

## **Representation of Nigerian Internet Scamsters in selected Nigerian and International News Reports**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Linguistic studies on Nigerian internet scamsters have dwelt on the aspects of language use. These studies focused on the linguistic features, slangy expressions, discourse and persuasive strategies used by scamsters in scam messages. However, the aspect of media representation of the social actors of Nigerian internet fraud has not been given adequate attention. This study, therefore, explores the representation of social actors of Nigerian internet fraud in Nigerian and international news reports. Headlines and news contents are purposively sampled from forty-five news articles published between 2019 and 2021, from two Nigerian newspapers and two international news media. Guided by Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) and Van Leeuwen's early work on social actor representation (1996), ten forms of representations were identified. Nigerian Internet Scamsters were represented as educated, role models, imposters, parentally supported, abductors, wrong ambassadors/negative nationals, friends to the security agents, desperate/money ritualists, guilty and convicted, exploiters and victimizers. The negative connotation of these labels indicates that the media are not neutral in their representation of scammers. This study shows that the representation of the social actions and actors in internet fraud are linguistically and discursively framed to fit their ideology.*

**KEYWORDS:** International media, News Reports, Nigerian Internet Scamsters, Nigerian media, Representation

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Nigerian Internet Scamsters (NIScamsters), popularly known as the "Yahoo Boys", are a group of online fraudsters who have become notorious for defrauding people of huge sums of money and valuables through the use of information technologies both in Nigeria and abroad. This activity seems to have become an acceptable means of livelihood for some youths. As observed by Oludayo and Ibrahim (2011), internet fraud has become a sub-culture among Nigerian youths, especially undergraduates and the unemployed, particularly in urban centres. This act is embraced and seems to have become an acceptable means of livelihood among most youths. Ranking second in

countries with romance scams, Nigeria has accounted for 1129 reports of scams with a total amount of \$16.8 million lost to Nigerian dating sites in 2021 (*SaharaReporter*, September 07, 2021). The major targets of these fraudsters are unsuspecting and vulnerable persons and once initial contact is successful, they will often continue to victimize these individuals (Ojilere & Oraegbunam, 2017; Eze-Michael, 2021).

From the researcher's personal observation on the street and on university campuses, those who engage in internet fraud become rich overnight. They display the financial resources at their disposal with their lavish lifestyle which motivate people to see virtues like honesty, hard work, and godliness as unattractive and pointless, thereby spreading the spirit of greed, get-rich-quick syndrome and cybercrime as an acceptable source of income.

The media are an essential aspect of society because they mostly perform the function of informing, educating, entertaining and updating people on the happenings around them. Through news reports, the public are kept abreast of issues in society. Thus, the media are part of the social institutions that influence events thorough coverage, the volume of coverage, or non-coverage of events (Chime-Nganya, Ezegwu & Ezeji 2017). Since the activities of NIScamsters are recognized as a major national and international problem (Durklin & Brinkman, 2009), the Nigerian and international media have been dedicated to the reporting of their activities that create and promote public awareness, and aim to prevent further victimization of the citizenry. However, news media have their own interests at heart, which may cause bias in their reporting. News is a carrier/bearer of social, cultural and ideological construction because the media reports to suit 'what it wants the people to know (Osisanwo, 2016) and what their readers want to read for commercial reasons. The method of reporting, such as naming and role attribution, can influence the reader's perception and attitude to actors and events being reported. It is thus expected that the media reportage of stories that emanate from the activities of internet fraudsters may influence the way Nigerian and international journalism constructs the social actors of internet fraud. It is in line with this that the present study is particularly interested in the representation of Nigerian internet fraudsters in Nigerian and international news reportage. The study qualitatively analyses a limited set of headlines and news contents of selected news.

### **Previous Studies and Statement of the Problem**

There are various scholarships on internet fraud in Nigeria. In the field of linguistics, studies have been undertaken on language used in scam messages. These studies focused on Nigerian linguistic features (Haruna, 2016; Buhari, 2017; Asfer & Bairmani, 2021), persuasive strategies (Schaffer, 2012; Chilua, 2009, 2010; Annadorai, Krish, Shaari and Kamaluddin, 2018), Discourse strategies (Taiwo, 2012; Chilua, Chilua & Ajiboye, 2022) and slangy expressions (Oni & Oke, 2010; Ajayi, 2019) used by Nigerian internet Scamsters in scam emails. Those below are just a few of the relevant ones.

Schaffer (2012) examines the linguistic features of Nigerian fraud emails in an analysis of 30 e-mailed letters received between March 28, 2002, and July 29, 2003. Analysis shows that similar narratives involving vast sums of money to be transferred from the scammer's home country with outside help and common persuasive strategies (frequently involving apologies, flattery, attempts to intrigue recipients, and appeals to greed, altruism, trust, and religious feelings), while stylistic patterns in writing features include use of attention-inducing buzz words like "urgent" and "secret" in subject headings as well as in the letters themselves, and obvious nonnative English grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary errors were the patterns of Nigerian scam emails. Similarly, Ajayi (2019) carried out a study on anti-language and slangy expressions used in the transactional and social interaction of cyber scammers in Nigeria. The study investigates the linguistic strategies employed by cyber scammers in Southwestern Nigeria. It adopts Halliday's (1976) concept of anti-language and discovers that slangy coinages, overlexicalisation, and relexicalisation (semantic extension) characterise cyber scammers' language in Nigeria. Linguistic sub-strategies such as reduplication, clipping, blending and acronym contribute to their illocutionary effect.

