

Ogheneofejiro Godswill Uzokpa, a Nigerian national, will now spend seven years behind bars for his involvement in online dating scams. A court found him guilty of tricking twelve older ladies with elaborate romance plots, highlighting the growing issue of elderly financial exploitation. He admitted to conspiring with others and committing wire fraud, showcasing the intricate Nigerian scammer tactics used in targeting vulnerable individuals seeking companionship.

From March 2020 to February 2021, Uzokpa executed his shady schemes, focusing on Effingham County in Illinois. The charges against him detail how he and his unindicted co-conspirators employed various communication methods to contact potential victims in the U.S., including email, phone calls, and other chat services. Uzokpa's modus operandi involved targeting older ladies, sweet-talking them extensively. He typically posed as a doctor from the States or a high-earning professional, claiming to be working overseas to lend credibility to his lies.

Prosecutors revealed that Uzokpa had a knack for earning trust from his contacts, building romantic relationships over time. His victims, often solitary and seeking companionship, genuinely believed in the authenticity of these connections. In some cases, they even accepted his phony marriage proposals, thinking they were entering into a serious relationship. This emotional manipulation was crucial to his strategy, allowing him to exploit the tender and trusting feelings his victims developed.

After hooking his targets, Uzokpa would fabricate sudden financial troubles. He might claim that unexpected circumstances had locked him out of his bank account, creating a sense of urgency and immediate need for cash. The indictment states that he would then request his victims to send money for various fabricated costs or fees to resolve his financial woes. Uzokpa employed multiple payment methods, including checks, gift cards, wire transfers, and cashier's checks. He even tricked some victims into shipping money directly to his accomplices, further complicating the web of deceit.

The charges reveal that Uzokpa's partners played a significant role in this international fraud scheme. When victims wired cash, these accomplices would transfer a portion of the funds into Uzokpa's Nigerian bank accounts. Notably, they also used Bitcoin for transactions, demonstrating the sophisticated nature of Uzokpa's operation and its links to Nigerian fraud networks. Victims believed they were making loans, but Uzokpa never repaid a cent, leaving them in financial distress.

Romance scams, like the one Uzokpa perpetrated, affect people of all ages and genders. These scams originate from various sources, including emails, texts, or unsolicited phone calls. Recently, there has been a significant increase in scams initiated through matches on dating apps and social media platforms. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) reported that in 2021, people lost a staggering \$547 million to these heartless love scams. This figure represents an increase of over 80% compared to 2020, illustrating the rapid growth of this criminal industry.

To protect potential targets and promote online dating safety, the FTC has issued several critical reminders for navigating online connections. These romance scam red flags include:

- Scammers often claim to be from the victim's country but mention they're currently abroad for various reasons, such as charity work, military service, or oil drilling. This narrative is designed to explain their need for money.
- These tricksters are adept at sweet-talking and building rapport. However, they suddenly introduce an emergency, such as a health scare or legal trouble, insisting that the only solution is financial assistance from the victim.

By staying vigilant and informed, individuals can better avoid falling victim to these insidious romance scams. It's crucial to be aware of these tactics to prevent becoming another statistic in the rising tide of emotional and financial exploitation.

Scammers might also attempt to lure victims with promises of lucrative business opportunities, such as cryptocurrency investments. They create a sense of exclusivity, making victims feel they've been invited into a secret moneymaking club. However, these schemes invariably require an upfront investment from the victim.

A key aspect of romance scam prevention is understanding the payment methods favored by scammers. They often request wire transfers or gift cards because these transactions are difficult to reverse. They also pressure victims to act quickly, leaving little time for critical thinking or verification of the deal's legitimacy.

If you suspect you've been scammed, it's crucial to act swiftly. Contact the business through which you sent the money and report the incident to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) immediately. Prompt action may allow law enforcement to apprehend the perpetrators and prevent further victimization.

As part of the financial fraud penalties, Uzokpa received a seven-year federal prison sentence and must pay \$329,470 in restitution. This victim compensation is intended to partially rectify the financial harm caused by his fraudulent schemes. The sentence serves as a deterrent and highlights the serious consequences of engaging in such criminal activities.

The FBI, which plays a crucial role in investigating these cross-border cybercrime cases, emphasizes the importance of digital security for seniors. They advise older adults to be cautious when forming online relationships and to verify the identity of individuals they meet on the internet. The FBI also works closely with international law enforcement agencies to combat these transnational criminal organizations.

In conclusion, the case of Ogheneofejiro Godswill Uzokpa underscores the ongoing threat of online dating scams and the need for increased awareness and senior citizen protection. By understanding the tactics employed by scammers and recognizing the red flags, individuals can better protect themselves from falling victim to these elaborate and emotionally damaging schemes. As these international fraud schemes continue to evolve, it's crucial for law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, to adapt their strategies and collaborate globally to bring perpetrators to justice and safeguard vulnerable populations.

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