices that connect them to people, web pages, voicemail, games, and even artificial intelligences such as non-player game characters and interactive online bots (2008). Whether animate or inanimate, these diverse entities assume a certain sameness due to the seamless accessibility they offer through our devices, effectively living through our constant connection to them. Scammers exploit these dynamics and processes inherent in late capitalism in their endeavors, but offer a slightly different perspective regarding the motivations behind their success. In Ghana, the phenomenon of Internet scamming

goes by the name *Sakawa*, denoting illicit activities that blend modern Internet-based fraud with traditional African rituals. The term *Sakawa* finds its origins in the Hausa language, signifying the act of “putting inside” or the process of generating wealth. These rituals, primarily involving sacrificial practices, are intended to spiritually manipulate the victims, thus ensuring the scammer's fraudulent activities are successful. In Ivory Coast, the world of cyberscams is deeply intertwined with the practice of *zamou*, a contemporary form of witchcraft and mysticism aimed at facilitating the execution and success of scams. The primary objective of *zamou* is to bewitch the victims through occult means, ultimately altering their judgment (referred to as *attacher*), rendering them susceptible to the scammer's ploy, and allowing money extraction without resistance or protection. It involves a pact between the *brouteur* and a mystical entity, sealed with the offering of a sacrifice. It is a shared beliefs within the romance scammers of both Ghana and Ivory Coast that spiritual rituals and mystic practices have the capacity to reach through the Internet and control people's actions, especially victims/clients who refuse to give money when asked for, as confirmed during the extensive interviews I made to some of them. Many scammers I interviewed resort to fetish priests and marabouts, in their country of origin or abroad (Benin and Senegal in particular) in order to succeed in dominating the mind of their victim, who are supposedly under the influence of their mystical interventions, losing the capacity for critical thinking and discernment. For some fraudsters, that is the key to the success of the scam.

As Newell suggests, scams and occult practices on the Internet provide us with a virtual guide with which to delve into these forms of ambivalence, intimacy, and deception in global cyberspace, since that is the platform on which both sociality and sorcery increasingly take place. In the same article, the author ventures to claim that: «smartphones act much like witches, draining vitality, power, and wealth, though their power can also be harnessed to a decolonizing sorcery that enables scammers to seduce the North Atlantic out of its riches» (2020: 11).

Over 240 million people world-wide use online dating – a number likely to increase in the next decade. As I highlight with Malinowska in the introduction of our edited collection *Data Dating. Love, Technology, Desire*: Dating and hookup applications make the most profitable business in the future of the internet – next to the gaming industry. As of today, romance platforms are ranking third among paid content sites online, outpacing pornography. There is a likelihood of the change in their business model towards recreational romance – an endeavor reflected in the business' preoccupation with bots and artificial assistants. Companion bots and IOS are one of the most rapidly growing branches of robotics. A major shift in our understanding of love is that “romantic script” can be recreated algorithmically (Malinowska & Peri 2021: XV). Companion AI chatbots, exemplified by apps like Replika and Woebot, are designed with the goal of addressing the pervasive issues of social loneliness and the absence of genuine human connections in the increasingly digital world. Yet, when examining these AI-driven companions along-

side the activities of scammers, intriguing parallels and dissonances emerge, warranting exploration. Which parallels and which collision could be explored between the scammers' "labor of love" and the new companion apps using AI chatbots? The coexistence of these seemingly disparate phenomena prompts us to consider what this development reveals about contemporary notions of intimacy, desire, anxieties, and loneliness. Do AI chatbots, in their pursuit of providing companionship, offer genuine solace or merely a facsimile of connection? How does this relate to the emotional manipulations of scammers, who similarly exploit human yearnings? The juxtaposition of these two realms invites us to reflect on the shifting contours of human relationships and the intricate ways in which technology intersects with our most profound emotional experiences in today's interconnected society.

On one end of the spectrum, we find scammers who adeptly leverage technologies from the Global North and exploit vulnerabilities within the capitalist system, including factors like loneliness, individualism, and depression. Their aim is not only to recover wealth that has been systematically eroded, but also to redress the historical inequalities stemming from colonization and decolonization processes. On the other end of the spectrum, AI chatbots represent a prominent facet of the same capitalist model, one in which technological innovation serves as both the driving force and outcome. These chatbots, while also capitalizing on the human consequences of the system, such as loneliness, paradoxically contribute to and perpetuate these issues. Recent studies show consistently that these applications can be addictive and elicit the same adverse effects as those engendered by deceptive scams. A recent illustrative case in point is the abrupt removal of Replica's sex feature last February, after years of availability without prior notice to users. This unforeseen change in the app triggered severe emotional distress among users, leading to instances of suicidal tendencies, underscoring the need for better psychological support within these platforms. Consequently, in response to the outcry, the CEO ultimately reinstated the sex and flirt function.

In the context of contemporary amorous discourse and relationships, this development underscores the evolving nature of human connection in the digital age, and it is the direction that my further research will take.

I would like to conclude the article with an excerpt from my edited collection *The New Romance Scammer's Instructor: Acquainted to you*, from the chapter "Start Lovin'."