Using Herring's (2004) Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), Chiluba, Chiluba and Ajiboye (2022) studied discourse structure and functions of deceptive online messages. He identified the use of specific discourse/pragmatic strategies like socio-cultural greeting formulas, confidence building, self-identification, and other interest-sustaining strategies by the writers of scam emails.

These studies are relevant to the proposed study because they dwelt extensively on the aspects of language use by Nigerian Internet fraudsters. Blommaert (2005), Button & Cross (2017), Heyd (2008), Reurink (2016) among others **do not consider the representation of internet fraudsters in the media**. However, this current study differs as it takes a broader approach from a discursive point of view, to investigate how the actors are constructed. This study does not focus on the linguistic features or deceptive strategies in Nigerian scam emails but centres on the media representation of Nigerian Internet Scammers. The study attempts to add a broader perspective to these linguistic studies of scammers' communications. In addition to linguistic studies of the language of internet fraudsters, this paper focuses on the discursive representation of the actions and actors in popular (or quality) news media reporting on Nigerian scamming practices. It delves into how the news reports both within and outside Nigeria label or represents social actors and internet fraud in Nigeria.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for this study were retrieved from both Nigerian and international news reports. Online news reports related to Nigerian Internet scammers published by two western/foreign newspapers namely: the *Daily Mail* (British) and the *New York Times* (American) and two popular Nigerian newspapers editions namely *The Guardian* and *Punch*. The inclusion of international media is

because the activities of the internet scamsters transcend the borders of Nigeria, thus, foreign news reports provide further insight into the subject of the study.

The choice of the newspapers was based on popularity of the newspapers and availability of data. Headlines and news contents of forty-five (45) news reports between 2019 and 2021 was used for the study. Data from the newspapers were downloaded online. Table 1 shows the sources and number of words per newspaper that were used for the study

**Table 1:** Sources and Number of Words in selected Newspapers

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>No. of Reports</b>	<b>No of Words</b>
<b>Foreign</b>		
Daily Mail (British)	10	2733
New York Times (American)	9	2469
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>5202</b>
<b>Nigerian</b>		
The Guardian	12	4421
Punch	14	4766
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>9187</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>14389</b>

With emphasis on the representation of social actors of internet fraud in the Nigerian and international news reports, this study examines the headlines, cover stories and some editorials based on Van Leeuwen's social actors representation and Halliday's transitivity in Systemic Functional Grammar.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theoretical insights from the transitivity aspect of Halliday's (2014) Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) and Van Leeuwen's version of Critical Discourse Analysis are deployed in the analysis of data. These two approaches, of Halliday and Van Leeuwen, are used to complement each other.

The transitivity aspect of Halliday's (2014) Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) is the total resources for constructing events or experiences within a clause. The transitivity system deals with how meaning is represented in a clause. When people use language to interact with people, it is used to refer to the world, the internal world- things, events, qualities etc. or our internal world-thoughts, beliefs, feelings etc. The system of transitivity reflects people's view of the world as consisting of 'going- on' (verb), involving things (noun) which may have attributes (adjectives) and which go on against background details of place, time, manner, etc (adverbials). Thus, the transitivity process is made up of three components which are the process itself (expressed and realized by verbal group), the participants in the process (realized by nominal group) and the

circumstances associated with the process (realized by adverbial group). The types of process are material, mental, verbal, behavioural, relational and ideational (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014).

This study is also guided by Van Leeuwen (1996) early work on social actor representation because it focuses on how social actors and actions are represented in discourses. It deals with how people make choices of words to describe or refer to actions and their actors in a discourse. Leeuwen (1996) identified ten categories and other sub-categories through which social actions and actors are represented in a discourse. These are discussed as follows: *Exclusion* refers to the way social actors are partially or completely de-emphasized in the representation. The two types of exclusion are suppression (complete removal of social actors and their activities) and *backgrounding* (partial exclusion of social actors). *Role Allocation* deals with the roles social actors play in a clause. Social actors may be activated or passivated. This may be realized by grammatical participant roles, by transitivity structures in which activated social actors are coded as 'Actor', 'Behaver', 'Senser', 'Sayer' or 'Assigner' (Leeuwen, 1996). *Genericisation* and *Specification* is the representation of social actors either as classes or as specific, identifiable individuals. *Assimilation* represents social actors as individuals (*individualization*) or as a group of participants (*Assimilation*). There are two major kinds of assimilation: *aggregation* and *collectivisation*. While the former use statistics to quantify groups of participants, the latter does not.

*Association* and *Dissociation* is another way in which social actors can be represented as groups. In *association*, social actors form groups based on common interests while in *disassociation*, social actors disassociate themselves from a group. In *determination* and *differentiation*, *Indetermination* occurs when social actors are represented as unspecified or anonymous, *determination* occurs when their identity is known and specified while *Differentiation* explicitly differentiates between the 'Self' and the 'Other', or between 'Us' and 'Them'. *Nomination* and *Categorisation* deal with how social actors are represented by their unique identities or in terms of identities and functions they share with others. In *Functionalisation* and *Identification*, *Functionalisation* occurs when social actors are represented

### **Analysis of Data**

The analysis of data in this study shows how news media, both foreign and Nigerian, construct their ideological position on social actors in Nigerian Internet fraud and therefore, the analysis for actors and transitivity can reveal those ideologies. In the analysis, ten forms of representations were identified.

