"Society Encourages the Killing of Girls Like Me": Layers of Victimization in Online Dating Romance Scams in Iran That Target Sexual Access Over Financial Gain

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Online dating romance scams involve coercing online daters out of their personal property. Money is almost always framed as the target of such scams, however this may be a consequence of prior work's focus on victims from Western countries and scammers from Africa. There is relatively little knowledge of online dating romance scams that occur entirely within non-Western cultures. To address this we conducted an interview study with 20 victims of online dating romance scams in Iran. Findings show that romance scams were seldom motivated by money, but rather sexual access to a woman's body through feigning intent to get married ("body scams"). Body scammers were abetted by cultural rules that justify murder and legal punishment of women for premarital sex, thus forcing them into silence. The paper concludes with calls for more expansive definitions of online dating romance scams and the foregrounding of local cultural dynamics in their perpetuation. ***Content Warning:*** *This paper discusses sexual violence.*

CCS Concepts: • **Security and privacy** → **Human and societal aspects of security and privacy**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Romance scam, scam, online dating, dating apps, Iran, sexual violence, women, body scam, culture, non-Western

1 INTRODUCTION

"A woman's virginity is the property of the men around her, first her father, later a gift for her husband; a virtual dowry as she graduates to marriage." [61]

Online dating romance scams, at their core, involve a scammer using a dating app to coerce other users out of their property, or *"items of value"* [45]. Money is by far the most commonly studied target of romance scammers [83, 93, 94, 96], through which dating app users are misled

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into believing in a romantic connection that is exploited to convince the victim to send money under false pretenses [93]. These include funding air travel for a face-to-face meeting that never occurs or medical expenses from an accident that never happened [93].

The emphasis on money as the goal of online dating romance scams is likely a consequence of prior literature's focus on victims from Western countries and the financial disparities with areas from which their scammers most often reside. One study of financially motivated online dating romance scams found that over 50% of scammers are from African countries, with their scam targets predominantly residing in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany [35]. Other research on online dating romance scams directly acknowledges or studies a Western victim/African scammer dynamic [38].

There remains a significant gap in knowledge about online dating romance scams that occur within (rather than originating from) non-Western cultures, and types of property that take on equal or greater importance to money in these cultures that scammers may be targeting [11]. The closest empirical research related to this gap studies online dating romance scammers who reside in non-Western countries (and pursue Western victims) [85]. This formative work provides early indication of the pronounced role of local technocultural factors in online dating romance scams that are overlooked in research on Western victims. For instance, romance scammers in Nigeria have reported beliefs in *"mystical, spiritual and supernatural powers"* from African mysticism to *"hypnotise"* western online daters [85]. Techniques used by these scammers include wearing *"magical"* rings and making incisions in their own wrists in hopes of increasing the success of their scams. Likewise, research on woman-identifying scammers in Ghana has explored their motivations for online dating romance scams through the role of family economic structures and societal reputation demands on women in the country [1].

We build on this burgeoning work by exploring online dating romance scams that occur entirely within non-Western cultures. In this paper we choose the context of online dating romance scams in Iran, for two reasons. One involves cultural and legal structures around premarital sex that frame a woman's body and her virginity as literal property, thus posing an unexplored potential "item of value" [45] for romance scams other than money. The second pertains to unique dimensions of online dating in Iranian culture that render known strategies about romance scams with Western online daters inapplicable or likely noncomprehensive. For example, Western dating apps are banned in Iran and online dating typically occurs through repurposing other social media apps such as Instagram and Telegram. The mere act of online dating also poses risk to women in Iran, leading some to create fake online profiles (a strategy typically practiced by scammers) as a means to protect themselves from legal and societal punishment for chatting with men outside of marriage [20]. Our research questions were:

- **RQ1 What are the "items of value" [45] that are targeted by online dating romance scams in Iran?**
- **RQ2. What strategies are used by online dating romance scammers to coerce victims in Iran?**

We explored these research questions through an interview study with 20 self-identified online dating romance scam victims in Iran (20 women). Findings show that romance scams were seldom motivated by money, but rather sexual access to a woman's body through feigning intent to get married - what some participants called a *"body scam"* or *"sexual scam."* Scammers' strategies exploited cultural and legal rules in Iran that give little recourse to victims of body scams. For example, participants explained that it is culturally acceptable for a woman to be beaten or murdered by her father if engagement in premarital sex is discovered, which scammers used to their advantage by threatening to contact the victim's father if they did not acquiesce to sexual demands. Ultimately,

our study argues for more HCI research about online dating romance scams in non-Western contexts through the following empirical discoveries:

- Local cultural factors related to dating play a significant role in determining what online daters are scammed out of and the strategies used by scammers. Iranian online dating romance scams differ starkly from those in Western countries through pursuit of sexual access rather than money, and exploitation of familial and legal dynamics.
- Typical recourse options available to scam victims in Western cultures, such as reporting to law enforcement, may be unavailable to victims in other cultures. Worse, victims themselves may be punished by the same institutions that Western victims would turn to first, as evidenced by the risk of prison time for disclosing premarital sex in Iran.
- Body scams in Iran draw parallels - and add new complexities - to how sexual violence is defined and studied in Western cultures, suggesting latent connections between HCI research on sexual/intimate partner violence [12, 13, 68] and romance scams that should be further explored.

2 RELATED WORK

The following subsections first provide a review of studies on online romance scams. The focus then shifts to the scam in romance among other harms in dating online, followed by a review of the geocultural dynamics of scams through online dating. The section ending with an exploration of Iranian dating culture and relevant regulations.

2.1 Online Dating Romance Scams

An online dating romance scam is a type of fraud in which the scammer creates a fake profile on a dating app or other social networking site to then establish communication with a victim under the false premise of a romantic relationship [21, 92, 94]. The ultimate goal is to defraud victims of their property, or "items of value" [45]. These scams typically unfold in several stages, as outlined in the Scammers' Persuasive Techniques Model [93]. The key stages include:

- **Idealized profile creation**: The scammer creates a fake profile using attractive photos and appealing personal information to lure victims [56].
- **Grooming**: The scammer builds a (false) sense of trust and emotional connection with the victim, leading the victim to believe they have a genuine romantic relationship [79].
- **Request for Money**: Once trust is established, the scammer fabricates a crisis or opportunity to coerce the victim into sending moeny. These requests are often framed as urgent and critical to exploit the victim's emotional attachment [93], such as a medical emergency [54, 90].
- **Continuation of the scam, sexual abuse, and re-victimization**: If successful, the scammer may continue exploiting the victim by fabricating new scenarios to solicit further money. In some cases, scams escalate to sextortion, where the scammer threatens to release nude imagery of the victim - which was initially given the scammer under the pretense of a relationship - unless more money is sent and/or further sexual content is sent to the scammer [90].

While some studies [90, 97] mention sextortion as tangentially related to online dating romance scams (as a vehicle to more financial gain for the scammer),

it is crucial to clarify that sexual abuse has *not* been found to be primary goal of these scams. Rather, research highlights money as the primary "item of value" pursued by scammers [74, 90, 97]. Some studies even go so far as to define online dating romance scams as specifically for financial

gain (e.g., [21, 96]). For example, victims in Australia have been reported to lose significant amounts of money, often over $500,000 per month, to scammers posing as romantic partners [54].