I just see myself keep searching for your email and believe me I am getting so acquainted to you. Ever since we started sending the recent messages we've sent to each other...I've been so much thinking about you and to be sincere I am thinking about you. Wow! So here I stand, among the digital masses. We're not so different after all. Here I stand, surrounded by people who've met on-line, People who've loved and lost, and people who are found, and somehow, in a desperate world, found each other. So what do I say that hasn't already been written, or been already said? Hmmm, pretty tough! Okay... try this: I no longer need to hope for love by going to clubs, (y'know I can't dance!) supermarkets, church socials, by passing notes in class as a kid, or instant messages as an adult. I don't have to

search for love, in ads, on the internet, in chat rooms, text messages, camera phones, faxes, and e-mails. I don't have to look for hope, pray for a miracle, wait for an angel, see hope for God's love here on earth, wish for a special friend, crave for love's passion, envy other's romance or wonder if someone will ever love me.

Thanks for coming into my life (Peri 2022: 22)

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## NOTES:

1 - Data Dating website: <https://www.datadating.online/>

2 - In Ivory Coast second hand computers are called "france au-revoir" in nouchi (Ivorian vernacular language), literally "bye bye France".

3 - Advance Fee Fraud (AFF), also known as Nigerian scam, or the 419 scam, is a type of financial scam that involves the promise of a large sum of money or some other valuable item to the victim. Before the promised funds or goods can be delivered, the scammers require the victim to pay a fee or advance payment. This fee is typically portrayed as covering legal fees, taxes, bribes, or other seemingly legitimate expenses. For an extensive study of AFF, refer to Hanafi 2021.

4 - Cfr the exhibition *Data Dating* <https://www.datadating.online/>, and Kamilia Kard's book *Arte e Social Media. Generatori di sentimenti*, Milano, Postmedia Books 2021.

5 - The cover illustration was created by Ghanaian artist OriginalBigwig.

6 - Cfr Franz Fanon (1952), *Peau noir, Masque Blanc*, Paris, Seuil.

7 - Extract: *Il faut rembourser, c'est la dette coloniale. Chacun à son tour... Il faut rembourser, choco choco, il faut rembourser.* You have to pay, that's the colonial debt. You have to pay, choco choco, you have to pay. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H\\_hLnWewsy0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_hLnWewsy0)

8 - I take advantage of the article to spread awareness about the extreme anti-LGBT+ bill undergoing parliamentary review in Ghana. More info: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghanaian\\_anti-LGBT\\_bill](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghanaian_anti-LGBT_bill)

9 - In Ivory Coast the act of offering alcohol, particularly champagne, and handing out banknotes to the dj to prove one's success at parties is called "travaillement", and has its origins in the practices of coupé-decalé, a musical genre initiated and popularised by Douk Soga in the 2000s.

10 - Cfr Franco Bifo Berardi, *Fenomenologia della fine*, 2020, Mark Fisher and his postcapitalist desire (2021) or the concept of "libido pick" by Dominique Pettman (2021).

## ABSTRACT ENG

This paper aims to underscore the pivotal role played by online romance scams in shaping the agency and socio-economic mobility of urban youth in Ghana and Ivory Coast and how it contributed to fostering entrepreneurship among young people in West Africa. It is based on the results of several research trips to Ghana and Ivory Coast that I undertook in 2022-23 in search of the original texts of online love scammers, and some interviews conducted with those involved.

Keywords: romance scam, West Africa, witchcraft, technology, chatbots.

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# Niente soldi, niente amore, dicono

Questo articolo analizza il fenomeno delle truffe romantiche (*romance scams*) con particolare attenzione a due paesi dell'Africa occidentale, dove sembra avere effetti positivi sulla *agency* e la mobilità socio-economica dei giovani residenti nelle aree metropolitane. Il *romance scamming*, un reato di adescamento che genera centinaia di milioni di dollari ogni anno, è diffuso e in crescita in tutto il mondo. L'Africa è uno dei suoi hub principali. L'indagine prende le mosse da ricerche etnografiche effettuate in Ghana e in Costa d'Avorio nel 2022 e 2023, dove l'autrice ha intervistato alcuni *scammer* coinvolti nelle truffe e ottenuto i testi originali che questi utilizzano nelle loro attività illecite, testi che, nel linguaggio utilizzato, ricordano i manuali di conversazione amorosa in uso anche in Italia fino agli anni '50 del secolo scorso.

Gli *scammer*, che si definiscono veri e proprio imprenditori della comunicazione, operano in un mercato virtuale opaco in cui le tecnologie digitali sono sfruttate per scopi estorsivi. Si tratta di una versione modernizzata e globalizzata di un fenomeno già esistente che prima dell'avvento di Internet avveniva attraverso mezzi di comunicazione analogici. In questo spazio digitalizzato i giovani spesso utilizzano macchinari di seconda mano e gli scambi di messaggi avvengono su social media come Facebook e Instagram e su diversi siti di incontri online. Queste applicazioni sono state sfruttate da una popolazione di utenti e in un contesto d'uso molto diverso da quello previsto dagli sviluppatori dell'industria high-tech americana.

L'articolo affronta diversi aspetti associati al fenomeno delle truffe romantiche, come il legame tra tecnologia e pratiche mistiche che dovrebbero manipolare le vittime delle truffe e il ruolo del desiderio nella costruzione delle relazioni virtuali. Suggestisce una serie di parallelismi e collisioni tra gli scammer e i contemporanei assistenti AI chatbot.

## Valentina Peri

is an independent curator, artist, and author based in Paris. Her work examines the role of technology in contemporary culture, with a focus on love and intimacy in the digital age. She has curated exhibitions, published articles and books, and given lectures on the topic. Her traveling exhibition *Data Dating* has been presented in Paris, Tel Aviv, London, Brussels, Geneva, and Brescia.