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# In the month of love, tech companies, regulators flag 'romance scams': What are they?

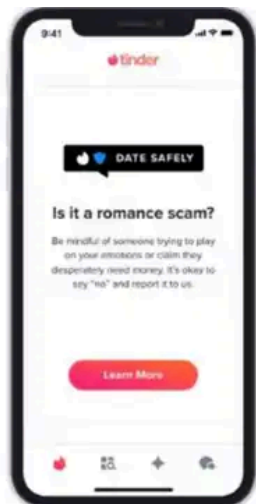
According to social media conglomerate Meta, romance scams are a common scheme in which scammers target people in a variety of ways – malicious texts or emails, dating apps, social media posts, discussion forums and more – under romantic pretenses.

Written by [Soumyarendra Barik](#), [Aanchal Magazine](#)  
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The Match Group, which runs popular dating apps like Tinder, Hinge, and OkCupid, in a 2023 blog post had said that it has taken steps to help prevent and warn users of potential scams or fraud using artificial intelligence (AI) tools to detect words and phrases and proactively intervene. (File)

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In what is widely viewed to be the month of love in popular culture, warnings about 'romance scams' are being issued by experts, social media companies and authorities about the tangled web of vulnerability, emotional connection, deceit, extortion and financial frauds. India has featured among the top three countries in the number of new 'romance scams' profiles opened in 2024, according to a Moody's report, with over three-fourths of Indians encountering fake profiles and AI-generated photos on dating websites, apps and social media.

India accounted for 12 per cent of the new romance scam profiles in 2024, behind only the United States and Nigeria, as per the Moody's report. Overall, Moody's recorded 1,193 new entities and people with potential ties to romance scams in 2024, a 14 per cent increase versus 2023.

"The US accounted for over a third (38 per cent) of new romance scam profiles among top 10 countries, followed by Nigeria (14 per cent), India (12 per cent), the UK (11 per cent), Malaysia (5 per cent), China (5 per cent), the Philippines (4 per cent), Brazil (4 per cent), Canada (4 per cent) and Australia (3 per cent)," it said.

In a recent survey, McAfee — an online protection and services solution provider — looked at the new dimension of artificial intelligence (AI)-based tools that may have added to romance scams, surveying 7,000 people in seven countries worldwide, including India. It found that 77 per cent of Indians said they'd come across fake profiles and/or photos that look AI-generated on dating websites or apps, or on social media. 39 per cent of Indians said their conversations with a potential love interest online turned out to be with a scammer, while 26 per cent said they'd talked with a potential love interest, to discover it was actually an AI-generated bot and not a real person.

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What are romance scams?

Romance frauds often take place through dating apps, but fraudsters may also contact potential victims through social media, according to a 2021 advisory of the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), which comes under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Fraudsters typically create fake online profiles designed to lure victims in.

Romance scams grew during the Covid-19 pandemic, as people were confined to their homes, many of them devoid of human intimacy and contact. Scammers

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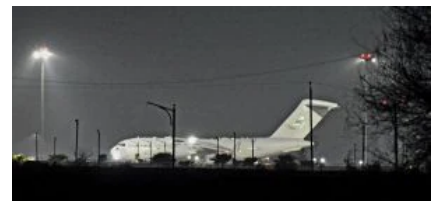
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thrived during the time, capitalising on people's isolation, which led to a greater need for emotional connection — leaving them vulnerable to scammers.

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"Fraudsters may use a technique called 'love bombing', where they contact victims frequently professing their feelings for them. The victims start to develop feelings in return, making them more likely to be defrauded," the I4C had said.

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The agency had detailed the modus operandi saying that such scammers ask the victims for money, gifts, bank details or intimate pictures / videos once they gain victims' trust. "Such fraudsters can also pose a risk to victims' personal safety as they are often part of criminal networks," it had said, asking people to avoid sending money, giving account details or important documents to unknown people and carefully controlling the amount of personal information shared on social media.

As per the USA's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), in romance scams, a criminal uses a fake online identity to gain a victim's affection and trust. The scammer then uses the illusion of a romantic or close relationship to manipulate and/or steal from the victim.