### **NIScamsters as Flashy and Role Models**

The news reports also construct the internet scamsters as role models- people who motivate and are admired by the young and the society at large. The scamsters live in exotic houses, drive luxurious cars, use expensive phones and jewelry. By displaying and flaunting their wealth, many

people look up to them and see their lifestyle as worthy of imitation. This is seen in the excerpts below (1- 2)

(1) Letter from Africa: Why Nigeria's internet scammers are 'role models'

Nigerian novelist Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani laments that internet scammers have become role models for many youths in her country..... They noticed the uneducated scammers accumulating wealth and esteem and decided to join them. After that followed a batch that simply admired the scammers. They had observed the scammers establish legitimate businesses from fraudulent funds, and become respected philanthropists or politicians in senior leadership positions. These people are the inspiration for many up-and-coming scammers, and many young Nigerians consider scamming a career path and a valid source of income(Daily Post, 23 September 2019).

In shaping the representation of NIScamsters as role models, the media use the verbalization process. This involves giving voice to individuals of newsworthy status. Reports are constructed around the comments of these individuals. In excerpt (1), the Nigerian novelist, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani is the human actor whose voice is reported thus: *internet scammers have become role models for many youths in her country*. The speaker of the verbiage uses *differentiation* to polarize between 'us' and 'them'. 'Them' represents the 'scammers who are wealthy, respected and better positioned in the society' while 'Us' represents 'many young Nigerians who admire the scammers as a result of the wealth within their control'. In this case, 'Us' now consider scamming as a valid source of income as a result of 'Them' who have become opulence and respected in the society through fraudulent funds. The lexical item 'lament' means the behavior is unhappy about the situation. Unemployment, crippled economy and mismanagement of public funds have succeeded in frustrating many people to turn to dishonest means as a means of survival.

(2) The fraudsters flash their lavish lifestyles in our faces. We attend their ostentatious weddings and parties. Videos have circulated of the accused men engaged in lavish displays of wealth, such as throwing a party where guests danced on a floor covered in dollar notes and having a 'champagne bath', drenched from top to toe in the expensive wine. These fraudsters flash their lavish lifestyles in our faces... They are the special guests at our events. Our community and humanitarian projects benefit from their largess. There is also that part of some Nigerians that cannot help but admire these young scammers - the ingenuity and audacity that enables them to swipe, with ease, millions of dollars from American neuroscientists, British CEOs and German scholars(Daily Post, July 23, 2021).

The text producer in excerpt (2) classified and identified Internet scamsters as 'accused men' and 'fraudsters' who 'flash' their wealth pretentiously. The text producer begins by exposing how the 'accused men' squander money by spraying dollars and purchasing expensive wine only to pour them away. The lexical items '*champagne bath*', '*flash*', '*lavish*' and '*ostentatious*' give readers the picture of how scamsters live expensive lives. They are special guests '*at our events*' and

communities benefit from their *'humanitarian projects'*. This shows the wealth and respects society accord to the scamsters. With the use of *differentiation*, the text producer segment between 'us' and 'them'. 'Them' here are scammers defraud victims millions of dollars with ease and 'Us' who cannot resist the admiration for the scammers'. This presents 'them' as role models to 'Us' who looks up to and are ready to follow the footsteps of the out-group. The use of the personal and possessive pronouns 'we', 'them', 'their', 'our', 'they' suggest the representation of the social actors as human beings.

### **NIScamsters as Parentally Supported**

There is also the representation of NIScamsters as having the support of their parents. It portrays parents as accomplices for their children (NIScamsters) to defraud people and this makes it appear like a family business. This is fronted in the news reportages (3-5)

(3) Mother, son, others nabbed for internet fraud

One of the suspects, Lucky Ebhogie, allegedly recruited his mother into the scam by using her account to launder suspected proceeds of crime. On July 30, 2021, he purchased a Mercedes Benz GLK car for N7 million through the mother's bank account.

(The Guardian, 12 August 2021)

(4) EFCC nabs father, son for alleged internet fraud in Lagos

(The Punch, July 11 2020)

(5) EFCC arrests son, mother for N50m internet fraud

The Lagos Zonal Office of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, (EFCC), have arrested Ibeh Theophilus Uche, Chief Executive Officer, CEO, 10 Kobo Wine Place, Ikotun, Lagos alongside his mother for their alleged involvement in computer-related fraud to the tune of about N50million in Lagos. Investigations revealed that the suspect had been using a First Bank account belonging to his mother, an accomplice; to launder the proceeds of his alleged criminal activities.

(The Guardian, 27 March 2021)

As seen in the excerpts above, the reporters substantiate the headlines to represent NIScamsters as having the support of parents by identifying and specifying the relationship between the arrested suspects. The text producers present parents as accomplice to the scamming acts using *identification*, *determination* and *specification* to achieve this. Excerpt (3) uses *relational identification* and *specification* (mother, son and others) to specify the actors in the headline. Meanwhile, the agent of the material process 'nabbed' is backgrounded to foreground the actors and the circumstances of the process. The lexical item 'recruited' shows the son influenced the mother into supporting him in the fraud activities.

Rather than the text producer in excerpt (4) to simply say that 'EFCC nabs two people'; *specification* and *determination* are used to indicate the arrested person as father and son. This is

to give readers the idea that parents are also aiding and abetting their children in criminal activities. Also in excerpt (5), the goals of the action 'arrest' in the headline are son and mother who are identified with the use of *determination* and *identification*. The reporter further draws on *aggregation* (N50million) in the news content to indicate the exact amount of money involved in the allegation. The noun apposition 'an accomplice' qualifying the noun 'his mother' shows the mother has been lending support to the suspect in laundering the proceeds of his alleged criminal activities. In general, the media also draw upon publicizing the arrest stories as a way to portray parental support for the Nigerian internet scamsters.

