Mental Burglary Appeal Strategies an Unlearning and Relearning Process: Notes On Media Persuasive Theories

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Abstract

The researcher in this literature-based paper describes the factors responsible for the ease with cognitive manipulation of unsuspecting individuals, and with extensive review of on and offline scamming and fraud related researches by scholars; he established a nexus between Cognitive Appeal Techniques and the successes of several crimes in the Nigerian society. With the employment of the Psychodynamic Model, the Cognitive Response Theory, and the several Media Propaganda Techniques; the researcher attempts to initiate a relearning process in the interest of communication recipients, to prepare their minds against possible future attacks.

Keywords: Psychological Manipulation, Emotional Exploitation, Persuasion Effect

Introduction

A popular saying reads that *Man is a bundle of desires*. The typical man has cravings, yearnings or longings that impel him or her towards the attainment or possession of something. For infants, the yearning might be as silly as the impulse to acquire and play with their parents' car keys at whatever cost, and for adults might be the desire to get an education, make some money, buy a house or find love. This means that at whatever stage in life, and in whatever degree or level of importance, man is fueled by his desire to get somewhere or something in some manner. These desires automatically make individuals vulnerable and a potential prey to other individuals who are equally propelled to fulfill their desires legally or illegally, ethically or unethically. This study seeks to answer the big question of how and why you got scammed in Nigeria or by a Nigerian.

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Methodology

In view of this paper being entirely literature based; the Library Research method is adopted. The Development Orientation Triangulation (DOT) Framework designed by Turnhout et-al, (2014), identifies Library Research as one of its five research strategies. The method enables researchers to conduct studies primarily grounded in theoretical analysis that require the selection and discussion of descriptive materials related to the topic under study. Biria, (2017), sums it up as a method where the objective is not to discover something about a specific phenomenon (as in the case of empirical studies), but to aid reach a judgment about the merits of the main theories defining the related concept in order to understand it as one of the realities of the world.

Common Scams in Nigeria

Nigerian internet scammers have over the years carved out a niche in the "*cybercrime industry*" for themselves. Notable among these crimes is the popular Advance Fee Fraud. Chauki, (2009), sums it as the event where an individual is defrauded upon the receipt of an official-looking letter or email, usually purporting to be from the relative of a former senior government official, who, prior to their death, accrued a large amount of money which is currently being held in a bank account within the country from which the letter was being sent, and thus requires assistance with the removal of the money by channeling   it through the recipient's bank account, for a whopping 20% profit. Once recipients respond to the sender, an advanced fee is sought to pay for banking fees and currency exchange, and herein lays the fraud.

Apart from Advance Fee Frauds, other types of fraud include: Fake Cheque Scams, Impersonation, General Merchandise, Nigerian Money Offers, Fake Lotteries, Prizes/Sweepstakes, Online Charity, Phishing, and the popular Friendship and Sweetheart Swindles. [Tade & Aliyu, 2011]

Notable among physical/offline scams in Nigeria are the too-good-to-be-true investment scams by fraudulent marketers, some of which may be within your social circles or even a family member. Another is the quintessential "Migrate to the Abroad" scam. Peel, (2006), sums it up as when fraudulent local individuals or organizations promises to arrange a work permit, visa and other documents, as part of a comprehensive package to help the unsuspecting candidate relocate abroad, for a not so bogus fee.

Note that this study focuses less on the effects of these crimes and more on the causative factors that gives way to the success of the Mental Burglary. Mental Burglary as used in this study occurs when the psychological functioning of communication recipients are deliberately altered by manipulators in ways such that the recipients react subconsciously in the selfish benefit of the manipulators, and at their own detriment.

These psychological manipulations occurs when a victim (communication recipient) is excessively influenced by way of mental distortion and emotional exploitation, with the intention to seize power, control, benefits and/or privileges at the victim"s expense.

This type of influence very much differs from your normal healthy social influences that occur without ulterior motive from either party, because in this case, the manipulator deliberately creates an imbalance of power, and exploits the victim to serve his or her agenda.

Adopting some of the principles for systems security as specified by Stajano and Wilson (2011), this study looks at the factors responsible for the successes of most mental burglaries.

The Distraction Principle

The writers argued that while we are distracted by what grabs our interest, manipulators can do anything to us and we won't notice. Some examples - The young lady who falls prey to the recruitment scam is so engrossed in her job-finding task that she totally fails to even suspect that the whole agency might be a fraud, in the same way the 419 Nigerian scammer, posing as a Nigerian government officer with access to tens of millions keep their victim focused solely on the huge sum he is promised to receive. The element of Distraction is seen here as a fundamental ingredient, just as it is during most successful magic performances or shows.

