- **Title:**

Are fraud victims nothing more than animals? Critiquing the propagation of "pig butchering" (Sha Zhu Pan, 杀猪盘)

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Are fraud victims nothing more than animals? Critiquing the propagation of "pig butchering" (Sha Zhu Pan, 杀猪盘)

Abstract

This is a theoretical treatment of the term "Sha Zhu Pan" (杀猪盘) in Chinese, which translates to "Pig-Butchering" in English. The article critically examines the propagation and validation of "Pig Butchering," an animal metaphor, and its implications for the dehumanisation of victims of online fraud across various discourses. The study provides background information about this type of fraud before investigating its theoretical foundations and linking its emergence to the dehumanisation of fraud victims. The analysis highlights the disparity between academic literature, subjected to rigorous peer-review processes, and sensationalised narratives prevalent in the media. While academic works subject "pig butchering" to critical scrutiny and refrain from endorsing derogatory terms to depict fraud victims, numerous media outlets employ this term uncritically, further worsening the predicament of these victims. "Pig butchering" is firmly rooted in the concept of dehumanisation, and this article underscores how language moulds perceptions of fraud and behaviour, extending to the development of preventive strategies. The role of law enforcement agencies in generating and disseminating materials is also a central theme, emphasising their responsibility as trusted sources of information. We suggest that these agencies should adopt non-victim shaming language to encourage victims to report crimes and alleviate the stigma attached to victimisation. Additionally, the article offers valuable cross-cultural insights by comparing metaphors from Chinese and Nigerian contexts. This comparative analysis enriches our comprehension of the global dimensions of online fraud and its cultural diversities, highlighting the substantial impact of language on perceptions and behaviours. We advocate for a departure from victim-blaming tendencies perpetuated by select media outlets, urging a more compassionate and accurate portrayal of those affected by online fraud. We, therefore, call for a more empathetic and accurate portrayal of individuals affected by online fraud, aligning with the broader objective of promoting understanding and support for these victims.

Keywords: pig butchering; romance fraud; online fraud; online dating; dehumanisation of victims; victim shaming; derogatory terminology; Sha Zhu Pan.

Introduction

In June 2023, during the University of Portsmouth's Annual Counter Fraud and Forensic Accounting Conference, an emerging scholar delivered a thought-provoking presentation on a prevalent variant of "Pig Butchering" scams. This article casts a more critical gaze at the term "Sha Zhu Pan" (杀猪盘) in Chinese, which translates to "Pig-Butchering" in English. This particular fraudulent scheme, commonly referred to as "Sha Zhu Pan" (杀猪盘) in Chinese, has garnered widespread recognition within Chinese online communities since 2019 (Tao, 2022). Its roots trace back to the early 2010s when it was first reported to Chinese authorities (Wang & Zhou, 2022). The Pig Butchering scam represents a distinct form of online fraud that involves scammers establishing a false sense of trust with their victims by posing as friends or romantic partners. Eventually, they convince these individuals to participate in financial schemes or gambling activities, as described by Liu and Chen (2022), Cross (2023), and Wang (2023). Wang (2023) has noted that this deceptive practice involves complex criminal activities, intricate schemes, and the orchestration of large-scale financial theft. While this fraudulent activity initially targeted Chinese-speaking individuals, recent research by Wang (2023) indicates its expansion to other world regions, especially Western countries. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that the impact of the Pig Butchering scam extends beyond specific language or geographic boundaries, affecting a diverse range of victims, as reported by some media sources such as Bloomberg (2023) and News24 (2023).

The globalisation of the term "pig butchering", whereby offenders perpetrating this type of fraud have moved from primarily victimising not only those in South East Asia but also those located in Western nations, has found its place within the broader landscape of authorised push-payment fraud and cryptocurrency fraud (Bloomberg, 2023). A substantial body of social psychology and cultural criminology literature underscores the argument that criminal enterprises and actors frequently resort to distinct labels for their victims to dehumanise them and mitigate their own culpability (e.g., Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al. 1996; Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975). While online fraudsters coined "pig butchering," to describe their victims and to dramatise them in the theatre of the international fraud arena as "pigs" we contend that the neologism is offensive and derogatory to victims and society. Thus, this article will critically examine the use of metaphors in the context of online fraud literature to highlight its negative consequences.

In the realm of online romance fraud, in the context of China, online fraudsters resort to derogatory labels like "pigs'' to characterise their victims, alongside describing their fraudulent endeavours as "pig butchering" (Wang & Zhou, 2022; Wang, 2023; Liu & Chen, 2022). Likewise, perpetrators from West Africa, notably Nigeria, often deploy terms like "mugu" to categorise their victims as unsuspecting individuals, while "Maga" is employed to compare them to native game animals such as antelopes (Igwe, 2007; Lazarus, 2018; Lazarus et al. 2023a). As such, we will briefly acknowledge metaphors from the Nigerian and Chinese contexts to provide cross-cultural insights into how language is used to frame online romance victims. This comparison will be invaluable for researchers studying the global dimensions of online fraud and its cultural variations. It will also offer an additional layer of explanation regarding the rationales behind these metaphoric depictions of victims by offenders.