The literature underscores both the financial and psychological consequences for victims of online dating romance scams. Victims frequently endure a "double hit" of financial loss and emotional distress, as they lose both money and the perceived relationship [95]. The psychological impact is often profound, with many describing the emotional loss as more distressing than the financial one, sometimes equating it to a "death" [97]. Victims often face emotional trauma and social stigma, which can be exacerbated by the manipulative tactics used by scammers to maintain control over the victim [86]. The emotional distress is significant even for those who have not lost money, highlighting the deep psychological manipulation involved in these scams [21].

2.2 Situating Romance Scams Amongst Other Harms in Online Dating

Sexual abuse has been found to play at least a tangential role in online dating romance scams, through sextortion (threatening to release sexual imagery of the victim unless the scammer receives money) [14, 30, 31, 93] and forced sexual acts through video calls purely to humiliate the victim [94]. Of course, these forms of sexual abuse in online dating do not occur only in the context of scams.

Powell, Flynn, and Henry [69] argue that communication technology introduces new avenues for sexual violence, including "image-based sexual abuse," which involves the non-consensual creation, distribution, or threat of distribution of nude or sexual images, as well as online sexual harassment, which includes sexual solicitation, image-based harassment, gender-based hate speech, and rape threats (p. 135).

A substantial body of literature addresses sexual harms in online dating, e.g., [9, 42, 43, 46, 64, 67]. Documented behaviors include crude comments, unsolicited nude images, non-consensual distribution of intimate images, and physical violence, such as stalking and sexual assault [28, 33, 78, 89]. One particularly concerning trend involves the use of geolocation data to stalk or physically approach victims, exacerbating the risks associated with these platforms [28]. Research on sexual harassment within dating apps has identified two primary types: digital and face-to-face harassment. Digital sexual harassment encompasses behaviors like unsolicited sexting, sending explicit images, revenge porn, and messages containing sexually harassing content [34, 55, 57, 100]. Conversely, face-to-face harassment arises when physical meetings follow app-based interactions, often escalating the potential for harm [32, 34].

Dating apps are also a well-known facilitator of physical sexual abuse [2, 7, 32, 88]. For example, research has connected dating app-use with increased likelihood of sexual violence victimization [25, 47], and some research has found that dating apps account for approximately 10% of overall rape cases in certain samples, often serving as the introduction point between perpetrators and victims [5, 70, 75]. Often, predators move quickly from online interactions to private, in-person meetings to pursue sexual activities [19, 63, 65]. In a study in Hong Kong, unprotected or unwanted sex and unintended pregnancies were reported as common forms of sexual abuse linked to dating app-use [26]. But sexual abuse can occur unintentionally as well, often influenced by sexual scripts [27, 72] and ambiguous consent practices [22, 101], leading to misinterpretations through dating app interfaces. Despite this growing evidence, literature argues that sexual abuse remains under-researched in the context of online dating [65].

2.3 Geocultural Dynamics of Online Dating Romance Scams

The experience of online dating is not culturally neutral; rather, it is shaped by local customs, politics, community norms, internet usage, and the social shaping of technology and language [8, 36, 41]. Previous research highlights the distinct online dating behaviors across Western and

non-Western cultures. For instance, in Western cultures, online dating often emphasizes individual choice and autonomy, while in non-Western contexts like Saudi Arabia, the process tends to be more family-oriented, with significant parental involvement in selecting a spouse [4]. Research by [52] explored online mate-seeking behaviors across India, Hong Kong, and Australia, revealing substantial cultural differences in self-descriptions. For example, Indian profiles tend to emphasize educational and occupational status, whereas Australian profiles often highlight personality traits. Similarly, in Japan—a society with strong family and kinship values—singles are less likely to engage with potential partners from large families, which are associated with traditional expectations. This trend is especially pronounced for firstborns with no brothers, as they are often expected to care for elderly parents, which can limit their dating prospects [98]. In Indonesia, online dating reflects Eastern philosophical influences and exhibits a predominance of female users, suggesting a shift in traditional gender roles [84]. This stands in contrast to American users, who approach online dating more pragmatically and with an action-oriented mindset. In China some online daters have turned to voice-based dating apps [81], in contrast with the physical appearance-driven mate selection found in other online dating research.

The literature also finds pronounced differences in online dating experiences of LGBTQIA+ users in non-Western contexts. For instance, men seeking men (MSM) in Mumbai, India utilize culturally-unique ways of conveying their identity while maintaining privacy through use of dating apps [18]. Other HCI research provides empirical insight on culturally-sensitive online dating experiences of queer women in the conservative context of South Korea [66], and how gay men in China co-opt non-dating platforms for online dating [91].

The often stark differences in online dating experiences across cultures, along with emerging research on online romance scams in non-Western contexts, suggest that online dating romance scams may also vary significantly across cultural lines [71]. For example, studies on romance scammers in Nigeria report that some scammers believe in "mystical, spiritual, and supernatural powers" rooted in African mysticism, which they claim can be used to "hypnotize" Western online daters [85]. Similarly, research on woman-identifying scammers in Ghana has examined their motivations through the lens of family economic structures and societal pressures, which emphasize women's contributions to familial reputation and financial support [1]. Another example is the Chinese-speaking scam "Sha Zhu Pan" (or "butchering pan") [90], where scammers establish friendships with victims and manipulate them into investing in fake businesses. This formative work highlights how local technocultural factors play a pronounced role in online romance scams.

Despite these insights, much of the empirical insight about online dating romance scams centers on those in which victims are from Western cultures and scammers from Africa [29, 83]. Prior work by Anh Phan [67] has highlighted that this one-sided perspective may leave certain user groups vulnerable and unprotected. To address this gap, we aim to explore the phenomenon of online dating romance scams in Iran, where both the scammer and victim are embedded within a non-Western cultural context.

2.4 Iranian (Dating) Culture

We chose Iran as our context for studying online dating romance scams in non-Western cultures because of cultural dynamics around dating that differ drastically from Western countries such as the United States. We highlight relevant cultural structures here.

2.4.1 Cultural and Legal Structures around Sexuality. Iran has a long cultural and political history spanning nearly three millennia, with a rich culture and one of the world's oldest civilizations [40]. Following the 1979 revolution, marriage laws, previously modernized to align with Western models, reverted to strict and traditional styles. The minimum legal marriage age was reduced from

18 to nine for girls and from 20 to 15 for boys [15]. New laws eased restrictions on men having multiple simultaneous marriages (up to four wives) and granted them more authority in divorces. These rules are not only legal but also align with societal and family values in some regions of the country.

Pre-marital relationships are taboo, as is basically any unsupervised contact between sexes. Dating behaviour is referred to as "Inja Irane", (roughly translating to "if you live in Iran, you must live by its rules"). In Iran, the only accepted and legal way to have a romantic relationship is through marriage, though this taboo has diminished in major cities in recent years [37]. Global (Western) media, including satellite networks and the internet, are reshaping traditional norms and values, leading to evolving perceptions of pre-marital relationships a rich culture and one of the world's oldest civilizations [40]. Nevertheless, non-marital relationships are predominantly restricted and often forbidden due to religious, social, and legal constraints. Iranian families typically discourage their children from having pre-marital romantic relationships [77], primarily because it contradicts Islamic law and is a major cultural taboo [16, 51]. The Islamic Penal Code of Iran contains two main crimes regarding the relationship between a man and a woman without a marriage contract [60, 80]. The first law covers Mozajeeh ("lying/sleeping together") and Taqbil ("kissing") by punishing physical or verbal intimacy between male and female [17, 20]. Behaviors like flirting, romantic conversation, or walking alone together can be covered by this law. Under law no. 637, the punishment for such actions can be up to 99 lashes. Secondly, Zena refers to vaginal sex without a marriage contract, and it is illegal [73]. According to laws no. 221, 224, and 225, the punishment is 100 lashes or execution, with potential adjustments under certain circumstances [58, 80, 99]. Marriage is the main, and most acceptable, way to enter a romantic relationship in Iran. Its constraints [39] mean that many young people, while fulfilling these marriage requirements, prefer to have a love marriage, leading them to have a relationship by "stealth".