### **NIScamsters as Abductors**

Nigerian internet scamsters do not only fraud and defraud people of their money as seen in examples above; they are also hostage-takers. This has to do with 'luring' their victims to Nigeria and keeping them against their will. News writers in the selected reports have consistently labelled scammers as captors of victims in news reportage. A glimpse of the excerpts below reveals this (6-9)

(6) DSS rescues American 'abducted' in Lagos by internet lover

The Department of State Services (DSS) yesterday rescued an American citizen. Parading the prime suspect and his accomplice at the DSS Lagos command, director of the command, Mrs. Betty Adoki, said Jackson, 46, who had arrived in Lagos on November 11 and was received at the airport by a suspected internet fraudster and kidnapper, Adedoyin, was held hostage on November 21, where she was allegedly raped several times by the suspect. (The Guardian, 27 November 2018)

(7) Romance scam: US woman freed after year as hostage in Nigeria

An American woman lured to Nigeria by a promise of marriage from a man she met on Facebook has been rescued after being held captive for more than a year, police say. The 46-year-old was held against her will for 16 months in a hotel room in Lagos. (Daily Post, 13 July 2020)

(8) Marriage scam: American woman defrauded of \$48,000, held hostage in Nigeria, rescued  
Police rescue American lady confined in Lagos hotel for 16 months. 'Police operatives have successfully rescued an American citizen who was confined in a Lagos hotel, where she was held against her wish for over a year by an internet fraudster,' police spokesman Frank Mba, said in a statement.

(New York Times, July 13, 2020)

(9) Estate Agent accused of raping American he lured to Nigeria

(The Punch, 13 November 2019)



The excerpts above show the representation of NIScamsters as abductors. The material processes 'lure' 'held hostage' 'abduct' 'rescue' 'freed' depict them as abductors. Exclusion and role allocation allow the activities of scamsters as abductors to be presented. In excerpt (6), the Guardian reporter constructs the headline to assign the role of an actor in rescuing the abductee to the DSS and the role of beneficiaries of the freedom to the 'American'. Meanwhile, the by-phrase 'internet lover' suggests circumstantialisation to activate internet Scammer as the abductor. The use of an inverted comma in 'abducted' purposefully foreground internet scamsters as abductors. The use of *functionalization (director of the command)* bestows a newsworthy status on the sayer. In excerpts (7) and (8), the social actors who perpetrated the act of abduction are hidden and suppressed in the headlines because readers are assumed to already know who the abductors are. Therefore, *US woman* and *American woman* were nominalized in both reports. Both reporters also deployed *determination* and *aggregation* by specifying the identity of the abductee, the actual duration spent in hostage and the amount fraud during the period of hostage to invoke the sympathy of the readers towards the victims and at the same time, make them see the acts perpetrated by the scamsters. The *identification* of the abductees as 'American/American woman' in all the reports showed that majority of the victims are Americans and women. They use various means to lure their victims to Nigeria and subject them to their control and other inhuman things such as rape as seen in excerpt (9)

### **NIScamsters as Educated**

News reports frame NIScamsters as Educated. Most internet scamsters comprised students and graduates of various tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The reports analysed often traced the identity of most Internet Scamsters to an educational institution and an academy as seen in the excerpts below (10-17)

(3) LAUTECH student jailed for scamming American  
(Daily Post, 23 February 2021)

(11) Court jails Kwara poly student, 11 Internet fraudsters  
(The Punch, 1 September 2021)

(12) UNILORIN graduate jailed six months for love scam  
(The Punch, 16 February 2021)

(13) Court Jails 34-year-old Graduate in Kwara over Romance Fraud  
(The Guardian, Feb 15, 2021)

(14) Court Jails Two Nigerian Students, Ordered To Forfeit Cars to Government Over Cybercrime  
(New York Times, Sept 14, 2021)

(15) Female graduate, lover in police net for impersonating FIRS chairman  
(The Guardian, 26 May 2021)

(16) EFCC uncovers internet fraud 'academy' in Abuja  
Operatives of the Abuja Zonal Office of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC, have uncovered another 'academy' for the grooming of internet fraudsters. The coordinator of the 'academy' is said to be 30-year-old Emmanuel Clement, and his 'students' are mostly young school leavers, ladies inclusive, within the age range of 18 to 25 years.  
(The Guardian, 19 February 2021)

(17) Mark Zuckerberg's imposter, others jailed for internet fraud in Ilorin  
The arrested persons were suspected to be apprentices learning the craft of cyber fraud  
(The Punch, 23 October 2021)

The reporters in the text above use *nomination* and *identification* to specifically identify the identity of the social actors of internet fraud in the headlines and contents. In this case, internet scammers are nominated and identified as young school leavers, polytechnic and university students, final year students, prospective corps members and graduates. These are fronted and foregrounded in the headlines. By naming educational institutions (ex. 10, 12 and 15), they also identify the type of actors. The reporters present internet scammers as educated, the majority of which are students associated to various tertiary institutions. The recipients of the actions in excerpts (10), (12) and (15) are a LAUTECH student, a UNILORIN graduate and a Female graduate respectively. They are activated to foreground the NIScamsters (students) as culprits and emphasize the conditions for their indictments.

The reporters in excerpts 11 and 15 use *Overdetermination (students/internet fraud)* to suggest that NIScamsters are students and at the same time, fraudsters. Excerpts in (10-15) assign the role of 'jailer' to the non-human actor - 'court' who performs the material process of 'sentencing' the patients – 'students' over offences bordering on Internet fraud.