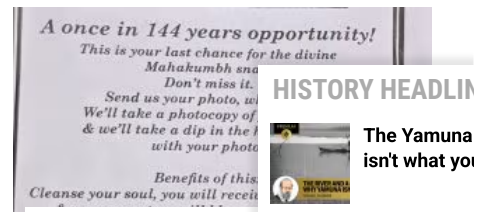
According to social media conglomerate Meta, romance scams are a common scheme in which scammers target people in a variety of ways – malicious texts or emails, dating apps, social media posts, discussion forums and more – under romantic pretenses. "In these cases, scammers would typically pose as attractive, single and successful individuals, often with a military or business background. They would send cold messages to many targets at once – in a typical spray and pray scheme – to initiate contact. If a target were to respond, the scammer would try to build trust over a period of time, ultimately asking for money or suggesting a fraudulent investment opportunity," as per Meta.

Moody's said that scammers often seek to launder the money generated from romance scams like sextortion via the traditional financial system. As a result, banks can face significant reputational risks and fines. Sextortion is a type of romance scam targeting teenagers, particularly boys. Perpetrators use fake profiles to solicit explicit images or videos from victims, then extort money by threatening to expose the images to friends, family or on social media.

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## How are tech companies responding to the issue?

Meta, whose social networking platforms Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook are used by at least 2 billion people globally, is a ripe place for romance scammers to hunt for their victims.



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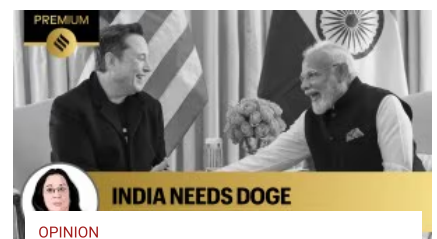
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Earlier this week, the company said it removes accounts that its automated systems find to be malicious, including those that impersonate others. On Facebook Messenger, the company said it rolled out 'Safety Notices' to caution users when they are chatting with someone whose account shows signals of suspicious activity, and who may be based in a different country. "We are testing similar nudges to teens on Instagram and will begin expanding them to more users in the coming months," Meta said.

On WhatsApp, people can silence calls from unknown callers to prevent unwanted contact, including from potential scammers, it added.

The Match Group, which runs popular dating apps like Tinder, Hinge, and OkCupid, in a 2023 blog post had said that it has taken steps to help prevent and warn users of potential scams or fraud using artificial intelligence (AI) tools to detect words and phrases and proactively intervene.

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"We have also implemented various ways to warn users of potential scams or fraud, from in app features to in-app education, and popup messages. To help further educate users on how to protect themselves on our apps as well as any online platform, we partnered with law enforcement and cyber crime investigators around the world to create a consumer education campaign on the different types of scams and how to identify common behaviors," the company had earlier said.

### What are the other frauds in focus?

Scammers are getting better at taking advantage of major events, leveraging AI to both conduct new types of scams and enhance well-established fraud techniques, Google India said in its blog dated February 11.

Enlisting the recent scam trends in India, Google said there are fake donation schemes and fraudulent travel bookings during the peak periods of charitable giving and travel around the time of major festivals like Diwali and religious celebrations. There are also AI-generated celebrity investment scams, wherein deepfakes with fabricated news articles and social media posts are used to promote fraudulent investment opportunities – commonly in cryptocurrency and trading platforms, it said.

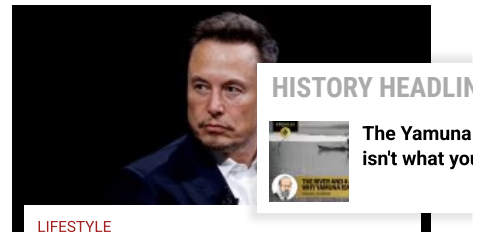
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Other scams include remote access tech support fraud where scammers pose as technical support staff from well-known companies, banks, and government agencies, creating a sense of urgency by claiming there's a problem with your device, account, or online security, Google said. Additionally, there are job scams under which job seekers are lured with promises of high-paying remote work and international opportunities, and scams involving predatory loan apps aimed at people who are seeking quick access to money, promising fast, easy loans with minimal paperwork.

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As on January 31, 2025, Google said it has blocked over 13.9 million installation attempts of potentially harmful apps, protecting 3.2 million devices that translates to over 309,000 unique apps prevented from being installed on these devices. Google has also partnered with the I4C under DigiKavach, and onboarded Google Pay, on to the National Cybercrime Reporting Portal that allows it to receive and share critical information to investigate fraudulent financial activities.

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