Using degrading labels for victims is a well-recognized strategy to distance perpetrators from the moral implications of their actions cognitively. Specifically, researchers have noted that online romance fraudsters neutralise their actions to mitigate their own culpability (Barnor et al., 2020; Lazarus, 2018; Offei et al., 2020). Nonetheless, what raises concern is the uncritical perpetuation of the term "pig butchering" in various discourses, for example, law enforcement, and media fora, without the benefit of rigorous examination.

> *The pig* [in Pig-Butchering] *is used to metaphorically describe the victims in this kind of romantic scam. [The] pig is a symbol of silliness and defenselessness in Chinese culture. They also are a major kind of meat on Chinese dining tables. Thus, in this metaphor, the pig* [has] *negative connotations. The attributes of silliness and defenselessness are mapped onto the victims, showing that victims are silly and their endings of losing money are as miserable as being butchered and eaten*. ....victims are described as prey, which is the target of huntsmen, i.e., fraudsters. It shows [that] the process of defrauding victims is metaphorically described as the scenario of hunting (Liu & Chen, 2022, p.111)

However, the persistent propagation of the metaphor "pig butchering" within professional, and media circles raises questions about its origins, accuracy, and implications. Therefore, the crux of this article is

to critically investigate and unpack the term's adoption and diffusion, exploring the socio-cultural, linguistic, and contextual dynamics that shape its narrative.

By dissecting the journey of the term "pig butchering" from its Chinese origins to its global reach, this article seeks to untangle its various layers of meaning and influence. It attempts to illuminate how the term resonates within different cultural contexts and elucidates how its usage intersects with the broader discourse on online fraud. Through our evaluation, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the linguistic nuances that can shape perceptions and, ultimately, inform a more accurate portrayal of the complex realm of online fraud and its multifaceted dimensions. Therefore, the primary objective of this article is to scrutinise this term and its various manifestations critically. Specifically, the article aims to:

1. Provide a comprehensive and critical analysis of "pig butchering" and its implications.

2. Highlight the potential consequences of perpetuating dehumanising terms in scholarly works, particularly concerning the well-being and experiences of the victims.

3. Offer suggestions and recommendations for future research endeavours to address the issue effectively.

By meticulously examining the usage of dehumanising terms, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the impact of this term on victims of this type of fraud. It raises crucial questions about the language employed in scholarly discussions. We hope that this article stimulates further investigations and fosters greater awareness regarding the ethical and social implications of victim shaming and labelling in the field.

Dehumanisation: The Theoretical Underpinnings of the Term "Pig-Butchering"

"The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference." (*Elie Wiesel)[1]*

Dehumanisation, articulated by Bandura et al. (1975) and further expounded upon by Bandura (1999), encompasses denying fundamental human attributes to others. This process involves stripping individuals of their essential human capacities. Bandura et al. (1975, p.255) aptly noted that "causing harm to individuals perceived as subhuman or debased tends to evoke fewer self-reproaches than if the victims were regarded as human beings possessing dignified qualities." The rationale behind this phenomenon lies in reducing individuals to a more primitive, base state. The concept of dehumanisation provides the theoretical foundation for characterising fraud victims using derogatory terms such as "pigs'' within various discourses. This characterization originates in one facet of Bandura's (1999) moral disengagement mechanisms paradigm in social psychology, specifically the dehumanisation of victims. Table 1, adapted from Lazarus, Button, and Adogame's (2022, p.4) qualitative work on online fraud, illustrates this technique alongside related mechanisms of moral disengagement. In the cybercrime literature, branches of moral disengagement mechanisms have extensively employed these moral disengagement mechanisms to analyse various facets of the field. For instance, scholars like Lazarus (2018), George (2014), Lazarus, Button, and Adogame (2022), and Lazarus et al. (2023a) have drawn upon Bandura's (1999) concept of moral disengagement mechanisms to investigate the intricate dynamics of cybercrime phenomena.