Furthermore, in excerpt (16), the term 'academy', 'student' and 'groom' are used to functionally categorize the social action in relation to educational institution. This comparison suggests that internet fraudsters are being tutored the way students are taught in schools, indicating that they are educated in scamming acts. *Collectivization* is used to generalize the category of people who attend such institutions as 'young school leavers' and 'ladies' and 'within the age range of 18 to 25 years'. In excerpt (17), internet fraud is represented as a 'craft' and actors are generalised as 'apprentices', like sorcerers, to indicate that internet scammers willfully engage in professionalizing in cybercrime as a profitable skill that earns them a living.

### **NIScamsters as Imposters**

The construction of NIScamsters as impostors who take up the personalities of soldiers, lovers, business tycoons, officials and other different identities that can afford them the opportunity to swindle unsuspecting victims is constructed by both Nigerian and foreign media reports. Usually, NIScamsters are known to assume different identities to defraud victims. Through the allegation of using fake identity to extort money from their victims, the reportages construct the NIScamsters as imposters.

(18) Female graduate, lover in police net for impersonating FIRS chairman

Two fraudsters, one Miss. Onuoha Onachi ..... and her lover, Chinedu Okoro, are currently cooling their heels in police cells .... for allegedly impersonating the Executive Chairman, Federal Inland Revenue Service, Mr Muhammad Nami, on Facebook to defraud unsuspecting job-seekers.

(The Guardian, 26 May 2021)

(19) 21-Year-Old Nigerian Who Impersonated Facebook Founder, Zuckerberg Bags Sentenced To Prison

The Kwara State High Court has sentenced Jatto Sheriff Umar, a 21-year-old man who impersonated Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg to prison over offences bordering on impersonation and cybercrime.... The 21-year-old was specialized in posing as the founder of Facebook.....

(New York Times, October 14 2021)

(20) Two fraudsters jailed in Edo

The charge against Omoregbe reads, 'That you Noah Omoregbe (a.k.a Frank Mark) on or about the 21st day of June 2021 at Yoruba Street, Benin City, within the jurisdiction of this Honourable Court, did with intent to defraud, falsely represented yourself as one Frank Mark, an American Soldier, and sent scam messages to one Liud Mila via your iPhone X with IMEI No: 354862090120911 with intent to obtain money from her ....'

(The Punch, 22 July 2021)

The examples above reveal the representation of Niscamsters as imposters in news reports. This representation is done through the instrumentality of circumstantiation 'impersonation'. The reporters dwell on publicizing arrest stories in which impersonation is one of the major causes of the arrest. Thus, in all the data reviewed, the lexical item 'impersonation' runs through the analysis. This is to call to attention that the Niscamsters can pose to be anybody and readers need to be vigilant. In excerpt (18), the scamster assumed the identity of a top government official on Facebook. The *functionalization* and *nomination* of Muhammad Nami as the Executive Chairman of the Federal Inland Revenue Service indicate the reason he was impersonated and how the actor was able to swindle job seekers. Ideologically, impersonating to defraud job-seekers infers that there is no category of people, whether rich or poor that the Niscamsters cannot fraud

In excerpt (19), the relative clause ‘Who Impersonated Facebook Founder’ was used to specify the actor as an impostor. The use of *functionalisation* (the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg) presents the identity of the personality the actor impersonated. The behavioural process ‘specialized’ indicates that the ‘behavior’ has been perpetrating the act of impersonation for a long time and he used this persona to ‘defrauding unsuspecting victims via online relationship’.

In authenticating the Niscamsters as imposters, the reporter in excerpt (20) uses Strategic Management of Voice by attributing the source to a non-human actor 'the charge' which depict the actor as an impersonator who '*falsely represented as Frank Mark, an American Soldier*'. This not only indicts the actor but label him as an impostor. This report shows that the scamsters assume various identities to earn people’s trust and defraud unsuspecting victims. Scamsters are able to manipulate victims successfully by the opportunity offered by the internet such as anonymity as they are able to present different identities that are not easily verifiable (Blommaert, 2005; Taiwo, 2012)

### **NIScamsters as Wrong Ambassador/Negative Nationals**

The NIScamsters are constructed as Wrong Ambassadors and negative nationals in news reports. The actions and inactions of Niscamsters label Nigeria and Nigerians as fraudsters in both local and international news reports.

(22) Obinwanne Okeke: Nigerian email fraudster jailed for 10 years in US  
(Daily Post, 17 February, 2021)

(23) Two Nigerian fraudsters to spend combined 22 years in US jail  
Two Nigerians, Opeyemi Abidemi Adeoso, 46, and Benjamin Adeleke Ifebajo, 47, have been jailed in the US for internet fraud. In a statement by the acting U.S. Attorney Chad E. Meacham, two Nigerian fraudsters arrested in DOJ’s Operation rewired have been sentenced to a combined 22 ½ years in federal prison  
(The Punch, 23 November 2021)

(24) VIDEO: FBI rounds up indicted Nigerian scammers in Los Angeles  
(New York Times, 23 August 2019)

In excerpt (22), the actor in the British news is activated and identified as a 'Nigerian email fraudster' to portray the nationality of the convicted in the United States. The agents who ‘jailed’ the actor are excluded because it is considered irrelevant. The reporter wants to point the readers to the nationality and country where the actors were jailed. The *Punch* reporter in excerpt (23) attributed the source of his information to the acting U.S. Attorney Chad E. Meacham. The use of *functionalization* is to authenticate the claims. He categories and activates the two Nigerian fraudsters as the recipients of the conviction whereas the actors and agency involved in convicting

them are excluded (suppression) outrightly in the headline and overlines. The repetition of the nationality of the convicts foregrounds it. The reporter wants the readers to see this and construct the NIScamsters as wrong ambassadors and negative nationals. The same can be said of excerpt (24) where the American reporter specifies the identity of the indicted scammers as 'Nigerians'. The readers are made to see the atrocities that Nigerians commit abroad.