The Social Compliance Principle

The writers further argued that society trains people to not question authority, and mental burglars exploit this "suspension of suspiciousness" to make us do what they want. An example – The ethically humble bank customer receives an unsolicited call and proceeds to dish out his credit card details to criminals in guise of bank account managers, simply because he/she seems to exhibit knowledge of the lingo, procedures, and mannerisms of a banker, worse even, when the

"banker" reads out the customer's name and date of birth. Social Compliance is the foundation for many successful scams and the fight against scams can never be won unless this principle is understood.

The Herd Principle

The writers find that even suspicious victims tend to let their guard down when everyone around them appears to share the same risks. This is similar to the "band wagon" propaganda technique and more about   it is discussed much later in this article. What victims fail to understand here is that not everyone they think is supporting or engaging in a cause or business actually exists! In online auctions for instance, a variety of frauds are possible if bidders are in cahoots with the auctioneer. In this digital age, it is quite easy for multiple usernames created by certain participants to give the impression that many others share their opinions in a bid to direct the unsuspecting victim to invest in a scam.

The Dishonesty Principle

The writers stress that our own inner larceny is what hooks us initially. Thereafter, anything illegal or immoral we do will be used against us by fraudsters. An Example – In this part of the globe (Nigeria); Pornography, nudity, homosexuality and the likes is still generally perceived as immoral, and some actors of these fall prey to manipulators when they gain access to such compromising materials.

The Kindness Principle

Since many people are fundamentally nice and willing to help, Manipulators shamelessly take advantage of this niceness. Ibid. finds that a variety of scams that propagate through email or social networks involves touching and tear inducing personal stories or follow disaster news (tsunami, earthquake, hurricane), taking advantage of the generous but naïve recipients who follows their spontaneous kindness before suspecting anything.

The Need and Greed Principle

Now this principle relates most to the big question that this study seeks to answer. Human cravings associated with addictions, status drives, hunger, sexual desires, moods and emotions make us vulnerable. Once hustlers know what we want, they can easily manipulate us. If someone prays every day for an answer, an email message offering a pathway to that answer might seem like the heaven-sent solution. The writers argue that to con someone; all that is needed to know is what they want, even if it doesn't exist. Therefore, it is pertinent to always abide by the defense strategy: "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

The Time Principle

Ever wondered why most seemingly good deals are unnecessarily time bound? In the psychology of decision making, it is observed that when people are under time pressure to make an important choice, they use a different decision strategy, and scammers are ever ready to steer them toward one involving less reasoning. This pattern is evident in several fraudulent limited-time discount offers and can as well be adopted to explain the usual *"You'll lose access to your bank account if you don't read out your BVN Number and Card Passwords to me now"* statements during many fraudulent phone calls from criminals in guise of bankers.

Literature Review

The researcher in this section relies majorly on primary data gathered by other studies that points towards how vulnerabilities of communication recipients are exploited.

Proponents of the psychodynamic model agree that Emotions, Hunger, Trust, Sexual Urges, Greed, Appraisals, Romance and Status Drives, are the psychological motivations used by manipulators to efficiently execute a mental burglary, and this plays out in the below selected studies. More about the Psychodynamic model is discussed later.

Tade & Aliyu, (2011), carried out a study at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The researchers made use of in-depth interview (IDI) and focus group discussion to sample the views of actual

Internet fraudsters (yahoo boys), and some of their findings that relate to this topic are presented below:

> **Emotions:** *"I started online fraud in my 2nd semester of 100 level as an imposter via online dating. Then I looked for the profile of people that live in developed country and if it is in Nigeria, I look for people who live in places like Port Harcourt, Abuja, Calabar and Eket. I always posed to them as a man who needed a wife. Sometimes I posed to them on how my wife disappointed me and took away my property and children. All this is polished in a pitiable way with some pictures, to convince them when I"m chatting with them (A male online fraudster/IDI/300level)."* **(Source: Tade & Aliyu, 2011)**

Another respondent also maintained thus;

> **Status Drive:** *"What I do mainly is to get cool money by setting up of an establishment (fake employment). Sometimes I pretend to be the chief executive officer, and ask people to come and apply for job. But usually you ask little money because if you asked for big money like N5, 000 you may lose. But if you ask for N2000 – N3, 000 you get more people. (Male fraudsters/IDI/300L)"* **(Source: Tade & Aliyu, 2011)**