Table 1: - Moral Disengagement Mechanisms

Cognitive Mechanism	Moral Disengagement
Cognitive Restructuring	1. Moral Justification 2. Euphemistic Labelling 3. Advantageous Comparison
Minimising Own Agency	1. Displacement of Responsibility 2. Diffusion of Responsibility

Disregarding/Distorting Negative Impact	1. Disregarding Consequences 2. Distorting Consequences
Blaming/Dehumanising Victim	1. Attribution of Blame 2. Dehumanisation

Table adapted from Lazarus, Button, and Adogame (2022, p.4)

Bandura (1999) posits that the moral disengagement mechanisms are based on the underlying assumption that individuals who participate in wrongdoing and those who do not have comparable normative orientations and overall moral convictions (Lazarus, 2018; Lazarus et al., 2023a). The proposition posits that people are more likely to engage in acts of misconduct when they use cognitive processes to justify and alleviate personal culpability. According to Bandura et al. (1996, p.365), individuals often refrain from engaging in morally objectionable behaviour until they have rationalised and convinced themselves of the moral validity of their acts. Therefore, given that individuals tend to abstain from participating in morally objectionable behaviour until they have justified them as morally justifiable (Bandura, 1999), it is reasonable to suggest that this theoretical framework could offer valuable perspectives on the cultural intricacies of pig butchering in its Chinese origins.

Within the Chinese cultural framework, hunters often perceive themselves as possessing more intelligence and superiority than the animals they pursue, viewing the targeted creatures as lacking in wisdom and inferior in nature (Liu & Chen, 2022). The pig is effectively carrying out its ecological function as a food chain component (Liu & Chen, 2022). In order to deepen our understanding of the fraudulent neologism "pig butchering" and its corresponding vocabulary, it is essential to explore the domains of victim blaming and dehumanisation. According to Bandura (1999), moral disengagement processes, such as dehumanisation, occur before immoral behaviours and significantly impact their direct cause. Offenders themselves use "pig butchering," which primarily functions as a psychological mechanism for coping with the underlying guilt resulting from their criminal actions.

The ability to see oneself as intellectually superior enables fraudsters in their self-identified role as hunters to justify their acts and alleviate feelings of guilt while engaging in activities that harm creatures they perceive as inferior, such as referring to them as "pigs." In a similar vein, the act of hunting and terminating a "pig" might be likened to a recreational activity. In its essence, a game animal does not possess an intrinsic criminal nature. Likewise, the comparison of online frauds to hunting imbues fraud victims with the attributes often associated with game animals. According to Bandura (1999, p.200), mistreating a person who has been humanised is challenging due to the resulting emotional misery and self-condemnation. Hence, promoting this dehumanising word in academia, media, and various discourses is not only problematic but also serves as a 'double hit' against victims of online romance fraud. Within this context, the depersonalisation of those who have suffered, as shown by the attribution of human characteristics to both the hunter and the pig, assumes a crucial role in facilitating the interpretation of the veiled designation "pigs" (symbolic of the victims).

Pig-Butchering: Active and Passive Dimensions of Dehumanisation of Victims

Drawing from the insights of Waytz and Schroeder (2014), a nuanced distinction emerges in the realm of dehumanisation, encapsulated by two distinct manifestations: active behaviours of dehumanisation by commission and dehumanisation rooted in passive apathy, termed dehumanisation by omission. This perspective sheds light on the multifaceted nature of indifference, revealing two dimensions: passive disdain and active disregard. In line with these observations, it becomes apparent that while online fraudsters often engage in explicit dehumanisation by commission, many discourses surrounding "pig-butchering" perpetuate dehumanisation against online fraud victims through omission.

Expounding upon the framework put forth by Waytz and Schroeder (2014), we posit that passive dehumanisation, characterised by a conspicuous absence of consideration and perpetuated by discourses that uncritically employ the term "pig butchering," predominates instances of dehumanisation within the context of online romance fraud. It is imperative to recognize that passive dehumanisation wields a comparable degree of influence to its active counterpart. Ultimately, the crux of dehumanisation lies in portraying individuals as lacking a fully developed human psyche, including the faculties for conscious

experience and logical reasoning, a viewpoint substantiated by Bandura et al. (1975) and Bandura (1999). Therefore, we argue that both dehumanisation by commission and dehumanisation by omission, which converges in the denial and re-victimisation of online fraud victims, can transpire intentionally or subconsciously. These processes boil down to one of two fundamental mechanisms: a conscious effort to obscure or dismiss consideration of others' cognitive capacities or a passive failure to engage in such contemplation.

Pig Butchering: A Call to Rehumanise Victims

We extend an invitation to various discourses aimed at humanizing victims of online fraud. In this context, humanising involves attributing to individuals the distinct individuality inherent in being human. This necessitates providing them with moral and equitable treatment, recognized as a right by virtue of their humanity, as expounded by Francis (2023) and discussed by Schumann and Walton (2021). Our article builds on these insights, focusing on rehumanising victims of online fraud. Rehumanising urges us to redress the harm inflicted, contemplating ways to minimize suffering and engage with a sense of care (Francis, 2023; Wheeler & Fiske, 2005). This call urges us to consider the social, cultural, political, and familial contexts that surround victims, perpetrators, and those involved in the discussion (cf. Francis, 2023).