(25) PUNCH Diaspora: Nigerian, Okuo, accomplice accused of alleged internet scam in US (The Punch, 23 September 2021)

(26) How the US caught flashy Nigerian Instagrammers 'with \$40m'  
A Washington-based attorney, Moe Odele, finds it frustrating as a Nigerian because it ignores the 'systemic failures that have led to brilliant Nigerian youths engaging in these scams', in the country and abroad. 'They see it as an easy way out in a country that offers them limited options and, in many cases, no options at all,' she says.

'Our value system in Nigeria needs to be checked, especially the emphasis we place on wealth, no matter how you got it,' the economist Ebuka Emebinah told the Daily Post.  
(Daily Post, 8 July 2020)

In excerpt (25), *determination* and *identification* (Nigerian and Okuo) are used to identify the goals of the process as 'Nigerian'. Bringing the actors to the beginning of the clause is to make the nationality more visible and prominent. To label the NIScamsters as wrong ambassadors and negative nationals, in excerpt (26), the Daily Post reporter manages the voice of a Washington, DC-based attorney, Moe Odele and the economist Ebuka Emebinah. The text producer constructs the report around the comments of these two individuals to make it newsworthy. There is the strategic use of indirect blaming of government to depict the situation of Nigeria as the real cause since there is 'no options at all'. However, the nominated economist blamed the value system of Nigerian society. Using the voice of Nigerians who lived abroad, the reporter is able to paint a vivid picture of the impression NIScamsters create in the mind of non-natives. The use of personal and possessive pronouns 'they', 'our', 'them' and 'you' is to personify the actors.

(27) Three Nigerian brothers and their wives convicted of £10m internet fraud in UK  
A gang of 11 fraudsters have been jailed for a total of more than 43 years for their parts in the theft of millions of pounds from businesses and individuals in the United Kingdom and abroad. Six of the convicts are Nigerians, comprising three brothers, two women who are wives to two of the brothers, and the sixth person who is their associate (The Guardian, 10 May 2019).

(28) FBI Arrests 35 Nigerians in Texas for \$117million Fraud  
Thirty-five Nigerians have been arrested in North Texas by the United States' Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI, for involvement in a fraud worth \$117million. The suspects, who have

allegedly defrauded over 100 people nationwide, would face indictment for money laundering and wire scam (New York Times, October 07, 2021).

In excerpt (27), the text producer's ideology that NIScamsters are wrong nationals is expressed through the *activation* of the actors who are convicted in the United Kingdom. Through the use of *determination* and *specification*, the *Punch* reporter, in the headline consciously classifies and activates the scamsters, fronting the nationality of the actors and the country where they were convicted (*Three Nigerian brothers and their wives convicted of £10m internet fraud in UK*). In spite of the fact that 11 fraudsters were arrested out of which six were Nigerians as seen in the news contents, the text producer intentionally fronted the national identity of only the six Nigerians in the headline. This is to tell readers that Nigerian inhabitants in the UK are perpetrating criminal activities. Using the voice of the metropolitan police as the source of the news is to ascribe the news to a newsworthy individual. The Daily Post reporter in the news content in excerpt (28) activates the actors to foreground them. He uses *aggregation* to specify the number of Nigerians arrested (35), the financial worth of the fraud (\$117million) and the number of people (100) defrauded worldwide by the Nigerians. All these represent Nigerians dwelling abroad and those within the country negatively

### **NIScamsters as Desperate and Money Ritualists**

News reports construct NIScamsters as greedy and desperate for wealth. Thus, money ritual has become the device for the NIScamsters to get rich-quick. They do not only abduct their victims, they also kill people for money rituals. The get-rich-quick syndrome that has become commonplace among youths and in every part of the country is claimed to drive the NIScamsters to engage in money rituals. They are desperate for money by all menacing means as constructed by media reports. Here, text producers strategically take positions. They openly condemn and generalize the act among the youths who are the NIScamsters.

(29) Greedy youths explore money rituals, internet fraud as gateways to success, meet dangerous ends

Owolabi, his mum, Bola and their prophet, Segun Philips, were arrested weeks earlier for killing his purported girlfriend, Favour Daley-Oladele in Ikoyi, Osun State, for money ritual purposes (The Guardian, 12 August, 2021)

(30) Filthy riches two yahoo boys Nigerians and the god of Money

Also, one Joy Osameze was murdered for ritual purposes on March 12, 2021, allegedly by five suspects ... The victim was said to have been lured to her abductors by her 18-year-old brother.... Another youth, Kabiru Oyeduntan, 39, collaborated with his friend simply identified as Akin to kill an 18-year lady, Kemi, for money ritual purposes.

A youth, Christian Eyo, was recently arrested for allegedly killing and beheading his aunt..... Though he claimed that he killed his aunt because she was seducing him, observers linked the

action to the killing for money rituals. The state police spokesperson, Bright Edefe, on June 29, stated in a statement that the command arrested suspected ritualists in possession of two human skulls and a container with fresh blood (The Punch, 8 August 2021).

(31) Lust for Money and Yahoo-Plus Mania in Nigeria

The latest get-rich-quick device is money ritual.... such young benzers are often either school dropouts, unemployed graduates or roadside hawkers, known for 'double hustle' but who, after moving closely with the 'sooji' or 'sharp pra-pra' or 'shraproper' folk become stupendously wealthy overnight. How? Human parts, young women's pants or some midnight blood sacrifices have been traded for sudden riches (The Punch, 8 August 2019).