Another respondent:

> **Greed:** *I started Internet fraud in 2008, and since then I have graduated into online dating and Lotto which are major achievements for me. Lotto simply means playing an online lottery, which some people have termed Baba-Ijebu. This involves getting the text trademark of a company mostly telecommunication and then send messages through an online bulk SMS that some people have won electronic gadget like DVD, home theatre, flat screen and black berry (A male online fraudster/IDI/400Level)*

> *(Source: Tade & Aliyu, 2011)*

In 2012, American researcher Andreas Doppelmayr, visited Ile-Ife in Nigeria to investigate the organization, knowledge sharing and innovations among Nigerian cyber-criminals, and the below are some responses from her interviews:

A respondent stated:

> **Trust:** *The key to Yahoo-Yahoo is relationship. If I can make, if I can create a good relationship with you, I can make you trust me. And if you can trust me you can do anything for me … So the major, the strongest tactic they use is relationship. Not really hacking anymore. Forget the computers. Now relationship. They now find out means of creating this relationship within text. (Informant 3 Personal Communication, December 12, 2012)*

Another said:

> **Romance**: *They also get girls to make calls for them you know when they will be chatting and they call you and want to hear my voice. So they're like oh, all right sweetie, no problem, one of the boys will get a girl to the phone and they talk to them*
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> *(Informant 1 Personal Communication, December 12, 2012)*

Researcher Oyenuga, (2020) adopted the snowballing method to qualitatively study the perspectives and techniques adopted by cybercrime fraudsters in Lagos State, specifically in the Surulere, Bariga, Ikotun, and Badagry localities of the state. Some of the findings from his in-depth interview (IDI) are highlighted below:

According to one of the respondents:

> **Romance**: *Our work involves telling lies and deceiving your client (lover). You can tell him/her that your mother is seriously ill and she needs to be operated upon, and this would cost a lot of money which you don't have (IDI/19/YICC/November 2011).*

Another said:

> *Romance: Dating online is to make love proposals to supposed individuals who most times are gullible, depressed, and lonely. These individuals are usually women that are above 40 years of age. It requires the change of identity, and as such, those that are involved in dating would have several identities online at the same time, depending on the age of the potential victim (IDI/18/YICC/November 2011).*

Another also said:

> *Romance: Dating is the safest cybercrime to perpetrate- no one can arrest you for collecting money from your sweetheart. You may not make so much, but you are sure that you are safer than those doing other ones. (IDI/24/YICC/November 2011)*

Similarly, Akanle & Shadere 2019 investigated the activities of cyber criminals in Ibadan, Nigeria and the below are some responses from their in-depth interview:

According to one of the respondents:

> *Greed: Just buy gifts for the female target then she becomes crazy in love. She can even leave her boyfriend because of you. Another trick used to getting the ladies is giving them a role to play while using them secretly. Once you make them feel they are involved and they are working to earn their money, they will trust you and loose guard. Money has a lot of power to get any girl (yahoo boy/IDI/23/Ajibode).*

Another said:

> *Romance: Girls are important especially when you are doing dating (online romance scam) and you pretend like a female (take on the role of a female) to deceive your client. You need a lady to appear legit to your client, she will be the one to send pictures to the*

> *client, pick his call on your behalf and do video call with him. (yahoo boy/IDI/male/25/Ring-road)*

In Aransiola & Asindemade, (2011), the in-depth interviewee responded thus:

> ***Greed:*** *Those whites are also greedy, they like money. My last victim gave out a laptop to sell, he wanted to sell the laptops for 1,500 dollars but I told him I will double the money for him. He sent the laptop to me, and I sent his confirmation which he was unable to clear. (Key Informant, 26 years, Male, Christian)*

In all the examples from the above literatures, one key element that these mental manipulators capitalize on is the victims" naivety. People need to understand that manipulation doesn't really require extreme sophistication and intelligence on the part of the manipulator. If harmless spouses, children, friends and relatives can skillfully influence one's decisions and actions, then so can a harmful stranger with the right information. The key is to always guard that which can create an imbalance of mental and emotional power between you and those you interact with. While physical burglary entails the forceful breaking into private enclosures with the intent
to steal, mental burglary is same, only that the victims mind is what is at risk here.