The Anatomy of "Pig Butchering"

The pig butchering scam typically follows a basic delineated pattern (Wang, 2023; Scharfman, 2023; Cross, 2023; scamadviser.com, 2021). Fraudsters often initiate contact with their victims on instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, WeChat, and dating websites, whereby they attempt to groom their victims by building a friendship or romantic relationship over several months (Cross, 2023). During this grooming phase, the offender usually introduces the notion that they or a close family member has a financial background (Wang & Zhou, 2022; Finra.org, 2022). The victim is then typically manipulated into investing a small amount of money on a cryptocurrency trading website that the offender themself operates, who will then later edit the website to display impressive gains on the victim's small investment (Wang & Zhou, 2022; Wang, 2023). Lastly, the victim will subsequently be encouraged to invest a more significant sum of money into the platform, whereby thereafter, the offender will change the website to display huge losses, thus providing them with an excuse to steal their victims' funds (Wang, 2023; Scamadviser.com, 2021). Supposedly, the term 'pig butchering' illustrates how the victim is fattened up like a pig before being slaughtered. In addition to this, the losses to victims are substantial. Table 2 illustrates the anatomy of

how a typical pig butchering scam works. The model has been adapted from Wang & Zhou (2022), who identified three anatomical stages of fraud ('pig hunting,' 'pig raising', and 'pig killing'), and Han (2023), who has contributed a fourth stage ('pig killing').

Table 2: The Four Stages of a Pig-Butchering Scam

Stages of the Pig-Butchering Scam	Descriptions
1. "Pig Hunting"	Fraudsters usually use stolen photos and biographies to create fake profiles on dating apps and social media. These profiles often portray the fraudsters as skilled professionals, such as investment consultants.
2. "Pig Raising"	The victim is groomed through continuous contact, fostering an atmosphere of intimacy and trust, often by establishing a shared interest or topic. Within this stage, propositions may arise, suggesting opportunities for financial gain through collaboration.
3. "Pig Killing"	The victim is lured into a fake investment scheme, initially earning profits from their smaller investment. However, they are then coerced into investing more money that they cannot withdraw.
4. "Pig Eating"	The fraudster will shut down the fake investment website, blacklist the victim, and attempt to destroy evidence of the fraud. At this stage, they will also launder the stolen funds obtained from the victim.

Table adapted from Wang & Zhou (2022) and Han (2023)

Pig Butchering and Human Trafficking Twist

Some perpetrators of "pig butchering" schemes and disseminators of "pig hunting," "pig raising," "pig killing," and "pig eating," as detailed in Table 2, may fall victim to other digital and traditional criminal activities. In some alarming instances, there are no clear boundaries between offenders and victims. This

occurs when certain perpetrators themselves are victims of human trafficking, enticed through deceptive job advertisements, and subsequently held against their will in what can only be described as "fraud sweatshop" compounds, primarily located in Southeast Asia (Nbcmiami.com, 2023; Propublica.org, 2022).

A compelling report by the Humanity Research Consultancy , a dedicated social enterprise committed to investigating modern-day slavery, offers a unique glimpse into the appalling conditions endured by the trafficking victims that are forced into perpetrating pig butchering. They are sometimes subjected to extreme measures to ensure compliance and deter any escape attempts from these compounds. The report describes and illustrates shocking instances of torture, such as victims being buried alive, electrocuted with tasers, and enduring the brutal smashing of their fingers with hammers (Chiang & Casulli, 2023). Furthermore, this report casts a revealing light on an array of other offences committed by the criminal organisations orchestrating this type of fraud. Female trafficking victims for example are coerced into a spectrum of activities, ranging from engaging in sex work within brothels and karaoke bars located within the compounds to assuming the role of models during video chats with potential fraud victims as well as in some instances procuring both the daily necessities and luxury items for fellow captives and their captors (Chiang & Casulli, 2023).

A secondary report issued by the United Nations (2023, pp. 10) underscores the multifaceted nature of these organised crime groups. Many of these entities are embroiled not solely in human trafficking but also in the trafficking of endangered wildlife and illicit drugs. A stark example of this is the Zhao Wei Transnational Criminal Organization, which incurred sanctions from the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) in 2018. The OFAC press release characterises this organisation as engaging in "an array of horrendous illicit activities, including human trafficking and child prostitution, drug trafficking, and wildlife trafficking" (Home.treasury.gov, 2018). Situated within the infamous Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone in the Bokeo province of Laos, this group stands accused of coercing victims of human trafficking into labouring within online scamming compounds located within the same zone. Our examination of the complex aspects of online fraud reveals an intriguing twist. While we explore the intricate dimensions of online fraud, we uncover a fascinating revelation, as illuminated in the above remarks. Specifically, some individuals perpetrating pig butchering scams and the processes of "pig hunting," "pig raising," "pig killing," and "pig eating," as detailed in Table 2, may themselves fall prey to various other interconnected digital and conventional criminal activities. Consequently, we have observed

that pig butchering perpetration and perpetuation are intricately intertwined with a web of diverse criminal activities.