2.4.2   Online Dating in Iran. In contexts where clothing, entertainment, education policies, and social interactions are regulated [37, 40], cyberspace provides a potential avenue for liberation [62]. This freedom can also be utilized for romantic relationships, which can be more easily kept secret in the online realm [62]. Technology also impacts the frequency of premarital relationships, as adolescents with access to technology and the internet (e.g., mobile phones, social media) are more likely to engage in premarital romantic relationships [37]. This indicates that the younger generation feels at ease using cyberspace to bypass cultural and legal restrictions [76]. Privately, Iranians appear more receptive to Western dating practices, unlike in Saudi Arabia, where Western dating apps are less commonly used [3]. Thus, Iranian culture illustrates a non-Western society where individuals engage in clandestine relationships to evade legal and social repercussions.

Despite the illegality and cultural unacceptability of premarital relationships, the state manages certain online dating sites to promote marriage among young people [49]. The state intervenes from the beginning by arranging 'matches,' with oversight conducted by a mullah at centers like the P15 Family Center. A counselor provides guidance to the daters during these meetings. For various reasons, however (for example due to economic problems, low age, etc.) these websites are not popular [49]. Additionally, mainstream Western dating apps are banned in Iran, leading people to repurpose other social media platforms, such as Instagram and Telegram, for dating purposes.

3   METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using narrative interviews to explore individuals' experiences in depth [59]. Qualitative research aims to gather rich, detailed insights, and a smaller sample allows for a more thorough exploration of personal narratives. With 20 female participants,

we reached thematic saturation, meaning key themes had emerged, and additional interviews did not yield new insights [23]. This ensures a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

3.1 Participants Recruitment

To explore our research questions we conducted narrative interviews with 20 online daters in Iran. The inclusion criteria necessitated prior experience with online dating and "romance scams" in Iran, and speaking Persian (the official language of Iran). There was no financial incentive for participation.

Social media channels were used for recruitment [82] in two rounds. Initially, we posted a recruitment ad as a "story" on an Instagram account owned by the first author that focused on romantic content (love/break-up videos, texts, poems, and music), which had 11,000 followers at the time of recruitment. According to the account's statistics on follower demographics, 58.9% were female and 41.1% were male, with ages ranging from 13 to 65 years. Almost 95% of the followers were located in Iran.

The second phase of recruitment used Telegram because it is one of the most popular applications among Iranians [53]. A recruitment message was posted to a public Telegram channel used by Persian-speaking individuals to share stories and content about romance; it had approximately 94,000 members at the time of recruitment.

We received 55 direct message responses to the Instagram story, and 19 direct message responses to the Telegram post. Ultimately 20 online daters participated in interviews; Nine from Instagram and 11 from Telegram, with 20 identifying as female. Ages at the time of interview ranged from 18 to 39, and ages when their romance scam occurred ranged from 14 to 36.

3.2 Positionality Statement

The first author, who was also the lead interviewer for this study, is an Iranian female living in Germany, maintaining strong connections with the Iranian community through social media. Their romantic content ("love-caption writing" with love video/music) on Instagram (the account used for recruitment) inspired their research on online dating romance scams. With 12,000 Instagram followers and 9,300 Telegram members, she listens to women's stories through social media and writes about them in academia, striving to be their voice. Recently, she initiated a Threads account (which has almost 1K followers) aimed at raising awareness of the red flags associated with online romance scams, using these platforms to educate and empower the younger generation in Iran to be more vigilant about cybersecurity. This research and subsequent awareness campaign are part of her broader commitment to using her unique position to affect positive change in the lives of those who are most vulnerable to online exploitation.

3.3 Data Collection

We conducted narrative interviews [6, 44], allowing participants to freely and easily share their romance scam experiences without interruption.

Interviews started with consent from the participant for data collection, followed by their prolonged and uninterrupted account of their romance scam experience.

We then asked supplementary questions that were not already answered in their story, or that were generated in reaction to the story, such as: *"What did the scammer steal?"* or *"What was the item of value that motivated the scammer to start a relationship with you?"*

Interviews were conducted via social media applications as requested by the participants (WhatsApp, Telegram or Instagram), and either through voice or text-based messaging according to the participant's comfort. The sessions lasted from 40 minutes to 2.5 hours. This variation in duration reflects not just the voice/text modality of the interview, but the depth of experiences among

Table 1. Participant Overview

Participant (Gender)	Age (Incident|Interview)	Scam Duration	Recruited on	Interview
P1 (F)	18 | 20	2 months	Instagram	T: Chat
P2 (F)	16 | 20	4 years	Instagram	T: Voice
P3 (F)	19 | 25	1 month	Instagram	I: Text
P4 (F)	15 | 19	6 months	Instagram	T: Chat
P5 (F)	17 | 19	2 months	Instagram	W: Call
P6 (F)	16 | 21	5 months	Instagram	T: Text
P7 (F)	16 | 20	3 years	Instagram	T: Voice
P8 (F)	17 | 18	1 year	Instagram	T: Text
P9 (F)	14 | 18	3 months	Instagram	T: Text
P10 (F)	17 | 19	3 months	Telegram	T: Call
P11 (F)	31 | 31	2 months	Telegram	T: Text
P12 (F)	31 | 34	3 years	Telegram	T: Text
P13 (F)	19 | 22	2 months	Telegram	I: Text
P14 (F)	26 | 27	1 week	Telegram	T: Video call
P15(F)	21 | 25	2 years	Telegram	T: Call
P16 (F)	36 | 39	1 month	Telegram	T: Chat
P17 (F)	17 | 25	1 year	Telegram	T: Text
P18 (F)	22 | -	1 year	Telegram	T: Text
P19 (F)	16 | 26	2 years	Telegram	T: Text
P20 (F)	28 | 28	2 months	Telegram	T: Chat

participants, some of whom maintained a relationship with their scammer for more than two years and had substantial insight to share. Interviews were conducted in Persian, and later transcribed and translated to English by the same researcher who conducted the interviews.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the lead author's university ethics board. Given the sensitivity of the topic, we considered several policies to protect our participants and prevent re-traumatization [10, 24, 100]; *Anonymity:* we used pseudonyms during both the interviews and data analysis and requested that real names not be used during the interview when possible. During data analysis we replaced references to specific locations with general terms such as "big town," or "rural area." This ensured that participants' identities and locations remained confidential. *Secure Data Handling:* We collected data online but stored it on an offline device to mitigate unauthorized access. Participants were also given the option to delete chat conversations after the interview. *Flexible Interview Process:* We accommodated participants' preferences for text or audio interviews, including late-night sessions, to ensure their privacy and comfort and to protect them from harm if their romance scam experiences were accidentally heard by family members (see Findings for examples of harm and murder that such disclosure incurs). *Discrete Communication:* Whenever the research team needed to contact a participant, such as to schedule the interview, this was done discreetly through

a simple greeting in case a family member or other person was observing the participant's device. After the interview, the participants saved the interviewer's account in case they had follow-up questions about the study, which they likewise could initiate through a simple greeting.

