

Love Bytes! Don't become a victim of online dating scams.

Opinion Piece by Jenny Reid, managing director of iFacts

Chris had been chatting to an attractive woman, whom he had “met” on a popular and largely reputable online dating site for just three days, when she delivered her tale of woe about a whole host of personal problems. This was followed by the inevitable request to borrow some cash. Hardly a sophisticated scammer, and Chris saw the writing on the wall immediately. However, hundreds of lonely South Africans are being taken daily for thousands of rands, by their “sweathearts” whom they met online.

In our world of lonely hearts, the internet has become a quick, simple and convenient way for the shy and lonely to “get out there” and try meet a potential new partner. While there are one or two happy-endings, these are few and far between. Most stories end in broken hearts and empty bank accounts.

Scammed in the name of love

When you're giddy with new love the words – *it's too good to be true* – somehow don't enter our stream of consciousness. This year a Durban-based single mother lost R700 000 after falling for the charms of an online Casanova. Swept away by the charms of a man she had never even met, the divorced administration clerk, like hundreds of vulnerable women every day, lost her life savings.

She had joined online dating site, Thunderbolt City, in April last year hoping to meet a companion. A man identifying himself as Collins Johnson, an engineer from Gordon's Bay but working in Switzerland, began chatting to her. In their online conversations, the woman happily disclosed to him that she had sold her house to cover her daughters' university fees.

She described him as charming and soon they were chatting on the phone for hours each day. Then came the kicker, Collins declared that he had bought gifts and jewellery for the woman and her daughters but needed her to send him R27 000 for the package to pass through customs. No questions asked, she transferred the money into a Standard Bank account as requested. And so it went on. Collins then needed money for his tax problems in Switzerland. He then needed to borrow a whopping R600 000, and inexplicably, and possibly in an effort to show the depth of her love and trust, the women sent it over. And that was the end of Collins. Communication ceased in July and his cellphone number has been inactive ever since. Not only has the women been left broken-hearted, but her family has lost everything.

On the trail

Hawks spokesperson, Captain Paul Ramaloko says many women lose millions of rands and that the number of online dating scams is increasing as more people turn to the internet to find love.

The Hawks say that these crimes are perpetrated by individuals as well as syndicates, and the modus operandi is to prey on vulnerable women on internet sites and then get them to hand over cash.

Last year, four men and three women appeared in court in connection with their alleged involvement in an online dating scam. They appeared in the Bellville Specialised Commercial Crime Court, before Magistrate Sabrina Sonnenberg, facing 77 counts of fraud and one framed in terms of the Prevention of Organised Crime Act.

Of the men, three are Nigerian nationals, and one a Ghanaian. Two of the women are Nigerians, and the third a South African. The four men were arrested in May last year in a room at the Lagoon Beach Hotel in the Cape Town suburb of Milnerton. The charge sheet listed 21 alleged victims, all of whom were duped in online dating chats. The accused created false online dating profiles, and targeted vulnerable victims with whom they built up trust in a grooming process, and then requested money from them for supposed emergencies.

Don't love the scammer

There are multiple warning signs that you could be getting scammed for love and many ways to avoid becoming a victim:

- Be wary if a person's profile, which states that age and income do not matter, and that finding a "meaningful connection" or "true love" is more important. This just doesn't fly in the real world.
- The scammer will usually readily show you pictures of himself/herself, possibly within hours of chatting. The purpose is to gain your trust.
- Female scammers, or rather, scammers posing as females are more than likely also scantily clad.
- The scammer usually declares love very quickly, usually within a span of just a few days. A person who professes undying love before having met you is just not for real.
- Emails from the scammer are generic and often not addressed to you by name.
- If the person only gives you a personal e-mail address and no other contact details, it should raise some red flags.
- Scammers usually want to move off the website and onto your personal account as quickly as possible.
- Most love scammers declare that they foreign nationals currently living abroad.
- The scammer usually takes more time to respond to chats. This is an indication that the scammer is simultaneously chatting with many other victims
- Money enters the equation very quickly. The scammer will usually ask the victim for help with money for family emergencies, medical attention, plane tickets or to help buy leave. They always promise to pay it back.
- The scammer will never provide a landline number or physical address.
- Don't give people you meet online your personal e-mail address, work e-mail address, or home or work address or phone number. Stick with a cellphone number so you can block it if you need to.
- Finally – never ever, ever send money to a person who you have never met!