Defense Against Mental Burglary: An Unlearning and Relearning Process

I like to take the human brain as sponges that can soak in a lot of information in a short period of time. At a younger age, humans accumulate so much information as they undergo their initial learning or socialization processes; from languages to beliefs to tradition to values and norms, and these educations, in most cases, shape their general attitude towards life. However, like the soaked-in contents of sponges may be squeezed out, psychologists believe humans are equally capable of mindfully untangling (unlearning) or releasing themselves of these beliefs to make way for better, healthier socialization (relearning).
In this section, the researcher highlights some psychological theories and models to bring to bear some of the appeal techniques used by manipulators. This is done in attempts to aid

communication recipients unlearn their general attitudes towards physical or mediated communications and to adopt a more rational and safer approach to message reception.

The Psychodynamic Persuasion Model

The psychodynamic model and theories owes their origin to Freud's psychoanalysis approach. Sigmund Freud, a therapist had between the 1890"s and 1930"s developed a collection of theories clinically during therapy sessions with his patients with depression or anxiety disorders. Lowry-Lehnen, (2015), finds that the term "psychodynamic" refers to both Freud's theories and that of his followers.

Basic Assumptions of Psychodynamic Theory

- Our behavior and feelings are powerfully affected by unconscious motives

- Our behavior and feelings as adults (including psychological problems) are rooted in our childhood experiences

- All behavior has a cause (usually unconscious), even slips of the tongue. Therefore, all behavior is determined.
- Personality is made up of three parts:

  The ID: The irrational and impulsive part characterized by desires, sex drives and pleasures that demands immediate gratification/satisfaction

  The Ego: The rational part that operates according to the principles of reason and reality in attempts to mediate between the irrational "ID" and the external world

  The Super Ego: The conscious part that incorporates the values, morals and expectation of society. The Super Ego functions to persuade the Ego to turn to moralistic goals rather than simply realistic ones.

In the contemporary world of today, psychologists, critical-cultural theorists and proponents of the psychodynamic model have expanded the model to explain how advertisers, politicians, the mass media and communicators in general, can actively package contents designed to appeal to the irrational (ID) aspect of human personality to satisfy a purpose, be it economic, political or social. The psychological motivations used as intervening variables between the message stimulus and audience responses include hunger, sexual urges, status drives, vanities, opinions, and these persuasive messages has properties capable of altering the psychological functioning of the recipient(s) in such a way that he or she or they will respond overtly with models of behavior desired or suggested by the communicator. (De Fleur and Ball-Rokeash, 1975 cited in Folarin, 2006).

Relating this to the examples cited in the literature reviews, it becomes evident that effective persuasion techniques used by *mental burglars* tends to change the internal psychological structure of victims, so that the psychodynamic relationship between the latent internal process and manifest overt behaviors, will lead to acts intended by the source of the communication.

Media Propaganda Techniques

It is observed that some content producers for many mediated and interpersonal communications adopt and use some persuasive techniques akin to the revered propaganda technique. Propaganda is generally believed to refer to the careful use of words or symbols to deceptively influence thoughts and actions of people. This "deceptiveness" associated with the concept is why there is no uniformity with regards to the rightness or wrongness of using the technique in communication. Ukonu (2005) sees propaganda as the rational use of argument as well as sound emotional appeals to influence man behavior either for good or bad. For manipulators, propaganda serves a significant purpose in their business of mental burglary, and this is why the researcher highlights and examines the commonly used propaganda appeals. The awareness of these appeals by communication recipients means a possibly lesser likelihood that they fall prey to it.

Card stacking

This technique is used by manipulators to present one side of the coin when trying to win you over. The propagandist advertises or highlights some aspects in an issue he wants you to know and covers up those he doesn't want you to know. An example is when a marketer persuades you to invest in a business without a mention of the past failures of same business or the risks involved. Almost every Nigerian knows another Nigerian that has fallen victim to the popular Binomo Investment Scam on Facebook. Fraudulent Binomo agents and marketers are still in business and fully operational today because people still get carried away by the cards carefully stacked by manipulators to reflect a huge return on investment for the gullible and unfortunate investor.

Appeal to Change

That magic word "change" is an evergreen tool for manipulation. It remains any and every politicians" first device. An appeal to change thrives on the very convincing position by scammers that the recipients" present socio-political and economic order is unbearable and retrogressive, and the outright change being promised shouldn't even be questioned. A popular way is for you to be asked to compare your standard of living with that of your successful peers, neighbors, or church members.