NIScamsters are represented as ritualists. This is common mostly in the Nigerian newspapers. In Nigerian newspapers, the NIScamsters are actors of violent actions such as 'murdered', 'behead' among others. The categorization 'ritualist', the material process 'killed', 'murdered', 'Kidnapped' and the circumstances 'money ritual' all label the NIScamsters as money ritualists. Excerpts (29) to (31) vividly describe the desperation of NIScamsters for money. They reveal how the NIScamsters engage in the act of killing for money rituals. Rather than engage in hard work and honest living, they rather resort to the use of human parts for money. They don't exclude family members as they kill their aunties and sisters to keep the money flowing. The victims can be a girlfriend (Excerpt 29), sister or brother (excerpt 30). This calls the attention of the readers to the cruelty, greediness, selfishness and desperation of NIScamsters for money. They do not consider their relationship with their victims before they kill them for money ritual. The text producers in excerpt (31) differentiate the money ritualist as 'sooji', 'sharp pra-pra' and 'shraproper folk'. This indicates that the scammers consider themselves as smart-, people who know the shortcut to wealth. The lexical items 'traded' and 'sudden' depict what the ritualists give in exchange for quick money. The text producer uses *indetermination* (human parts, some midnight blood sacrifices) and classification (young women's pants) to present them.

**NIScamsters as Friends to the Security Agents**

NIScamsters are constructed as friends of the law enforcement agencies. They collaborate with them to perpetrate criminal activities. Excerpts below show this.

(32) How yahoo boys befriend, bribe policemen, soldiers to evade justice(The Punch, 11 December 2021),

(33) He is known as Nigerian's 'super cop'. The FBI says he supported a cybercrime ring

Now Abba Alhaji Kyari, deputy commissioner for the Nigeria Police Force, stands accused of abusing his power to support a global fraud ring. One of Nigeria's most infamous scammers —

Ramon Abbas, who goes by the moniker 'Hushpuppi' — told investigators that Kyari accepted a bribe last year to arrest a man who betrayed his cybercrime syndicate.

This is the 'super cop' — a top guy in top circles,' said Rinu Oduala, an #EndSARS activist. 'Police officers still aren't friends of the people. They're friends of the elites.'

(New York Times, 30 July 2021)

The excerpts above reveal the representation of NIScamsters and the security officials as collaborators in news reports as seen in both Nigerian (*The Punch*) and Foreign (*New York Times*) newspapers. This representation is done through the instrumentality of the material process 'befriend', 'bribe', and 'support'. It shows that the NIScamsters offer bribes to the law enforcement officials to buy their support. In excerpt (32), two material processes are used including 'befriend' and 'bribe'. The actors of these processes are 'yahoo boys' and the recipients of the friendship and bribe are 'policemen' and 'soldiers'. This vividly constructs the NIScamsters as friends of both the policemen and soldiers. The circumstantial elements reveal that these actions were carried out to 'evade justice'. In excerpt (33), the reporter uses *functionalisation* to specify the policemen (deputy commissioner for the Nigeria Police Force) as a supporter of NIScamsters (global fraud ring). The report goes further to explicitly how the actor identified as one of Nigeria's most infamous scammers 'bribed' the deputy commissioner for the Nigeria Police Force to perform a task in his order. To detach from taking position, the American reporter strategically uses the voice of Rinu Oduala, an #EndSARS activist, to explicitly differentiate between the people and the elites. The 'people' here are the masses who cannot afford to offer bribes while the 'elites' are the rich, whether corrupt or not who can grease the pockets of the policemen. In this case, the policemen are friends with the NIScamsters because they can offer bribes.

### **NIScamsters as Guilty and Convicted**

The media reports label NIScamsters as guilty and convicted. Reporters represent the NIScamsters as guilty of the charges levelled against them and therefore convicted and jailed by the court of law.

(34) 21-Year-Old Nigerian Who Impersonated Facebook Founder, Zuckerberg Bags Sentenced To Prison

The Kwara State High Court has sentenced Jatto Sheriff Umar, to prison over offences bordering on impersonation and cybercrime.... The defendants pleaded guilty to their separate charges. Justice Abdulgafar sentenced Jatto (Zuckerberg's impostor) to six months imprisonment each on counts (New York Times, October 14 2021).

(35) Three Nigerian brothers and their wives convicted of £10m internet fraud in UK  
Abbas in April pleaded guilty to charges linked to fraud in a U.S. court in California, according to court records unsealed Monday. He faces up to 20 years in prison.

(The Guardian, 10 May 2019)



(36) Two Nigerian fraudsters to spend combined 22 years in US jail

In a statement by the United States Attorney's Office, Northern District of Texas, titled, 'Nigerian Email Scammers Sentenced to Combined 22+ Years in Federal Prison,' Adeoso pleaded guilty in June of 2020 to 17 counts of wire fraud and sentenced to a combined 22 ½ years in federal prison (The Guardian, 23 November 2021).

(37) Court Jails 34-year-old Graduate in Kwara over Romance Fraud

Monye was jailed on Monday by Justice Mahmood Abdulgafar of the state high court sitting in Ilorin, having found him guilty of the offences of romance fraud (Daily Post, February 15, 2021).