Trauma Sensitivity: We approached romance scam disclosures as potentially traumatic experiences. This involved acknowledging potential emotional impacts during interview quesitons, as well as emphasizing active listening and empathy. We encouraged participants to stop the interview if the telling of their story was too emotionally intense–one participant did utilize this option. *Participant Support After Interview Session:* Recognizing the sensitive nature of the study and the emotional impact of sharing their experiences, we ensured that participants received appropriate support after the interview.

First, we conducted a thorough debriefing to help participants process their experiences and address any immediate concerns. We also made ourselves available for follow-up contact should they need further support.

Three participants reached out to us multiple times after the study, seeking further support and someone to talk to. Through active listening and creating a safe space for them to share, we aimed to make them feel heard and supported. Where needed, we also connected them with relevant psychological support groups and professional services to ensure they had access to appropriate resources.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis (QCA). QCA is a pragmatic methodology in empirical educational research developed by Mayring [48] and is often used in qualitative studies [50]. It can be supported digitally by different software packages, and we opted to use MAXQDA. The lead author performed multiple readings of all stories to, first, inductively code themes. Two additional researchers then reviewed the initial coding scheme to pose questions, suggest refinements to existing themes, and to pose new themes. This theme refine occurred through multiple asynchronous iterations, manifesting in the thematic structure that is reported in the next section.

Initial codes and categories were grouped and organized into common themes that appeared from each victim's story; primarily in a semantic fashion reflective of literal statements and phrases from the interviews. In this initial round the most common "item of value" in scams became apparent - sexual access to the victim's body - and related themes pertained to cultural structures that abetted or otherwise influenced such scams. The thematic structure was refined to provide granularity to the different strategies used by romance scammers in Iran and the recursive influence of Iranian culture and family dynamics on victims.

4 FINDINGS

The most common type of online dating romance scam overall in our analysis—reported by every female participant—was referred to as a "body scam" by participants. This typically involved a male scammer seducing the female victim into believing in a genuine romantic connection and intent to get married. This latter element—intent to get married—is crucial because casual sexual encounters are culturally and legally unacceptable in Iran and all of our participants used online dating specifically to find a marriage partner. Scammers exploited the perceived marriage connection to manipulate victims into engaging in physical sexual acts or sending sexually explicit materials online. In some cases, participants willingly engaged in these sexual acts under the pretense that they were going to marry, or already were married to, the scammer. In other cases, participants reported engaging in unwanted sexual acts under explicit threat from the scammer. There were three types of body scams discovered through our study that varied based on whether the scam

Table 2. Variations of body scams through online dating in Iran, where scammers convince victims of intent to get married in order to receive sexual access to their body.

Type of body scam	Definition	Example
Coerced into sexting and sending sexual explicit imagery	The victim is pressured into sending and receiving (semi-)pornographic images, video, and/or texts online.	The scammer threatens to tell the victim's father about their sexual activity, which could result in physical beating: "After receiving some of my pictures, he asked for naked photos. He threatened that if I didn't do what he asked, he would call my father and tell him that he had many photos of me without a hijab. [...] I could not talk about it with my parents. I was sure they would kill me." (P9)
Unwanted sexual activity	The victim is socially pressured or physically forced into sex during a face-to-face meeting with their believed-to-be future husband.	The victim is gang raped at the scammer's home: "Then I went to his place [house] [...]. We were talking, and suddenly, his friends entered, and they came to me at once and raped me." (P4)
Ending a fake relationship after sex	The victim voluntarily agrees to sex after a temporary marriage permit (called sigeh in Iran) or after the scammer convinces them of intent to marry. The scammer then discontinues contact.	The scammer marries the victim temporarily for the purpose of sex, then leaves the relationship: "He easily, with a fake and temporary marriage, had the easiest way of engaging in sexual activity in the conservative area where I live." (P18)

targeted physical and/or online sexual acts, and whether the scammer utilized overt force or subtler forms of coercion. These are summarized in Table 2 and unpacked in section 4.1.

Importantly, all body scams reported by our participants were enabled or exacerbated by cultural structures unique to Iran that limited options for recourse by victims and their ability to say no to their scammer's demands even after realizing there was no sincere interest in marriage. These include legal punishment for premarital sex and familial dynamics that left participants feeling undervalued by their families and susceptible to being beaten or murdered by their father if their premarital sexual activity was made public. These cultural structures are summarized in Table 3 and unpacked in section 4.2.

4.1 Defining Body Scams

"I consider any action taken by a scammer with the goal of obtaining sex—whether in cyberspace or the real world—as a sexual scam. If you look at my case, you'll understand what I mean. These scammers exploit the word 'love' to manipulate someone into a sexual relationship." (P10)

Almost all participants disclosed experiences or attempts of being scammed out of sexual access to their body by an online dater who they believed had a genuine interest in marrying them. Sexual access manifested in (attempted) physical sexual intercourse and/or the sending of sexual images and videos online. Several participants gave explicit labels to this type of scam to demarcate it from other financially motivated romance scams. Per P9: *"Financially, he never abused me [...] I feel he scammed me sexually."*. The most common terms used by participants were *"sexual scam"* (P10 above) and *"body scam."* We adopt the term "body scam" in this paper rather than *"sexual scam"* because it most directly frames the body (which only the victim owns) as the item that scammers seek to possess, whereas sex is a jointly constructed phenomenon or occurrence with the scammer, thus obfuscating what item of value is coerced away from the victim's ownership and into the scammer's possession. P18 illustrated this distinction through the notion of ownership: *"He owned my body with no pay. I mean paying should be by love or money. What he has paid? Nothing. He was*

Table 3. Body scammer strategies utilizing gendered cultural structures in Iran related to sex.

Body scammer strategy	Cultural Structure	How a body scammer is abetted by the cultural structure
Implicit threat of criminal prosecution	Legal punishment for sex outside of marriage	Pre-marital sex is illegal in Iran, which emboldens scammers because they know victims will not go to authorities out of fear of their own criminal prosecution: "We fear to disclose the experience of [unwanted sex]; this vulnerability gives the men the power to abuse easily." (P16)
Promising love then threatening to leave	Women are "not valued" by their families	The scammer promises love that the victim lacks from their own family, then threatens to leave if the victim does not acquiesce to sexual demands: "The lack of love I received from my family convinced me to love a stranger and allow him to have sex with me." (P6)
Implicit threat of harm for dishonoring the family	Aberou: cultural expectation to protect the family's reputation	Women suffer continued body scam victimization in silence, without seeking help or support from their family, because disclosure would cast shame on her family: "...my parents demanded that I stay silent, accusing me of damaging the family's reputation and honor. For about a month, I endured their physical punishment." (P10)
Deliberate threat of honor killing by contacting the victim's family	Cultural acceptability of murder for dishonoring family	A woman's father is allowed to kill her for dishonoring the family with premarital sex. The scammer threatens to contact the victim's father and reveal their relationship if she does not acquiesce to sexual demands: "He kept repeating his requests, and when I ignored him, he called my father but didn't say anything, just to scare me." (P19)

a body scammer." (P18) There were three overarching types of body scams reported by participants: 1) coerced into sexting or sending sexual explicit imagery, 2) unwanted physical sexual activity during face-to-face meetings, and 3) manipulation into voluntary sexual activity through pretense of eventual marriage.