Having introduced this type of fraud, and how it is intricately intertwined with a web of diverse criminal activities, we now focus on the article's intended focus: to stimulate debate on the term pig butchering by casting a critical gaze over the term. However, before we embark on this journey, it is important to acknowledge that there are also arguably benefits to the term's use. For example, because the term pig butchering is in itself visceral but tells us very little about the crime, it can act as a clickbait headline for the media, thereby providing at least some benefit from public information and victim warning perspective. Additionally, we also recognise that the use of offender-oriented terminology to elicit a negative visceral reaction towards victims of online fraud is not a new concept. An example from the 1990s is when hackers coined the term "phishing," drawing a parallel between victims and fish caught on a hook. We now contrast two world regions regarding scholarly works on labels that criminal actors bestowed on victims, such as "Maga," the antelopes in West Africa, and pig butchering in a Chinese context. Comparing metaphors used in Nigerian and Chinese contexts offers cross-cultural insights into framing fraudulent activities through language. This strategy is valuable for researchers studying the global dimensions of online fraud and its cultural variations.

Contrasting and Contextualizing the Use of Labels: Nigeria and China

In Nigerian and Chinese settings, online fraudsters use different metaphors to depict victims as stupid and neglectful animals. For instance, they employ the metaphor "impala" (Lazarus et al., 2023a, p.10) in Nigeria, while in China, they use "pig" (Liu & Chen, 2022, p.111) as metaphors for this characterization. In contrast, offenders engaging in fraudulent activities often adopt the self-perception of being "hunters," therefore presenting themselves as possessing exceptional abilities, resourcefulness, strategic thinking, unwavering self-assurance, disdain, and assertiveness (Lazarus, 2018; Lazarus et al., 2023a; Liu & Chen, 2022). Conceptually, it aligns with the concept of moral disengagement mechanisms proposed by Bandura (1999) that criminals use dehumanising terms for their victims to avoid accountability and lessen their guilt. Within the realm of online fraudulent activities in recent years, offenders originating from West Africa, specifically Nigeria, commonly employ distinct terminology such as "mugu" to classify their targets as susceptible individuals and "Maga" to draw a parallel between them and unsuspecting animals like

antelopes (Akanle & Shadare, 2019; Ibrahim, 2017; Lazarus, 2018; Lazarus, 2019; Lazarus & Okolorie, 2019; Lazarus, 2020; Lazarus et al. 2023a). Significantly, these groupings have not been unquestionably embraced. Several scholarly articles have used animal analogies but have done so without promoting or unquestioningly approving them (e.g., Akanle & Shadare, 2019; Lazarus, 2018; Lazarus et al., 2023a; Liu & Chen, 2022; Tao, 2022).

Nevertheless, only a limited number of scholarly articles have truly disseminated these metaphors, as Yu (2023) shows, which parallels the methodology used by certain media outlets, such as Bloomberg (2023). The dissemination of these phrases may occur without undergoing critical examination or by using them in manners that perpetuate stereotypes or marginalise those who have fallen victim to online fraudulent activities. The critical analysis of the language and context in which metaphors are used is of utmost importance in academic literature as well as in media outlets.

In contrast, several media outlets have disseminated and blindly used similar animal analogies to pejoratively characterise those who have fallen victim to online romance fraud. This phenomenon is often seen in sensationalist or tabloid journalism, characterised by a prioritisation on generating captivating headlines above undertaking thorough scholarly study. Media portrayals have the potential to perpetuate victim-blaming tendencies and promote detrimental stereotypes. Hence, it is necessary to critically evaluate the language and conceptualization used in these metaphors across academic and media spheres in order to get a comprehensive understanding of their influence and consequences.

The main purpose of this article is to undertake a critical evaluation of the term pig butchering within the specific context of China. It incorporates several related iterations of the word, as shown in Table 2, which have had a substantial impact on a broad array of academic publications. Additionally, the article will highlight the term's apparent acceptability and its connotations, elucidating the complexity and subtleties that underlie its use.

The examination of the names "Mugu" and "Maga" originating from Nigeria (e.g., Lazarus, 2018; Lazarus et al., 2023a), as well as the practice of pig butchering in China (e.g., Liu & Chen, 2022; Tao, 2022), offers a unique vantage point for exploring the cultural, linguistic, and contextual complexities that influence the discourse around fraudulent actions on the internet. In addition, this study aims to expand our understanding of the underlying dynamics in the linguistic patterns used by various individuals engaged in online fraudulent activities. It does this by analysing the adoption, diffusion, and implications of these words. This line of inquiry provides a more thorough perspective on how these phrases illustrate the techniques used by cybercriminals and the cultural and sociological factors that impact their usage. In particular, this article examines the complex processes of cross-cultural language assimilation and the subsequent worldwide ramifications for the perception of online deception.

