

Leverhulme Doctoral Scholarships Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies (PIRS) University of Southampton

RECRUITMENT CYCLE for studentships starting: October 2025 (Cohort 2)

SUPERVISORY TEAM

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STUDENTSHIP PROJECT TITLE

Fraud, Resilience and the Media

OVERVIEW

This project explores fraud (UK's fastest-growing type of crime) and asks what impact media representations of such things as scams, cons and swindles have on systems of fraud and their resilience. In short, do the representations encourage the resilience of fraud or the public's resilience to the impacts of fraud?

SUMMARY

This project considers why traditional law enforcement measures have struggled to dismantle systems of fraud, a crime with a long and established history. Fraud is a very fluid criminal entity, that merges and aligns quickly to technological developments or social change. Therefore, the project seeks to examine the role of social media, television and podcasts in the durability and innovation of fraud, as well as reactions to fraud by those targeted by it. Do media representations of fraud increase public awareness of potential scams or inform them on how to respond to fraud? Do these narratives help fraud victims feel less alone and make them more likely to work through their experiences? Or, can the media fuel a seemingly unstoppable and impenetrable system of resilience?

This 3-year project will take an interdisciplinary approach drawing on Criminology, Media and Communications, and Television Studies to develop novel contributions to resilience studies. The project will have the potential to combine qualitative and quantitative methods to generate and analyse findings from media content, UK audiences and media creators. In addition, the successful candidate will be expected to engage with the Institute of Criminal Justice Research and the Centre for International Film Research at the University of Southampton in expanding and furthering the project and their career development. Both groups included experienced, mid and new researchers, run regular seminars and offer a wealth of knowledge, support and advice.

PROJECT CONCEPT

Rationale

Fraud now accounts for more than 40% of all UK crime. It is estimated that £2.3 billion was lost to fraud in the UK during 2023, an increase of 104% on 2022. Worldwide over \$5 trillion is lost to fraud each year. Existing research has already shown that a number of developments, including globalisation, the spread of digital culture, technological advancements, and the global Covid-19 pandemic, have significantly increased the resilience of this criminal system both nationally and worldwide. A number of law enforcement, policy and awareness-raising initiatives have been launched to try to map and dismantle this system of criminological intent.

Alongside the financial impact of this system, victims of fraud also endure profound and lasting psychological impacts. Crucially, potential victims usually play a role in the process, whether it is sending money, clicking on a link, or failing to report the fraud to the police. Indeed, without the victims' involvement, scams can become quickly redundant. Despite its prevalence, there has been very little research on fraud as a resilient system and on individual's resilience to the risks and effects of fraud.

The project will begin by exploring definitions of resilience as it relates to fraud and the ways in which fraud can be understood as having grown increasingly resilient in the last 20 years. Then, by gathering data from non-specialists' participants in the form of the UK public, online content creators, television producers and podcast journalists the project will elicit the perceptions, meanings and understanding applied to the potentials and realities of fraud in the media. Thus, establishing how fraud builds or corrodes existing levels of resilience, both for the system at large and for individual actors involved (i.e. fraudsters, victims and law enforcement).

Media narratives on fraud have gained increased prominence, for example, via YouTube and TikTok, so-called fraud baiting has become a popular genre, and a growing number of true crime podcasts have focused specifically on fraud. Elsewhere, fraud has been depicted in 1,207 television episodes on terrestrial UK television, with a particularly sharp increase in non-fiction fraud-focused programmes since 2021 (forthcoming Spiller

and Bull). The project will review three forms of media (social media, podcasts and television shows), to examine how fraud narratives are presented and consumed, how these programmes highlight the resilience of fraud as a system and if they have an impact viewer's resilience to fraud. The project seeks to better understand the complex workings of fraud and how media might be effective in preventing fraud or alerting individuals to the potential risks of fraud. Equally, the project will explore which forms of media might heighten fears, misinform or serve little purpose other than to entertain.

The project will also be careful to contextualise fraud as a resilient system, paying attention to how organisations such as banks, the Home Office, law enforcement bodies or online companies work to raise awareness of and prevent fraud. A key issue will be to examine demographic and geographical correlations between fraud victims and media audiences.