4.1.1 Coerced into Sexting or sending sexual explicit imagery. While physical sexual activity was often described as the ultimate goal of body scammers, they also sought various forms of cybersexual activity with their victims, particularly if physical sexual activity was not immediately obtainable. These included *"sex chat"* over messaging, voice, and video call, as well as nude or sexual explicit images from the victim. P9 described this hierarchy of sexual goals of their body scammer: *"Sexually, he made numerous attempts to convince me to go to his place [. . .] He frequently engaged in sexual conversations and used my photos to pressure me into sending nude pictures. His primary goal was sex."* (P9).

In a few instances body scammers abandoned the guise of genuine interest in marriage and instead overtly threatened their victim into sending sexual imagery through traditional sextortion tactics. This involved threatening to release sexual imagery publicly that the victim has already sent the scammer if they do not agree to send more sexual content. In P4's case the scammer also demanded money: *"He threatened me that if I do not give him the money he asked for, he would share this video [She was gang-raped, and the scammer recorded a video during the assault] on social*

media!" (P4). It should be noted that money was a relatively rare demand of body scammers in this study relative to nude images or videos for the scammer's personal sexual pleasure.

Some scammers used emotional manipulation to obtain sexual imagery. P12, a religious participant, initially resisted the scammers' requests, but the scammer exploited her values by claiming they shared a sincere "marriage goal" and that they were experiencing physical pain due to unmet sexual needs. This manipulation played on both her religious beliefs and her desire for marriage: *"He started asking me for sexy photos, sex chat (sexting), and sexual videos. [...] I am a religious person. [...] When he saw I was firm in my refusal, he pressured me with his words. He told me that we had a marriage goal [...] and that he was in a physical pain because his sexual needs were unmet."* (P12)

A far more common threat by body scammers, rather than publicly releasing sexual imagery, was the threat to end the supposed romantic relationship with the victim and the prospect of marriage. This tactic was particularly coercive for victims who had already developed a significant emotional attachment to the scammer who was believed to be their future husband. Per P7: *"He asked for some nude photos, but I refused. At this point, his behavior suddenly changed, and he began to threaten [to end the relationship]."*

Some participants elaborated on the emotional manipulation of their scammer and their fear of losing the romantic relationship that they had already invested a lot of time into (often several months). Even if they had never met their scammer face-to-face, participants reported several, repeated experiences of online intimacy and "masturbation" that reinforced the notion of a sexually and romantically serious relationship. Two participants expressed in identical words *"I did not want to lose him"* when explaining why they acquiesced to their scammer's demands for online sexual content. As P6 described in: *"He also abused me sexually. He used to ask for sex chat, voice or video call all the time. [..] I did not like to have sex chats or video calls but after some months I did not want to lose him and did whatever he asked for."* (P6)

A story from P19 most blatantly captured the devastating toll of coerced sexting that scammers engaged in through manipulation of emotional attachment or *"love"* from their victims: *"After some time, when he was more confident about my love, he asked me for naked photos of my body […]. He said I should go to his home and have sex with him […] I was just crying and begging him not to ask for it. […] He accepted that I wouldn't go to his house. But then he told me I had to go to the bath and, on a video call, perform [sexual activity censored by authors]. […] Although I didn't have a real-world sexual relationship, I harmed my body in front of the camera for two years by inserting foreign objects. He scammed not only my body but also stole two valuable years of my life, causing me significant mental damage."* (P19)

4.1.2 Unwanted Sexual Activity During The First Face-to-Face Meeting . "Online dating often involves people pretending they're genuinely looking for a marriage partner. They try hard to present themselves as the 'perfect catch'—someone no girl would want to pass up. They might suggest a face-to-face date and then try to convince you to meet somewhere more private, giving all kinds of reasons. […] This can sometimes lead to sexual acts, often without clear consent." (P14)

Most of the body scams reported by participants involved face-to-face meetings with their scammers. The scammers were believed to be their eventual marriage partners, and the first face-to-face meeting was expected to be the next big step in formalizing a marriage. Sex was not an expectation or desire of any participant during their initial meeting with their scammers, yet several reported situations of their scammers pressuring or physically forcing them into sex during their first meeting. In all of these situations the scammer arranged the meeting to take place in a private place that the scammer (but not the victim) was already very familiar with, and which did not have ready access to bystander intervention, such as the scammer's home or workplace after hours. Importantly, this type of body scam differs from that in the next subsection in that scammers made

no attempt to maintain the facade of intent for marriage. Rather, interest in casual sex was made very explicit through attempt to pressure or force the victim.

In all instances of unwanted sexual activity the scammer was very abrupt in their attempts to pressure the victim into sex as soon as the meeting began. For example, P16 described a situation where the scammer appeared naked at the very start of the meeting: *"I wanted to find an appropriate partner for marriage [...]. We talked on the phone several times. [...] Afterwards, we decided to have an offline date in his office after working hours [...] Suddenly, he entered the room totally naked!"* (P16). P3 relayed a similar experience of abrupt pressure for sex: *"After one month of chatting with that guy, we decided to have a real-world date [...] he hugged me, kissed me, and put me under sexual pressure."* (P3)

In one case the scammer was not the only person who was seeking to partake in sexual activity with the victim. P4 described in detail a situation where she met the scammer at his home in another city so that the meeting would not be discovered by people in her local town. The scammer had secretly arranged for his friends to hide in the home and upon P4's arrival she was gang raped:

"He suggested meeting in person. Since I live in a small city where it's not acceptable to have a boyfriend or go out with a boy in our local culture, I chose to meet him in his city [...]. Then I went to his place [house] [...] and suddenly, his friends entered, and they came to me at once and raped me." (P4).

P16 recounted that after the initial face-to-face meeting and the occurrence of unwanted sexual activity, the scammer attempted to arrange another in-person meeting for further body scams. This case illustrates an instance where the scammer pursued a 'body scam,' again promising eventual marriage—but only if they were 'satisfied' with further sexual activities from the victim.

"After four days, he called me again and told me he liked me! It was unbelievable for me—how did he dare to call me? He said he wanted to have [a type of sexual activity] with me. If he was satisfied, then he would propose marriage." (P16)

4.1.3 Ending a Fake Relationship After Sex . Not all attempts by body scammers for physical sexual activity were unwanted or forced. In contrast to the previous finding, some participants reported experiences of voluntarily engaging in sex with the scammer during a face-to-face meeting due to the impression that they were going to marry – or in one case already were married – to the scammer. In this type of body scam, the scammer ended what was thought to be a legitimate romantic relationship immediately after physical sexual activity occurred. It was that this point – when the scammer abruptly discontinued contact with the victim – that participants realized that the scammer never had real interest in marrying them and had engaged in online interaction and face-to-face meetings purely for the eventual payoff of physical sexual activity.