Additionally, this article acknowledges the significant impact of language in shaping perceptions and reactions, underscoring the need to use clear and thoughtful vocabulary when addressing complex phenomena like online fraud, given that many new types of fraud may occur quickly and with a need for them to be named succinctly. Our intentions are to contribute to the academic discourse on online deception by analysing the nuanced differences and commonalities in various forms of language used in this context. By doing so, the article attempts to enrich the existing body of knowledge by evaluating the use of derogatory terms to describe victims of fraud and, in turn, facilitate a comprehensive and informed exploration of the multifaceted nature of internet deception.

Positionality in Decoding the term "Hunter"

The interpretation of the term "hunter" is similar in both Chinese and Nigerian contexts, and scholars have no diverging interpretations (e.g., Liu & Chen, 2022; Lazarus et al., 2023a). Some might argue that in the public sphere, the term "hunter" within the framework of the pig butchering scam may be subject to interpretation, with some asserting that it carries a pejorative connotation. This interpretation implies that fraudsters use unscrupulous and unethical tactics to defraud their victims. The self-identification of online fraudsters as "hunters" could evoke public sympathy toward the victims, depicting them as vulnerable figures akin to animals. In this context of pig butchering, particularly when describing individuals aggressively and ruthlessly pursuing a goal, the term "hunter" may carry negative implications.

This negativity arises from the emphasis on the means employed to achieve the objective, which may be perceived as immoral or excessively intense. The term, when applied in this manner, suggests an unscrupulous or unethical pursuit of goals, contributing to a perception of impropriety in the methods employed.

We write for multifaceted audiences, drawing support for our interpretation of the term "hunter" from Barthes's seminal work (1977). In our analysis, we meticulously consider and interpret the metaphorical concept of "hunter" within this context, focusing on the diverse readers or audience members. This perspective aligns with Barthes's (1977, p. 148) assertion that emphasizes the need to encompass a broad spectrum of readership in our examination: "...*a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, and contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader, not, as hitherto said, the author*". Comparable perspectives to Barthes's (1977) viewpoint, a foundational influence on our work, can be discerned in interpretative traditions across various disciplines. Anthropology, as articulated by Turner et al. (1991), Cultural Sociology, as presented by Schechner (1988), and Literary Studies, particularly highlighted by Gates (1988), offer insights that resonate with Barthes's (1977) perspective. Therefore, our scholarly stance aligns with this rich interdisciplinary tradition, recognizing that objectivity or a purported "neutral standpoint" is inherently situated within the complex realm of social meaning construction.

Critiquing the Term Pig Butchering

In respect of our first critique of the term pig butchering, it is important to briefly note that fraud is a significantly underreported crime. For example, it is estimated that fewer than 20 percent of fraud is reported in the United Kingdom, according to the National Crime Agency (n.d.). There are many reasons for this, but one important reason that is worth considering in the context of this article is that victims of fraud are often ashamed of having been victimised, often because they are themselves blamed for their victimisation (Cross, 2013; Cross, 2015; Cross et al., 2016). Notably, it has been observed that victim-blaming narratives are not only spread by the victims' families and their acquaintances, but also by wider society, including bank employees. Shockingly, even staff at the United Kingdom's national fraud reporting facility, Action Fraud, have been found to mock and call victims names like "morons, screwballs, and

psychos." (Button, 2021; The Times, 2019). Arguably, the term pig butchering contributes to the pervasive problem of victim shaming by dehumanising victims when describing them as "pigs", an animal that serves little purpose other than to be fattened up for slaughter.

Victims of so-called pig butchering suffer not only the financial loss of having their supposedly invested money stolen but also reportedly secondary victimisation, which relates to the emotional loss of having been groomed on a deeply personal level over a period of months (Fariver, 2022). Notably, like in conventional online romance fraud, some victims of pig butchering have reportedly contemplated committing suicide after having been defrauded (Wang & Zhou, 2022; Proofpoint.com, 2022). By referring to fraud victims as "pigs", this terminology arguably reinforces the shame and guilt that victims of fraud often feel at having been victimised, that victims are different from non-victims and are under the term no longer human beings but rather an 'animal.' Given that pigs are often viscerally associated with being 'greedy', 'filthy', 'stupid', and 'lazy', it reinforces a common myth pertaining to fraud victims that they are "greedy" and that they "should have known better" (Cross, 2016). Therefore, the term pig butchering arguably undermines the works of fraud scholars such as Cassandra Cross, who have argued against common myths that plague fraud victims, such as that they fit a prescribed stereotype, that they are inherently different from non-victims, and that non-victims are too smart to be victimised (Cross, 2015).

