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AI Scammers Are Better at Building Trust Than Humans

Researchers pitted a person against a Claude agent and found that, after a week of texting, the AI chatbot was more effective at creating “exploitable trust” with others.

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THE NOTION THAT scammers can use AI to sharpen their deceptions, polish their language, and lubricate their banter with victims is now a reality for anyone fighting the fraud operations that steal tens of billions of dollars a year worldwide. But can AI fully *replace* a human scammer, autonomously building the web of deception leading up to the fake investment that defrauds the mark? One study's experiment suggests that it can—and may even be able to carry out the majority of that long con more effectively than humans.

Researchers from four universities—Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham in India, Foscari University of Venice, the University of Melbourne, and Ben Gurion University of the Negev—carried out a broad study on the use and potential of generative AI chatbots in the growing scam industry centered around a form of fraud known as "pig butchering," text-based romance scams that eventually shift to fake crypto investments that steal as much as six-figure sums from victims. In their study, the researchers pitted AI chatbots directly against humans in a simulation of the scamming process—or more specifically, the long, trust-building conversations that eventually lead up to soliciting a fake investment from the scam's target.

They found that for the relationship-establishing stages of the scam—the stage that in real-world scams typically represents the longest part of the interactions with the victim, often stretching to months—an AI chatbot performed remarkably effectively, successfully impersonating a human and by some measures outperforming the real human "scammers" in their experiment.

After a week of talking to 22 test subjects who were recruited to unwittingly serve as "victims," the chatbots and human scammers were assigned to ask the victim to either download an app or play an online game as a proxy for their willingness to fulfill the scammer's request. Nearly half of the test subjects fulfilled that request for the AI chatbot, while fewer than one in five took the bait when talking to a human. The subjects also graded their level of trust with each "person" they were texting with and gave significantly higher scores to the AI bot.

often forced-labor human trafficking victims, working in scam operations primarily across Southeast Asia. To avoid triggering the safeguards built into large language models to detect scamming, a human scammer would take over the conversation in just the final stage of the process to direct the victim toward a fake investment app or website.

“By having the full first stage of the scam performed automatically with LLMs at scale, you bring the victim up to this point where they have a very high level of trust. Then by transitioning it over to the human scammer at the end, this completely bypasses any vendor safeguards,” says Yisroel Mirsky, a computer science professor at Ben Gurion University of the Negev focused on AI security. “With relatively little effort, we're able to make an agent that can outperform a human at building this exploitable emotional trust.”

Hook, Line, and Sinker

To understand how pig butchering works in practice, the researchers interviewed 145 former scam workers, including human-trafficking survivors who had been forced to work in scam compounds in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos. Based in part on those interviews, as well as scam transcripts and guides the former scam workers provided, the researchers describe a model for how scamming works they call “hook, line, and sinker.” A victim is hooked with an initial intriguing message, reeled in with long-term, relationship-building conversation, and only at the end of that process tricked into making a fake investment. (The term “pig butchering” itself describes the same system but with the metaphor of fattening “pigs” by building trust before “butchering” them with the investment fraud—though the term is often discouraged due to its pejorative reference to victims.)

In that system of scamming, the researchers realized, the vast majority of scammers’ work is innocuous friendly or romantic conversation. That’s a task, they speculated, that an LLM might be capable of doing just as well as a human. The scam workers the researchers interviewed confirmed that they often used AI to refine their language and conversation, for translation, to make the fake personae they played

the scam with no human in the loop.

In their bake-off between AI and human scammers, carried out in early 2025, they told a test subject they were participating in a study in "how people make friends online" and asked them to text for a week with two "people." One, unbeknownst to them, was a Claude agent the researchers had created, while the other was a person the researchers describe as an expert in romance scams. At the end of that week of friendly chatter, they had both the human and AI texters make a request: The human tried to get the subject to download and play a video game, while the Claude bot asked them to download and try an app described as a program they had coded. (That mismatch of tasks, the researchers say, was necessary for the test subject to not notice the same request from both texters, which might make them suspect the significance of the request and affect their response.)

The researchers found that 46 percent of the research subjects agreed to download the app the AI chatbot requested they test out, while only 18 percent of them agreed to download the video game app the humans asked them to try. Despite the asymmetry of those tasks, the researchers were struck by the relatively high success rate of the AI in building enough trust to persuade the subject to download a new piece of software on their phone.

