# When love hurts | Inquirer Opinion

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“Love” and “scam” are four-letter words that, coupled together, have brought ruin to a lot of lives.

It starts innocently enough, the promise of a solid relationship an irresistible hook for the lonely and besotted for whom Valentine’s Day for one has become a painful and chronic gibe.

A warning by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) to its 5,000 citizens in the Philippines has noted that victims of romance scams often fall prey to fraudsters who use dummy accounts to cultivate fake relationships in dating apps or social media for financial gain.

The AFP and their local counterparts worked in late 2024 to identify likely Australian targets of love scams after a Philippine offshore gaming operator (Pogo) hub was raided in Parañaque City in October. The facility was engaged in love and investment scams, the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) said, based on scripts found in their computers.

A typical “rom-con” script, according to AFP commander of cybercrime operations Graeme Marshall, has scammers using “emotive language and creat(ing) backstories that sound genuine to try and trick (victims) into giving them money.”

## Rosy promises

A simple conversation would turn into a sudden romantic connection and when trust has been established, scammers would “subtly” bring in cryptocurrency trading into the conversation as their “side job,” saying it helped them reach “significant wealth.” They would then encourage their victims to make similar investments, only to block them after significant amounts have been transferred to a fake crypto account.

Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Commission (PAOCC) Undersecretary Gilbert Cruz said Pogo hubs develop an appealing profile of a person complete with a touching life story to lure single or divorced men with emotional problems, usually from the United States or Europe. He added that these scammers who’d often send spurious photos of attractive individuals to make victims fall in love with them.

Unfortunately, most scammers themselves were recruited with rosy promises of a legitimate job, but are instead given a quota of amounts they must raise from love or investment schemes, under pain of torture from Pogo hub operators. Those who want out have to pay from P150,000 to half a million pesos.

## Dubious distinction

Former PAOCC spokesperson Winston Casio said that based on knowledge of how scam hubs operate, the 32 teams in a building they had raided can earn around P350 million a week.

Despite a nationwide ban on Pogo operations in December last year, some of the licensees have stayed on, converting their business into alleged BPOs or gaming licensees in small rented spaces with a leaner staff.

Australia’s advisory against love scams underscores how the ban on Pogos has not rooted out a lucrative industry that has simply downgraded into less conspicuous schemes. This has reinforced the dubious distinction for the Philippines as hub of a growing list of criminal enterprises.

While diligent monitoring and surveillance have resulted in raids and the rescue of trafficked workers, the PAOCC and other government agencies must scale up their operations to prevent love scams from flourishing further.

It wouldn’t hurt to offer rewards to tipsters and, on top of deporting illegal foreign workers caught in raided hubs, initiate full prosecution of Pogos, local officials who might have looked the other way in granting business licenses and permits, as well as the owners of properties leased by these illegal businesses. A hefty fine and possible jail time should also be a deterrent.

## Online romances

Fast tracking the case against Alice Guo, who was behind one of the biggest Pogo complexes, would certainly telegraph how serious government is in striking down this menace.

The government, too, must assign more agents to check out dating sites and launch an information campaign to warn of love scams through ads on Facebook and other social media platforms where online relationships often start.

Netizens meanwhile must beware of red flags when using dating apps.

Watch out for “overly affectionate behavior” by someone you’ve just met online, and who starts professing love so soon after you connect.

Be careful as well with what you share online: never disclose personal information or send intimate photos to people you hardly know as this may be used to extort or blackmail you or steal your identity.

Do your research and make sure people you’ve met on dating sites are genuine. Look them up on Google, perform a reverse image search on their profile picture, or ask to meet them in-person or via video call.

Once you suspect a scam, take screenshots of conversations and profiles before blocking them. Report it to authorities, the online platform, and your bank when necessary.

More importantly, never send money to people you’ve met online no matter how seemingly attractive the investment they tell you about.

Unlike the song, when it comes to online romances, don’t keep believin’.