Our second critique of the term pig butchering is that because it tells us very little about the crime itself, it has created fundamental confusion as to what fraud category it should be conceptually linked to. For example, a quick search of the term pig butchering in a search engine brings up a broadly confusing array of descriptions on different websites. Several online media outlets describe it as a "cryptocurrency scam" (see, for example, Nordvpn.com, 2023; Nypost.com, 2023; Secureworld.io, 2023), others describe it as a "romance scam" (see, for example, Mashable.com, 2023; Techtarget.com, 2023; Cnbc.com, 2023), whilst some perhaps more accurately describe it as a hybrid between an investment and a romance fraud (see for example Mirror.co.uk, 2023; Michigan.gov, n.d.; Bsc.news, 2022). Moreso, some websites appear to provide fundamentally misleading financial losses as to how much pig butchering has cost victims of this type of fraud, perhaps because of a lack of understanding of what this type of fraud is or to artificially inflate its grandiosity with the intention of sensationalising this type of fraud. The magazine Wired, for

example, describes pig butchering in an article title as a "$3 billion threat," which, upon further inspection, refers to all investment fraud losses recorded by the FBI's IC3 report in 2022 (Wired.com, 2023).

Furthermore, there is limited evidence suggesting that different fraud reporting facilities have not taken a consistent approach to the type of pre-existing fraud category that it should be recorded as, instead arguably electing to place a proverbial square peg into a round hole (Cross, 2023). A recent research insight provided by the US Federal Trade Commission, for example, argued that the second "favourite lie" told by romance fraudsters is that "they can teach you to invest," therefore providing some indication that this specific reporting facility is recording pig butchering as a romance fraud (Ftc.gov, 2023). The FBI, on the other hand, in a press release issued in 2022, described the fraud as an "investment scam," therefore providing an indication that complaints sent here are recorded as investment fraud (Fbi.gov, 2022). The lack of consistency in the various fraud reporting facilities' approaches to this new online fraud indicates a common dilemma (Lazarus et al., 2023b). The dilemma is that when a supposedly new type of fraud emerges, such as pig butchering, cybercrime and fraud reporting facilities can either take a ham-fisted approach and catalogue the crime under a pre-existing label that does not properly describe the fraud taking place. For example, categorising pig butchering under the binary category as an investment or romance fraud risks misrepresenting the fraud and inflating certain statistics. On the other hand, the facility can instead create an entirely new category. Introducing a new "hybrid romance-investment fraud" category could be an alternative option for recording this type of fraud. Whilst at a prima facie glance, this might appear to be a radical step, many frauds, such as romance fraud and also certain types of consumer frauds and investment frauds, can be epistemologically traced back to advance-fee fraud, yet they are now recorded separately (Gillespie, 2017; Ibrahim, 2016; Lazarus et al., 2023b; Whittaker & Button, 2020).

Summary

This article presents an analysis of the use of animal metaphors in characterising individuals who have fallen victim to online romance scams, arguing that the theoretical base of "pig butchering" is the dehumanisation of victims proposed by Bandura (1999) and Bandura et al. (1996). This particularly critical viewpoint provides several noteworthy contributions. Firstly, it enhances our understanding of language dynamics in fraud. This viewpoint explores the complex language dynamics seen in online fraud environments, specifically focusing on using metaphors to portray those involved as victims and perpetrators. These findings may be useful to researchers, law enforcement agencies, and legislators since they provide a more comprehensive understanding of the language tactics utilised by fraudsters and the cultural environments in which these tactics develop. The significance of this matter cannot be overstated concerning its contribution towards fostering a more sophisticated and empathetic understanding of those who have been victims of fraudulent activities. This approach promotes a shift away from the inclination to assign blame to victims, which specific media organisations may maintain.

Additionally, the research elucidates the difference between academic publications and media stories with regard to their approach in analysing these metaphors, particularly in light of the fact that there is only limited English language academic attention has been paid to to research in this area. The differentiation between rigorous academic analysis and sensationalised reporting is of utmost importance in promoting media literacy and critical thinking among the public. Furthermore, the significance of law enforcement agencies in producing and disseminating materials should not be underestimated. As trusted sources of information for the general public, it is crucial for law enforcement agencies to use non-victim shaming language in their communications. This not only encourages victims to come forward and report crimes by reducing the stigma associated with victimisation but also helps minimise victim shaming from the broader community towards those affected by crime.

Also, this article provides cross-cultural insights into the language framing of fraudulent actions by examining and comparing metaphors arising from the Chinese and Nigerian settings. There are several advantages to contrasting metaphors from Nigerian and Chinese settings. This resource has significant value for scholars studying the worldwide aspects of online fraud and its cultural diversities. Therefore, we emphasise the significant impact of language on individuals' perceptions and responses, highlighting broader applicability outside the context of online fraud to other domains where language plays a role in shaping attitudes and behaviours.