Key objectives:

- explore definitions of resilience as it relates to systems of fraud
- document resilience to fraud, how it is understood, activated and its impacts
- determine the preventative potential of different types of media representations of fraud

Timeline:

This will be a 3-year project.

Year 1 – systematic review of relevant scholarly work on resilience, fraud and the media.

Year 2 – data collection (see below)

Year 3 – write up/ dissemination

Methodological approach

The project will follow a step-by-step approach, where each stage, listed below, will inform the stage to follow. The data collection process will adhere to current ethical standards and responsible research practices, along with other relevant legislation such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The student will comply with the University of Southampton's obligatory Ethics Review before commencing any research activities. It is expected this work will commence at the start of Year 2.

1. **Online questionnaire with 1000 participants**, using professional survey organisations (such as Prolific) to gather responses from a wide socio-economic range of participants from across the UK. This survey will examine how people understand fraud and how they perceive exposure to the potentials of fraud.

2. **Interviews with creators** of fraud-focused media texts. These interviews will ask the participants to reflect on how they construct their fraud narratives, how they are informed, if they are attempting to prevent fraud and how. (5 interviews in each format. Total of 15).
3. **Qualitative content analysis** of a selection of fraud-focused media narratives, using approaches such as themes or content analysis.
4. **Reception analysis through focus groups**. 3 focus groups (10 participants in each) in 3 different UK locations will be asked to view different types of fraud narratives from television, podcasts and social media. Measures of pre and post presentations will be collected, recording variations in consumption of the message across media formats and in demographic and regional participants.
5. **Revisit** questionnaire respondents and those involved in the focus groups 6 months post events and seek personal responses on if they have been potential victims or victims of fraud in the intervening months. Directly asking if any exposure to preventive measure or narratives has helped to build resilience in the face of potential fraud.

Wider implications of this proposed research

The project will enhance understandings of fraud as a complex and often opaque system. Moreover, the project seeks to review what media format is most effective in generating helpful narratives and to highlight potential differences in demographic and regional consumption of the narratives. This work will be of interest to scholars in resilience studies, criminology, media and communications, and television studies, as well as people working in the media industry and law enforcement. The critical perspective proposed by the project takes a unique perspective in combining the theoretical and methodological approaches of 2 key and interrelated disciplines that have significant potential to generate informed and impactful findings for those working in and around issues of fraud and content creation.

Please explain how this project represents a contribution to interdisciplinary resilience studies.

The project offers a unique perspective by merging resilience studies with criminology and television studies, with a focus on one of the fastest-growing areas of crime as a resilient system and the role of media in visualising and increasing resilience. This will be achieved by employing an innovative approach of resilience studies that draw on existing expertise from critical criminology and television theory; enabling the project to unpack the structuring, role and impact of the media on appreciations of this crime on those who consume media. The project will consider the dynamics of resilience both as a system of crime and as the ability of individuals to protect themselves against crime and working-through victimisation.

When considering if media can increase individual viewer's resilience, the project will consider a number of systemic elements. Firstly, individual attributes of audiences and creators, of interest will be the range of opportunities available to individuals and its impact on how they consider and deal with fraud. For example, levels of education, familial support or fiscal competence. Secondly, the notion of responsibility and how individuals, and organisations, work to alleviate victimisation or vilification. For example, blaming the victim. Thirdly, greater understandings of vulnerability and how those exposed to harm can learn to counter potential fraud. This will build upon supervisor's previous work that has examined responsibility and vulnerability and contribute to the enrichment of resilience studies.

Please list and describe any specific/additional technical training or support to undertake and successfully deliver this project. *Note that students recruited into this programme will undertake a bespoke training curriculum. Students and their supervisory teams will also identify generic skills gaps to address through training courses offered by the University's Doctoral College.*

Depending on the skill set of the successful candidate, the expectation would be that they participate in all training offered by PRIS, and any relevant additional training offered by the Doctoral College. The supervisory team have substantial qualitative experience and would expect the project to avail of this expertise, however the project is not restricted to qualitative students.