P20 expressed the frustration of having a thought-to-be romantic relationship and marriage plan abruptly *"cut"* by the scammer after sex, or what she described as *"abuse"* of her love for casual sex. In her words: *"I never cut the relationship and he could have [had] more relationship and sex with me. But he cut it [ended the relationship]. I do not know why! Maybe he just wanted a casual sex with a random person but not paying money to the sex-worker or paying by love-relationship. I mean he could abuse more from my love, but he wanted a free sex! No money, no love!"* (P20)

While an abrupt discontinuation of contact with the victim after sex was the defining quality of this type of body scam, P6 described how scammer provided a rationale for ending the relationship immediately after sexual activity that accused her of coercing him into sex. After losing her virginity, which she described as the *"worst thing"* that could happen, she faced an unexpected and harsh rejection. The scammer accused her of manipulating the situation to trap him into marriage (despite the fact that interactions between the scammer and victim prior to sexual activity were clearly

about building a romantic connection and intent to get married). Following this accusation, he abruptly cut off all contact, ignoring her messages and calls:

"At the time of the date [in a private place], that [act of intimate activity] and other sexual actions […] were the worst things that happened to me, and after that, I was no longer a virgin. Then, he rudely rejected me! He accused me of doing it on purpose to force him into marriage! After that, he left and never responded to my messages or calls again." (P6)

4.2 How Body Scammers Exploit Cultural Structures to Perpetuate Their Scams

Participants in our study remained silent about their body scam experiences due to deep-rooted cultural norms that perpetuate shame and stigma around women's bodies and relationships, particularly those involving sex. These norms place blame on women for their involvement in premarital sexual activity, regardless of the circumstances, leading them to endure abuse without seeking justice. The fear of dishonoring the family (called Aberou), gendered legal punishments, and societal neglect of women contribute to this silence. The body scam experiences from participants elucidated how scammers are abetted by, or deliberately exploit, this silence and its underlying cultural dynamics to perform their scams with impunity. In this section we explore three major themes illustrating how local cultural dynamics facilitate body scams in Iran.

4.2.1 Implicit threat of criminal prosecution for disclosing body scam victimization to authorities. Victims of body scams face legal repercussions if they disclose their body scam experiences due to societal laws that criminalize intimate relationships, particularly for women. This creates an environment where women are coerced into body scams, yet fear reporting such incidents because they know they (rather than their scammer) could face punishment. P6 stated: *"I didn't go to the police because I knew that every intimate relationship, especially involving sex, carries legal punishment. I didn't want to create more drama. Men often take advantage of this lack of legal protection."* P16 echoed a similar sentiment: *"We fear to disclose the experience of this incident [unwanted sex]; this vulnerability gives the men [who are scamming] the power to abuse easily."* Quotes like these exemplify why many of our participants refrained from reporting body scams to authorities, recognizing that the legal system treats any premarital intimate relationship as a crime. This in turn allowed perpetrators to continue manipulating and abusing women without fear of repercussions.

At least one participant did attempt to report their body scam experience to the police and were met with a hostile response that confirmed the fears shared by other participants. Per P1: *"First, they [the police] accused me and told me I was a criminal. I was really scared! Then they told me they could punish me for a premarital relationship, but they would help me because of my age. I was almost 18."* (P1) Her case highlights how authorities often shift blame onto victims, reinforcing the societal belief that women are responsible for their victimization. Although her age offered her some leniency, the fear of being treated as a criminal demonstrates the pervasive gender bias in legal systems. This legal uncertainty left participants feeling trapped, unable to seek help without risking further victimization.

Some participants elaborated on the distinctly gendered consequences for premarital sexual activity that put women at risk of further harm for being body scam victims while men face little consequence or may even be celebrated by their families. To the latter, P10 discussed double standards in her own household if she or her brother were discovered to have had a sexual partner: *"If my brother were dating or even having sex, it's sad to say, but my parents wouldn't be ashamed. In fact, they might take pride in it, viewing it as a sign of his prowess as a male."* (P10) This disparity in societal reactions allows scammers to manipulate women, aware that women will face stigma and legal jeopardy, while men are often praised or excused for similar behavior.

4.2.2 Promising love that victims do not receive from their families, then threatening to leave . "Being a woman is the hardest thing in my culture. Even before my parents knew about my relationship, I could sense their neglect—no attention, no care—simply because I am female. I felt as if my parents hated me. Women here are expected to endure punishment, regardless of whether they've done something right or wrong." (P10)

Section 4.1.1 reported on how some participants acquiesced to sexual demands due to fears that their scammer would end the relationship and prospect for marriage. As P7 exemplified: *"He asked for some nudes, but I said no. That's when his whole vibe shifted, and he started threatening me [that he would leave]."* Participants traced the influence of this fear to absence of affection received from their own families. A common theme in our analysis was the perception from participants that women are unloved and unvalued in their culture, leading to neglect and even emotional harm within the family unit. As P10 described: *"Girls in the family are not valued and are often seen by their parents as annoying and redundant."* This perceived lack of value placed participants in a vulnerable position, where they are expected to bear blame and punishment simply for being women.

Participants described how body scammers preyed on these emotional vulnerabilities by promising the love and emotional support that they lacked from their own families. This created dependency which scammers used to manipulate their victims into adhering to sexual demands. P10 suspected that body scammers deliberately target younger women because they may not have the dating experience to detect when a scammer is exploiting the familial dynamic to build emotional dependency.

"Males usually know that girls in the family are not valued and are often seen by their parents as annoying and redundant. That means a girl never experiences love. If the males are from the same region, they are aware of this and target young girls who lack experience." (P10)

4.2.3 Implicit threat of harm for dishonoring the family . "My mom beat me, took my phone, and then told my dad what happened. My dad also beat me and banned me from going to school. In every situation, my parents demanded that I stay silent, accusing me of damaging the family's reputation and honor. For about a month, I endured their physical punishment." (P10)

In Iran there is a cultural and familial expectation that women must uphold the family's reputation (called Aberou) at all costs.Dishonoring the family can result in severe punishment, particularly by a woman's father, to prevent further *"shame"* to the family. For this reason most participants could not confide in their family after realizing they were victims of body scams. Per P9: *"I could not talk about it with my parents, [...] absolutely they will kill me."* In this sense, a victim's own family enables body scams in a way similar to police: by viewing body scam victimization as a punishable offense whose disclosure warrants further harm.

Participants cited various examples of culturally acceptable forms of punishment for dishonoring their family through premarital relationships. P10 described forced marriage as a type of honor-based punishment, specifically *"being forced to marry an older man—in the age of a grandfather—all because of a premarital intimate relationship she had."* Other examples included physical violence, emotional abuse, and most notably murder (also referred to as honor killing). P15's account shows how girls like her face the prospect of murder for body scam victimization due to the societal belief that fathers own their daughters' lives: *"In our region, society encourages the killing of girls like me. On the other hand, there are hardly any serious legal consequences for my father. It's as if fathers are seen as the owners of their daughters. In this situation [discovering I was the victim of a body scam], I believe my father sees the advantages as outweighing the disadvantages of killing me."*

The threat of honor killing comes distinctly from men in the family, according to P4, who described confiding in her mother and sister even though they could seek assistance on her behalf: *"...just my mother and sister are supporting me. Even my mother stayed silent for keeping 'Aberou' in*

society and keeping me safe from my father's reaction, which would be for sure killing me." For some women, the only perceived escape from dishonoring the family is suicide. P4's story reveals how deeply the cultural concept of Aberou impacts a woman's decision-making, even driving her to multiple suicide attempts to avoid having her body scam victimization discovered.

"My decision for suicide was also rooted in the death with honor [Aberou] instead of being killed by dad and after death, a lot of rumors coming out after me. Suicide was a much more honorable death for me. [. . .] To get rid of this worrisome situation I attempted suicide ten times." (P4)

4.2.4 Deliberate threat of honor killing by informing the victim's family of premarital sexual activity. There were two ways that Aberou enabled body scams according to participants. One was the elimination of family as a trusted party for disclosing body scam victimization, thus allowing body scammers to continue their scams without consequence (see previous subsection). In the other, body scammers intentionally exploited Aberou to trap their victims into silence by threatening to reveal their intimate relationship to the victim's father. Because the resulting shame to the family would socially justify the victim's father in murdering her, scammers were effectively making indirect threats of honor killing.