Furthermore, it promotes intercultural understanding by highlighting the nuances of linguistic and metaphorical expressions in many cultures. This knowledge may help linguists, cultural anthropologists, and communication scholars understand how language changes among cultures and affects communication dynamics. Such comparison is also crucial in the identification of fraud. It gives cybersecurity specialists and law enforcement organisations a broader grasp of the metaphors used in many cultures to represent fraudulent acts, assisting in detecting potentially fraudulent messages and behaviours.

This cross-cultural investigation offers a rich environment for communication studies, especially those focusing on how fraud is seen and practised. Researchers in linguistics and communication may investigate how language affects people's perspectives on fraud and behaviours, illuminating the complex relationship between language and conduct. These perceptions extend to preventive tactics, where cross-cultural understanding may guide the creation of more successful fraud prevention and awareness initiatives. This strategy connects with different audiences more deeply by considering cultural differences in language usage, thus increasing their effect. This comparative attempt also has benefits for lawmakers and policymakers. They may create laws and regulations that are successful and sensitive to cultural differences by having a thorough understanding of how other cultures frame and see fraud.

Besides the value of cross-cultural endeavour, the policy implications and applications within the academic sphere are also significant. The article has substantial policy consequences. Understanding the linguistic patterns in online fraudulent activities may contribute to developing efficacious policy measures and solutions. Policymakers might use this information to design focused awareness campaigns and assistance systems, especially in countries where these metaphors have significant prevalence. Moreover, the examination conducted in this work enhances the understanding of online deceit, enriching scholarly discussions within the academic domain. This critical viewpoint enhances the discussion on online fraud by emphasising the significant influence of language and by questioning prevailing narratives. In essence, it cultivates a heightened level of knowledge and understanding and a compassionate mindset when it comes to recognizing and tackling the many aspects of online deceit.

Conclusion

This article has expounded upon the theoretical underpinnings of "pig butchering," attributing its genesis to the dehumanisation of fraud victims. "Pig butchering" is a form of online fraud wherein perpetrators establish rapport with their targets to manoeuvre them into investing in counterfeit platforms,

meticulously designed to embezzle the funds ostensibly committed by their victims. Our critique discerns that the term "pig butchering" raises two primary concerns. First, we contend that this term perpetuates a prevailing narrative in which online fraud victims are depersonalised, depicted as "foolish," "indolent," and "avaricious" through the likening to 'pigs.' Secondly, we highlight that the term "pig butchering" inadequately describes the multifaceted nature of this crime, propagating a fallacy of single causality. Consequently, both media outlets and fraud reporting agencies tend to oversimplify this type of fraud, often categorising it under existing, yet insufficient, fraud classifications such as 'romance fraud' or 'investment fraud,' neglecting the potential need for a distinct category.

We advocate that policymakers, academia, and law enforcement should meticulously assess the ramifications of employing the term "pig butchering" on fraud victims. An alternative method for framing a more accurate conceptualization of "pig butchering" is to employ existing online fraud categories that typically emphasise the technique employed in the fraud rather than focusing on the victim. Noteworthy examples encompass 'advance-fee fraud,' 'romance fraud,' 'online shopping fraud,' and 'investment fraud.' If terms that emphasise the victim, such as "pig butchering," become the norm for conceptualising online fraud, one could hypothetically argue for the relabeling of 'advance-fee fraud' as 'maga fraud,' and recovery scams as 'sucker fraud.'

Additionally, while we acknowledge that changing the established term "pig butchering" and erasing its stigma on victims is challenging, examining the broader landscape of online harm reveals instances where such transitions have been successfully implemented. Therefore, it is worth considering advocating for a shift in the right direction. A pertinent example is the transformation of the term 'child pornography' into 'child sexual abuse material' in recent years. Advocates against the term 'child pornography' have rightly contended that it trivialises the gravity of the offence, as the term 'pornography' undermines the abuse inherent in the material and erroneously implies consent, which a child cannot provide. Thus, we posit that a similar evolution is plausible within the context of 'pig butchering' by adopting a term that refrains from dehumanising the victims. A more conventional, technique-oriented label for this crime could be 'investment-romance fraud,' offering a more comprehensive depiction of the fraudulent activities involved. This transition can also stimulate international perspectives on the language offenders use, fostering fresh research and awareness initiatives in the process.

Lastly, we extend an invitation to various discourses aimed at humanizing victims of online fraud. We highlighted in this article that humanising involves attributing to individuals the distinct individuality inherent in being human. This necessitates providing them with moral and equitable treatment, recognized as a right by virtue of their humanity. We built on these insights, focusing on rehumanising victims of online fraud. Rehumanising urges us to redress the harm inflicted, contemplating ways to minimize suffering and engage with a sense of care. This call urges us to consider the social, cultural, political, and familial contexts surrounding victims, perpetrators, and those involved in the discussion.

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[1] **Elie Wiesel's quotes:**   https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/677-the-opposite-of-love-is-not-hate-it-s-indifference-the