The Fear/Desire Appeal

Manipulators use this technique to associate two unrelated concepts or items in an effort to push what they're offering to be accepted by you. With the fear technique, they conjure up negative images or scenarios as a means to convince recipients to take their suggested action, lest they may suffer similar negative fate. An example is the seemingly righteous politician, whom in his bid to promise "State Security", digs up images of charred bodies and burnt properties from past administrations to emphasize his point. The Desire technique comes alive when manipulators use terms like "Financial Freedom" "Life Objectives" etc. in his/her appeal. The Internet fraudster for instance, will start his/her advertisement by showing recipients" tons of credit

alert screen shots, pictures of beautiful cars and houses, and other attractive items that could be theirs if only they invest.

Unreliable Testimonial

Manipulators hinge on the ability of an unrelated person to successfully sell an idea, opinion, practice, product or opinion. In Nigeria, social misfits (yahoo boys, cultists, and thugs) are known to gain followership simply by enlisting to newbies the celebrities, politicians and other influential people supposedly belonging to their group(s). This goes to show just how influential a popular face can be. Since testimonials can increase sales, advertisers and marketers are known to recruit celebrities that do not have personal experience with the products being promoted by them. Due to the grave negative effects of these sometimes false testimonials, the Wall Street Journal in 2014 reported how Chinese government updated their draft regulations to mandate celebrities to actually use every product they endorse. It is pertinent therefore, that recipients learn to judge the idea or product being presented on the basis of its merit or worth to them as individuals rather than on testimonials by popular faces.

The Hot Potato Appeal

This is a technique in which manipulators make use of inflammatory statements or questions to throw the recipients off guard embarrass them, while piquing their interests at the same time. They ask questions like: *When was the last time you took your family out for vacation at resorts? Wouldn't you like for your kids to attend better schools? Don't you think your parents deserve to live in bigger houses? Aren't you tired of using public transportation?* Having pondered upon these questions, it takes a conscious and rational effort to not damn the consequences and invest in the scam.

Band Wagon

This technique is used by manipulators to convince recipients to accept their ideas, opinions, on the basis that every „successful" person is already doing it. Examples: *The MMM business is the*

21st century business, what are you waiting for? *Do you know you're among the few remaining youths in this town without an account with us?* To conquer a band wagon appeal, it is important that recipients not only crosscheck the validity of the acceptance statistics being reeled out to them, but also assess the relevancy and implications of the proposals their individual lives.

A Few Other Strategies

Among the several manipulative a strategy deployed by mental buglers is the quintessential "Let Them Speak First" method. This is particularly used to establish a baseline and look for weaknesses. Ni, (2015) finds that by asking you general questions with hidden agendas, manipulators establish a baseline about your thinking and behavior, from which they can then evaluate your strengths and weaknesses.

Some manipulators equally enjoy "intellectual bullying" by presuming to be the expert and most knowledgeable in certain areas. They take advantage of you by imposing alleged facts, statistics, and other data you may know little about. This approach has a direct relationship with the "Social Compliance Principle" earlier discussed. Many people feel obliged to respond as demanded to individuals they perceive to be more "intelligent" or those in position of higher authority than them. A conscious recipient should be able to note some or all of the following traits in any or most conversation with manipulators: Lying, Excuse Making, Blaming Recipients (victims) for causing their own victimization, Deformation of truth, Strategic Disclosure or withholding of key information, Exaggeration, Understatement and One-sided bias of issues (Preston Ni, 2015)

In the same vein, some manipulators like to make critical remarks, often disguised as humor or sarcasm, to make you seem inferior and less secure. And just like in the *Hot Potato Propaganda Technique*, the manipulators make variety of comments ranging from your level of income, appearance, the place you live, to your command of language etc. By making you look and feel bad, the manipulator hopes to impose psychological superiority over you, and consequently control you.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Regardless of the persuasive missiles contained in any message being received, it is important that recipients" try to separate facts from fiction. In line with Greenwald's cognitive response theory, it is in fact possible for attentive people to remember their cognitive responses (pre-existing thoughts, opinions, judgments) about the subject of the ideas, messages, being received, than the content of the information itself. This means that continuous decoding and analysis of persuasive messages will overtime lead either to the formation of or a change of one's attitudes towards every potentially harmful communication. In essence, what you know about (based on experiences, readings) cannot, rather should not be let by you to harm you. The element of "Choice" remains invaluable in every persuasive communication. Mental burglaries succeed when victims misuse or side-line their strategic element of choice.

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