The execution of this strategy hinged on the victim developing an emotional connection with the scammer. Similar to the "promising love" strategy in 4.2.2 in which the scammer threatens to end the relationship if the victim does not acquiesce to sexual demands, in this strategy the scammer threatens an end to the relationship if the victim does not provide their father's contact information. In keeping with the ruse of marriage intent, this request for the father's phone number is explained as necessary for a future marriage proposal – its use as leverage to make indirect threats of honor killing remains hidden at this point. P9 explained how she gave the body scammer her father's phone number to prove her *"trust"* in the relationship:

"When he realized I liked him, he told me that if I truly trusted him, I should give him my father's phone number -for a future proposal-. At first, I refused, but then he threatened to end the relationship, saying that withholding my father's phone number meant there was no trust between us. I couldn't bear the thought of ending things, so I eventually gave him my father's number to keep the relationship going." (P9)

Once the body scammer obtains the victim's father's phone number, they become much more emboldened and blatant in using this information to enforce their sexual demands. This usually involved threats to send *"naked"* photos to the victim's father that would have previously been given to the scammer through emotional manipulation. The veil of a marriage proposal begins to crumble at this point and the motivation for victims to adhere to sexual demands shifts away from maintaining a (now clearly hostile) relationship and towards avoiding harm or murder from one's father. P19 described a vicious cycle in which their body scammer threatened to send naked photos to her father if she did send him more naked photos to the scammer.

"He told me that if I didn't follow his commands, he would call my father and send all of my photos to him." [...] He told me I should send my naked photo to him [...] When I ignored his request, he called my father but didn't say anything! He called to make me feel scared" (P19)

P19 elaborated on how her body scammer used the prospect of contacting her father to make escalating threats of more intimate and more demeaning sexual content. What started with demands for naked photos escalated to demands for live sexual acts during video calls. P19 told one story of how the body scammer directed her to go to the bathroom to perform a particularly demeaning sexual act on camera: *"He told me that I had to go to the bathroom and during a video call to [perform an act that caused harm to her body], otherwise he would call my father and share my intimate photos and videos with him."*

5 DISCUSSION

In this paper we presented an interview study with 20 woman-identifying online daters in Iran about their experiences with romance scams, finding that scams mostly target sexual access to victims' bodies rather than money. Our findings reveal how deeply cultural and legal constraints shape dating behaviors in Iran. Premarital romantic relationships remain highly stigmatized, leading individuals to seek secretive relationships online to avoid societal judgment and potential legal consequences [17, 40, 58]. Accordingly, participants in our study highlighted the dangers of being seen in public with someone of the opposite sex, emphasizing the protective role online dating plays in maintaining secrecy. Only here can relationships be explored without pressure from family and community. Our research, however, shows that cultural standards concerning respectability and victimhood confer risks not commonly found elsewhere in the online dating literature. In this section, we discuss the dynamics of online dating romance scams across cultures. Then, to revise the anatomy of romance scams, we first explain the differences between "money" scams and "body" scams. Next, we define the stages of "Body Scams". Moreover, we examine how victimization in Iran results in a "Triple Hit" impact. Finally, we discuss study limitations, suggest future research directions, and consider practical implications for online dating safety.

5.1 Dynamics of Online Dating Romance Scams Across Cultures

The literature extensively discusses online dating romance scams, but mainly in the context of the West (see Related Work). Previous studies, along with our findings, indicate that scammers' strategies for building trust with victims are largely similar in both Western cultures and Iran, despite varying dating cultures, norms, laws, and traditions. The four main strategies taken by scammers in Western culture [94] were also present in our study: being attentive, showing affection, addressing victims' dreams, and creating intimacy. However, there were differences, e.g. the trajectory of scammer behaviour was different in that it tended to become aggressive at a certain point, presumably because scammers know there is little recourse for victims.

This confidence comes from the cultural background of both scammers and victims. By Iranian cultural standards, most of women (especially in the conservative area) fall far short of standards of 'respectability' and are engaging in equally value-laden standards of 'risky' behaviour.

Our interviews also reveal technical and social risk factors. For one, the web fosters a level of secrecy and anonymity which is not otherwise available in the physical realm. While empowering, the need to act in secrecy (As mentioned by P10) is also a risk factor: The victims we interviewed generally reported using chat applications such as Telegram or other social media channels for online dating, rather than professional dating websites. These platforms lack safety mechanisms for verifying the identity of accounts. While Al-Dawood et al.'s research [3] suggests that people are less receptive to dating apps that ignore their specific cultural features, our study yielded different results. In Iran, people were very willing to adopt Western dating methods or social media platforms like Instagram to navigate cultural restrictions. These platforms allow users to join groups and establish connections under pseudonyms, providing a sense of safety and community. The transition from group interactions to private chats is a common tactic used by scammers, who exploit the initial sense of trust built in these group settings. The increased reach and visibility for daters are matched by the increased reach and visibility for scammers. Entrance barriers are virtually non-existent for determined scammers. The other significant risk factor arises from the social environment and values. Dating is illegal, considered a religious sin, and a widespread social taboo. This greatly impacts the safety of daters, as engaging in premarital relationships makes them potential criminals who can face legal consequences. Additionally, fear of severe repercussions,

particularly from their families, pushes daters into secrecy, leading to unsafe practices like meeting in remote locations or visiting strangers' homes alone, particularly endangering women.

Our findings are grounded in the Iranian context, highlighting how cultural and societal dynamics shape online dating risks in non-Western settings. While we acknowledge that our study focuses on a specific cultural context, it also underscores the need for further research into how romance scams and digital vulnerabilities manifest in different cultural and digital environments. Western models of online scams may not fully apply to non-Western settings, where distinct societal norms and technological practices influence user behavior. This opens avenues for future research to explore similar phenomena across diverse regions, assessing both the generalizability of our findings and the potential for unique, culturally specific risks.

5.2 Revising the Anatomy of Romance Scams to Include Body Scams

Our findings illustrate experiences of "body scams," a term used to describe manipulative practices that target individuals under false pretenses, primarily through the guise of a romantic or marital relationship, to gain access to their bodies (online and/or offline). This finding highlights the broader cultural control over female sexuality—like virginity— which scammers exploit to coerce victims into compliance.

Body scammers often leverage threats tied to family honor (Aberou), discouraging victims from seeking help. Unlike financial scams, body scams manipulate cultural norms, creating a coercive environment where victims feel isolated and trapped. Existing frameworks for online dating romance scams focus largely on monetary gain and often overlook sexual gain in cultural vulnerabilities. Our study proposes revising the anatomy of romance scams to recognize body scams. We begin by comparing money scams and body scams, followed by revisiting the Scammers' Persuasive Techniques Model [93] to incorporate body scams.

5.2.1 Money Scam vs. Body Scam. In online dating romance scams, "money scams" (Western model) and "body scams" (Iranian model) both follow a staged manipulation process but differ significantly in their ultimate goals and the types of exploitation involved. As The Scammers' Persuasive Techniques Model illustrates [93], in a money scam scammers gradually gain the victim's trust, often by posing as the ideal partner, and eventually fabricate crises or emergencies to elicit financial support. This leads to repeated monetary requests, often escalating as the victim's attachment deepens, with scammers employing techniques like the "door-in-the-face" method to maximize compliance.