All the excerpts above indicated that the social actors performed the behavioural process 'plead'. The 'behavers' who are NIScamsters 'pleaded' guilty to all the charges. This is an indication that the actors concede to be culpable of the crimes they were charged with. The text producers used tools of *nomination* and *functionalization* to portray the power of the agents (Judges) to convict the NIScamsters. The reporters assign the role of jailer to the judges and court of law to authenticate the conviction while the NIScamsters are recipients of the conviction. The non-human actor 'court of law' exercises its power through the judges. In Excerpt (37), the *nomination* and *functionalisation* 'Justice Mahmood Abdulgafar of the state high court' indicates the role of actor of the process 'sentenced' to show the occupational relevance and role to the action performed. Also, *aggregation* is used by the text producers to specify the jail time and amount of fines issued to the convicted scamsters. The attribution of information source and assignment of the sayer to newsworthy participants gives credibility to the judgment issued and authenticates the label as guilty and convicted.

### **NIScamsters as Exploiters and Victimizers**

NIScamsters are framed as exploiters- those who seek out vulnerable people and capitalize on that vulnerability to defraud their targets and at the end, leave them in emotional, psychological and financial trauma.

(38) Katy Worobec, managing director of economic crime at UK Finance, said: Romance scams can be emotionally and financially damaging for victims (New York Times, 11 February 2020).

(39) Nigerians count losses as SIM swap fraudsters empty bank accounts

In the mid-day, she walked into the newsroom.. overwhelmed with anguish. Sadness was written on her face as she sat perplexed. Her countenance reflected the agony in her. Sawari Bolanle is a victim of Subscribers *Identification* Module (SIM) swap fraud. She sighed, lamented and was in tears as she narrated her ordeal with the fraudsters, who illegally cleared her bank account. (The Guardian, 01 July 2019)

(40) Women 'victims in 63% of romance scams'

The average age of a romance fraud victim is 50 and 63% of victims are women. They lose twice as much on average as males, Action Fraud said. Commander Karen Baxter, head of the City of London Police's economic crime department, said: 'As cases of romance fraud increase each year, so too does the cost to victims, both emotionally and financially (Daily Post, 10 February 2019).

(41)            Coronavirus: Loneliness and lockdown exploited in romance scams  
Many of the alleged victims are believed to be widows and divorcees (Daily Post, 15 May 2020).

(42)            Nigerian prince' email scams still rake in over \$700,000 a year  
Scammers are constantly seeking opportunities to find vulnerable victims, they present victims with a 'perfect storm of temptations,' Dr. Frank McAndrew, a social psychologist and professor at Illinois-based Knox College, tells the Daily Post. First, these scams play on people's greed (Daily Post, Aprils 8, 2019).

(43)            Financial gains remain the only huge compelling force for dating scams among fraudsters. Once there's a level of trust built up, they ask for money and play on victims' emotions. Fraudsters have not only left many people broken-hearted but also have left their pockets empty (New York Times, September 07, 2021).

One prominent discourse strategy that recurs through this representation is the Strategic Management of Voice. Employing the voice of Katy Worobec, managing director of economic crime at UK Finance in excerpt (38) and Commander Karen Baxter, head of the City of London Police's economic crime department in excerpt (40) as the sayers of the verbiage, NIScamsters are depicted as victimizers because of the emotional breakdown they do cause victims. The text producer in excerpt (39) appeals to readers' emotion to make readers see the sad state that NIScamsters put their victims. The behavioural process 'sighed', 'lamented' and the lexical items 'agony', 'anguish', 'ordeal', 'perplexed' 'in tears' all describe the NIScamsters as victimizers. NIScamsters always end up leaving their targets in lugubrious situations which present their actions and activities as debauched and unwanted

In excerpt (41), the major actors of the process 'exploited' are completely excluded in the headline. However, the circumstantial element 'in romance scam' suggests NIScamsters as the exploiters of people's loneliness and the global lockdown that hit the world in 2020 as a result of Coronavirus. NIScamster exploits vulnerable people who are weak and easily penetrated. Widows, divorcees and the elderly ones as seen in except (41) and greedy people as described in excerpt (42) are 'targeted' by the actors. They appeal to the inner want of their targets, telling them what they wished to hear, taking time to establish a trustworthy-like relationship and at the end, leaving the victims broken-hearted with their pockets empty (excerpt 43). As Smith (2009) and Ofulue (2010) noted, scamsters play on their victims' common desires. Scam emails are thus crafted in such a way that they are made to appeal to their targets' sentiments through the use of explicit information

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the representation of Nigerian Internet Scamsters in both Nigerian and foreign news reports and their headlines. Analysis reveals that these Nigerian and international news media are not neutral in reporting activities of Nigerian internet fraudsters. They present their ideological stances in the ways they represent generally considered negative activity of internet scamming as a common activity among the ten identified categories of actors. In their reports, Nigerian Internet Scamsters are represented as educated, role models, imposters, abductors, wrong ambassadors/negative nationals, friends to the security agents, money ritualists, guilty and convicted, exploiters, victimizers and parentally supported. The news media use various discourse strategies to present the scamsters in ways they want the public to see the scamsters and consequently raise a sense of distrust towards them.

The representations in both Nigerian and the British and US news media show that the peculiarities of internet fraud in Nigeria is similar to what constitutes internet fraud in most Western nations. The activities of the Nigerian Scamsters no doubt call Nigeria's image and reputation to question. The paper aligns with the argument of Taiwo (2012), Osisanwo (2016) and Chiluwa (2015) among others that word choice in the media is not neutral; rather words carry the power that reflects the interests of owner of the words. This study, therefore, establishes that the negative connotations of these labels indicate that these Nigerian media are not neutral in their representation of scammers. This study shows that the representation of the social actions and actors in internet fraud are and strategically framed to fit their ideology in a discursive way.

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