

Are You an Informed Investor?

Don't Get Swept Away by a Romance Scam

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Dating apps and social media platforms may be good ways to meet new people but be cautious if someone turns a burgeoning online romance into an opportunity to solicit an investment or ask to borrow money. Scammers are increasingly posing as potential romantic partners to lure people into fraudulent investment schemes. This alert discusses some common tactics fraudsters use in investment-related romance scams and points out things you can do to protect yourself from these schemes.

Romance Scams on the Rise

Government agencies across North America are seeing an increase in investment-focused romance scams. ¹In March 2023, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released a report that said its Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) identified more than 19,000 victims of confidence or romance scams resulting in losses greater than \$735 million. In a similar report, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) showed that romance scammers cost nearly 70,000 consumers \$1.3 billion in 2022.

Investment tied to cryptocurrencies and digital assets topped the North American Securities Administrators Association's (NASAA) 2023 list of investor threats. Some of these threats may be tied to romance scams. Finally, the Canadian Securities Administrators (CSA) has also warned of fraudsters using social media, messaging apps, and online dating sites to lure people into investment scams.

Romance Scams Are Real; Know the Warning Signs

Romance scammers set online traps

¹Sometimes these scams are referred to as "financial grooming," or "pig butchering."

and use technology and social media platforms to profile targets. They also spend time getting to know people before asking for money or introducing an investment opportunity. Here are some common tactics and warning signs to look out for:

- Reluctance to meet in-person or by video: Most scammers avoid meeting face-to-face because often times they aren't who they say they are. They pretend to be anyone they think you would be attracted to. They will make excuses not to meet, like being too busy with work, or not being able to get away from family or community obligations. "In-person" may include refusing a video chat with the victim while they groom them for the scam. Scammers may use video filters or Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology to disguise their identities, sometimes referred to as "deep fakes."
- Wanting a long-distance relationship: Once you enter into a "relationship" with an online romance scammer, they might tell you that they live far away, travel a lot for work, or have a job outside the country or

area you live. They won't offer to visit you and may discourage you from trying to visit them.

- Discussing wealth or business success: In order to interest you in investing, romance scammers may brag about how successful they are. They may flaunt their supposed wealth, using photos of luxury items, real estate, expensive cars, etc. They may offer to help you make money or become wealthy, often offering access to supposed inside information or trading secrets for trendy or complex investments, like cryptocurrencies or non-fungible tokens (NFTs).
- Pressuring you to give them money: At some point, the romance scammer will likely ask you point blank to provide them with a sum of money. They will likely try to show you that your investment has grown quickly and substantially in order to hook you into giving larger and larger amounts. If you show reluctance, they may put pressure on you by saying manipulative things, such as that they are considering breaking off

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North American Securities Administrators Association

the relationship or they are offended that you can't trust them.

- Introducing an app or website: When you show a willingness to invest, a romance scammer may steer you to an investing app that they say they are using or a website that offers investments. The website or app may be controlled by the scammer or a criminal organization they are associated with. The scammer may also offer to teach you how to invest or trade, and then ask for remote access to your computer or request your online banking information.

How to Protect Yourself from Romance Scams

When we're smitten with someone, we tend to lead with our heart instead of our head. A romance scammer depends on this, encouraging you not to look too deeply into their background or the type of scheme they are promoting. Protect yourself by following these steps:

- Keep your guard up. If a new romantic interest suddenly starts asking for money or encourages you to start investing, be cautious. A potential partner should be focused on your developing relationship, not your money or investing interests.
- Do your research. Online searches may provide a better idea about the person you are dealing with and what they do. Most people have an online presence these days, which includes personal and professional information. Fake online profiles tend to lack information about an individual, and the images used in an activity feed may feel impersonal or staged. Scammers often use stolen images from real people or stock images, so

it's good to do online image searches to check the origin and use of the image.

- Check registration. Firms that provide investment advisory services in the U.S. are typically registered with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) or one or more state securities regulators. In Canada, firms and individuals must be registered with the securities regulators in the provinces in which they operate. Check the SEC's Investment Adviser Public Disclosure database or FINRA's BrokerCheck to

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verify registered individuals or firms. In Canada, use the CSA's National Registration Search. To find your state or provincial securities regulator, visit the NASAA website.

- Suggest meeting in-person. To determine if a person is who they say they are, you can try and meet in-person in a public place. Make sure to meet in a safe, busy, and public place. Bring a friend or family member. This person doesn't need to stick around if things go well, but it will give you a witness and an easy excuse to leave if you feel uncomfortable.

- Research websites and apps: Scammers create a custom online platform and direct you to it in order to take your money and hide from authorities. Building a custom app or website that can accept money or crypto assets is surprisingly easy. If a person encourages you to invest and recommends an investing website or app, make sure it is registered to do business in your state or province before investing. When dealing with registered investing platforms, do business directly with the platform, don't allow someone to act as an intermediary or access your computer.

- Look for red flags: Scammers might attempt to make the investment look safe by convincing you that they are investing and taking risks too. Alternatively, they may say the investment is low risk or no risk, while offering guarantees that your money will be safe. This is a red flag of investment fraud. Review NASAA's Warning Signs of Fraud to better understand common tactics fraudsters use to scam people.

The Bottom Line

Be careful when you meet new people online, especially when you are looking for romance. Seeking a romantic partner is a complex and emotional experience at the best of times – so it's a good idea not to mix business with romance. Don't get swept away – make sure you are in a relationship with a real person who cares about you before even considering sharing financial information, making an investment, or loaning a person money. Also, reach out to your local state or provincial securities regulator before making any investment or if you ever suspect fraud may be involved.