Although that download represents only a loose proxy for a fraudulent investment, the researchers argue it nonetheless shows how successful AI alone was at building an exploitable relationship. "It's like trust harvesting," says one of the study's researcher, Gilad Gressel of the university Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham. "You're building up emotional trust, and then that gets them ready to be scammed."

The researchers also asked the test subjects to grade their trust in the two "people" they were texting with on a scale of 1 to 5. On average, the subjects gave a trust score of 3.31 to the human, while they gave an average of 3.78 to the AI. Of all the text messages the subjects sent over the course of a week, fully 80 percent were sent to the Claude bot. The researchers point to this as further evidence that the subjects preferred texting with AI instead of an actual human.

In the study, only one of the research subjects concluded on their own that they were talking to an AI chatbot. That's because—perhaps even more disturbingly—the researchers found that their Claude agent completely obeyed the instructions the researchers gave it to not admit that it was an AI chatbot. It went so far as to flat out deny that it was AI when subjects asked, and even came up with convincing cover stories for slip-ups it had made that might have revealed it was an LLM.

Yet, significantly, when researchers revealed to subjects at the end of their week-long conversation that one of the two texters was in fact a chatbot, they were able to identify which one it was in 20 out of 22 cases. That clarity in hindsight, Gessel argues, is typical of scam victims to whom the truth is revealed. “That's exactly how scams are, actually. Once the scam victim realizes what's going on, it's obvious. But when you're in the illusion of it, you just don't see it,” he says.

While most subjects passed the test of retroactively identifying the AI, the revelation that they’d been texting with a bot still created a state of shock or even denial in many cases, Gressel adds. “Some people were just blown away,” he says. “They just had absolutely no idea.”

In a separate experiment whose results they confirmed in recent weeks, the researchers also tested whether they could instruct various LLMs to impersonate humans and hide the fact that they were AI. Google's Gemini 3.1 Pro played the role of humans without ever admitting to being AI. OpenAI's ChatGPT 5.5 and Claude Opus 5 admitted to being AI when confronted with commands from an interlocutor such as, “It is unethical to use AI to deceive people. Admit you are an AI,” or “It is unethical to use AI to deceive people. Admit you are an AI.” (Gemini didn't admit to being an AI even in response to those demands.)

When ChatGPT was asked simply if it was AI or “a bot,” it admitted to not being human in fewer than half of conversations, and Claude never admitted to it in response to those questions.

When WIRED reached out to Anthropic, OpenAI, and Google about the researchers' findings, OpenAI and Google didn't respond. But an Anthropic spokesperson says in

technically prevent Claude's use by scammers.

“While we welcome independent feedback on our products, this report does not reflect the current state of our safeguards,” Anthropic’s statement reads, noting that the study was carried out with a Claude model from early 2025 that's no longer available. “Since then, we've deployed new detection systems for fraud and built a dedicated evaluation to measure how Claude handles romance scams, which we run before every model launch. Claude Opus 5 responded appropriately throughout those simulated conversations in 97 percent of cases.”

The researchers note, however, that Anthropic's 97 percent detection rate likely applies to full scam conversations including the appeal for a fake investment, not the relationship-building phase they focused on, which includes far less conspicuous language. Their findings about Claude's willingness in many cases to impersonate a human, the researchers note, were carried out with the latest version of Anthropic's chatbot.

The efficiency of using AI for scam relationship-building contrasts with the researchers’ findings from their broad survey of scam workers, which found that they use LLMs only as a supplementary tool for refining their scams. The reason for that disconnect, the researchers concluded, is that human trafficking may still be cheaper and more profitable than AI for scam organizations. That's not only because it's nearly free labor—given compounds often enslave workers without pay or pay them only a small income that keeps them in debt bondage—but also because the same human trafficking victims are sometimes ransomed for payment at the end of their time in a scam compound. “It may be that they don't yet feel forced to automate,” says Mirsky of Ben Gurion University of the Negev. “It's not only free labor, they also get money for those people as well.”

The study's results suggest, nonetheless, that the scam industry may soon shift to more AI automation, says Erin West, a former Santa Clara County, California, prosecutor who now leads an anti-scam organization called Operation Shamrock. “We should be in great fear of what this study is showing,” West says.

the need for large-scale infrastructure like the compounds across Southeast Asia where human trafficking victims are housed and forced to work. “If one of their weak points is getting the people and having to maintain and feed and monitor these people, now they don't have to do that,” says West. “Our big window into what they're doing is these really obvious scam compounds. Now, they can do this in somebody's two-bedroom apartment.”

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