

Online Romance Scams: “How Scammers Use Impersonation, Blackmail, and Trickery”



Romance scams are different from other scams. They prey on lonely people looking to connect with someone, and can often take months to develop to the point where money changes hands. The emotional harm to the victim can be even more painful than the monetary loss.

The spread of online dating sites and apps has made this fraud even easier to commit. Victims in the US and Canada have reported losing nearly \$1 billion over the last three years, and BBB estimates there may be more than a million victims in the U.S. alone. Because most people do not file complaints about romance scams with BBB or law enforcement, this may just be the tip of the iceberg.

BBB’s study, “Online Romance Scams: How Scammers Use Impersonation, Blackmail, and Trickery to Steal from Unsuspecting Daters” looks at how these scams work, who the scammers are, and what is being done

to combat them. **You can read the full study here.**

Anatomy of a Romance Scam

Experts identify several distinct stages of the scam:

Contacting victims



(Image: ATLAS Social Media)


Romance scammers use dating websites, apps, Facebook, and other social media. Many use stolen credit cards to join the sites and post fake profiles. They meet victims, interact with them, and quickly try to get them to move to a different form of communication such as email or texting. This way, if the dating site identifies the scammer as being bogus and shuts them down, they are already in contact with their victims elsewhere. The scammers will often make fake Facebook pages for their aliases to help bolster their fake identity.

Grooming

This is when the fraudster learns about the victim's life and builds trust. This stage can go on for months. It may include daily texts or messages. Some scammers even send flowers and small gifts. This is also when scammers may request small favors. This can help them test how open a victim ultimately may be to helping when an "emergency" pops up and the scam kicks into high gear.

The grooming process also focuses on isolating victims from their friends and families so they don't have help when making decisions. The scammers will convince victims that their friends and families have questionable motives to criticize the scammer.

The sting

 The scammer will finally ask for money; usually for an emergency, business problem, or plane ticket to finally meet. If the victim sends money, the scammer will find ways to keep asking for more. These scams can also be dangerous: victims have unknowingly been pulled in to money laundering or drug trafficking and, in a few cases, even convinced to fly overseas to meet their love interest only to be kidnapped and held for ransom.

The fraud continues

Even if targets realize they have been victims of a scam, the fraud may continue with a new scam pretending to help them get their money back. A fake law enforcement official may reach out to say the scammer has been caught and the victims can get their money - if they spend several thousand dollars in fees. The original scammer will also sometimes reach out and admit that the "relationship" started as a scam but then claim they actually fell in love. And the cycle continues.

BBB's study gives much more detailed information on where the scams originate, how the scammers trick their victims (including by posing as military personnel), and how they get their money. It also details what

we know about the victims, why they fall for the scams, and how they can be pulled into other scams. **You can read the full report here.**

The research shows that all types of people - male, female, young, old, straight, gay - can be victims of romance scams. For BBB's tips on protecting yourself from romance scams, **click here.**

Source: BBB