Conversely, our findings reveal that in a body scam the scammer's primary aim is to obtain explicit images or sexual engagement rather than financial gain [11]. Participants report experiencing emotional grooming that focuses on encouraging them to share increasingly intimate photos or videos. Scammers use strategies like the "foot-in-the-door" technique to escalate requests ranging from photos without a hijab to fully nude images, depending on the victim's cultural background (e.g., whether she is from a highly conservative area in Iran). Once intimate content is acquired, body scammers may resort to sextortion, threatening to release the victim's content publicly unless they continue to comply. While financial scams leverage monetary crises to maintain control, we argue that body scams exploit the victim's fear of social embarrassment and their desire for connection. Finally, due to cultural and legal consequences, victims often feel unable to report or escape, reinforcing cycles of abuse that are particularly unique to body scams.

5.2.2 Stage Approach: The Body Scammers Persuasive Techniques Model. Based on our findings, this section discusses and compares a stage-by-stage outline for body scams, drawing from Whitty's model for financial scams [93]. While Whitty's model for financial scams shares similarities in the

grooming stage and propensity for re-victimization, body scam processes otherwise diverge quite markedly (see Figure 1).

To start, Whitty's model begins with the victim's hope and motivation to find an ideal partner on a dating platforms—a desire that scammers exploit in the next stage by creating fake profiles that embody the victims' ideal partner. This initial stage does not fully apply to the body scam, as Iranian women involved in online dating scams typically use social media platforms repurposed for dating rather than dedicated dating sites. Therefore, their intent is not necessarily to meet an ideal partner, but rather to connect socially, sometimes with romantic potential. However, body scammers still construct fake personas that appeal to the victims' emotional needs by appearing available, non-judgmental, and attentive—qualities ranging from passionate intellectualism to loyal partnership, shaped to match the victim's perception. This approach leverages the cultural and social structures in Iran more than it does the victims' motivations for using these platforms.

Whitty uses the concept of child grooming from sex crimes to describe how scammers build trust and provide a safe-feeling environment for victims; for instance, by integrating into their daily lives with morning and evening chats, creating a strong attachment that becomes difficult to break. This stage closely parallels body scams, where the grooming persists not until victims are ready to give money but, instead, until they are prepared to give access to their bodies.

In the next stage, while financial scammers request money, body scammers demand sensitive photos, videos, or text messages. This stage may also escalate to real-life sexual abuse, which in Whitty's model occurred only in rare cases and often as a last step after victims disclosed they had no money left. In body scams, however, the focus remains consistently on intimate exploitation rather than a re-victimization through continuous financial demands.

Therefore, the body scam model highlights not only a shift from financial to bodily exploitation but also emphasizes how cultural and social structures within society can be exploited to prey on victims through socio-technical platforms with dating affordances.
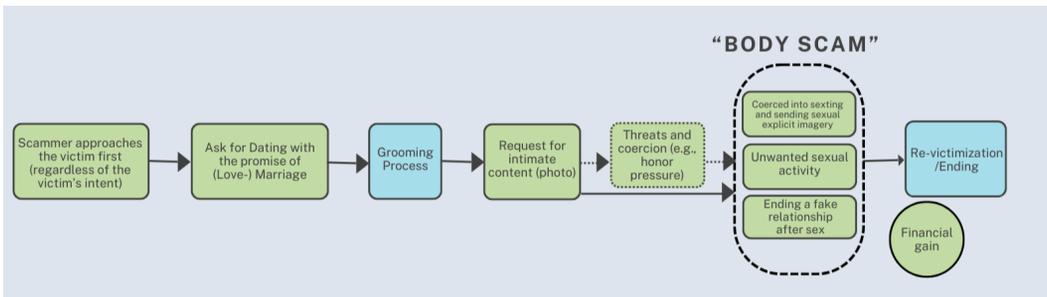

Fig. 1. The body scam process elucidated in the format of The Scammers Persuasive Techniques Model to highlight differences with financial scams. While both types of scams share a grooming stage and perpetual re-victimization, the processes otherwise diverge.

5.3 Limitations and Future Work

To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the cultural aspects of online dating romance scams where both victims and scammers come from a non-Western context. While this qualitative study provides initial insights, further research is needed to thoroughly understand romance scams in non-Western societies similar to Iran, where premarital relationships are socially discouraged. Moreover, limitations inherent to the study's sample and methodology should be noted.

Firstly, due to the nature of online interviews, we cannot verify with complete certainty the accuracy of participants' accounts. We chose to believe these victims, as they had no apparent reason to lie, and there is substantial evidence documenting the challenges and prevalence of disbelief in cases of sexual abuse [87].

Other limitations relate to the absence of gender diversity in our sample. Our findings pertain only to female participants, raising questions as to whether body scams uniquely affect female daters and if there are other types of culturally-sensitive dating scams that users of other gender and sexual identities are susceptible to. In particular, future work could study the online dating scam experiences of men, LBGTQ+ individuals, and self-identified perpetrators of such scams. For future research, we observed that participants often described their experiences as 'body/sexual scams' rather than 'sexual violence,' even in cases without physical aggression, likely due to cultural taboos surrounding sexuality. Drawing from these insights, we introduce the concept of 'Body Scam' into the study of online dating romance scams and recommend further research to establish a universally applicable, comprehensive definition of these scams, including 'body scams' as a distinct category.

Our findings indicate that 'body scams' may have unique and severe effects, especially in societies where victims face high social stigma and are often unable to report their abuse. This underscores the need for culturally sensitive reporting systems that allow victims to seek help anonymously and securely, particularly in environments where open reporting might lead to legal or social repercussions. Such systems could be adapted to social media and dating platforms to ensure that victims feel safe and supported when reporting incidents.

In addition, future CSCW research could play an important role in understanding the socio-technical aspects of body scams by exploring how trust-building tactics and secrecy dynamics unfold in various cultural contexts. Future studies should also investigate the dual role of secrecy and anonymity—elements that can empower users but also heighten their risk of victimization. So, future research should examine the psychological impacts of repeated manipulation in body scams, focusing on how cycles of coercion affect victims' well-being and their ability to escape abusive situations.

Finally, while this study provides valuable insights into online dating romance scams within the Iranian context, its findings may not be directly transferable to other non-Western regions due to the specific societal dynamics explored. Future research could build on these insights by examining similar phenomena in other cultural settings to assess their broader transferability.

6 CONCLUSION

In this work, we provided empiricial insight into the practices of online dating and romance scam victimization in Iran. We highlight the cultural dynamics that influence the goals of online dating romance scammers, the strategies they use to manipulate victims, and the limited recourse options available to victims once they realize they have been scammed. The study contributes to an improved understanding of online dating and associated harm in non-Western contexts, specifically in conservative, theocratic cultures. Most notably, the scams reported by women in our study were motivated by sexual access to the victim's body rather than financial gain. This was in part due to premarital sex being socially and legally taboo in Iran. Such cultural dynamics also prevented victims from seeking help from authorities and their families; doing so risked further punishment due to the shame it would incur for their families.

The findings show a stark contrast in the consequences of online dating romance scam victimization between Iranian and Western victims. Prior research of victims in Western countries like the United States reveals a "double hit" impact [95]: the loss of a presumed-to-be romantic partner, and a loss of money (the primary target of their scammers) - the latter of which is recognized

by authorities in Western countries as a crime. Participants in our study also reveal a double hit impact, with one impact similarly being the loss of a romantic relationship. Yet the second impact is quite different, being the cultural blame and punishment put on them for being victims, even by authority figures that would otherwise be seen as essential resources for justice and support in the West. The study ultimately emphasizes how the definition and anatomy of online dating romance scams, and approaches to mitigating such scams, need expansion to be more inclusive of non-Western cultures.

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