Inside a Romance Scam Investigation

How Criminal Networks Operate and How Cryptocurrency Enables Global Fraud

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Financial Cybersecurity Crime Investigation Conference

Why Romance Scams Matter

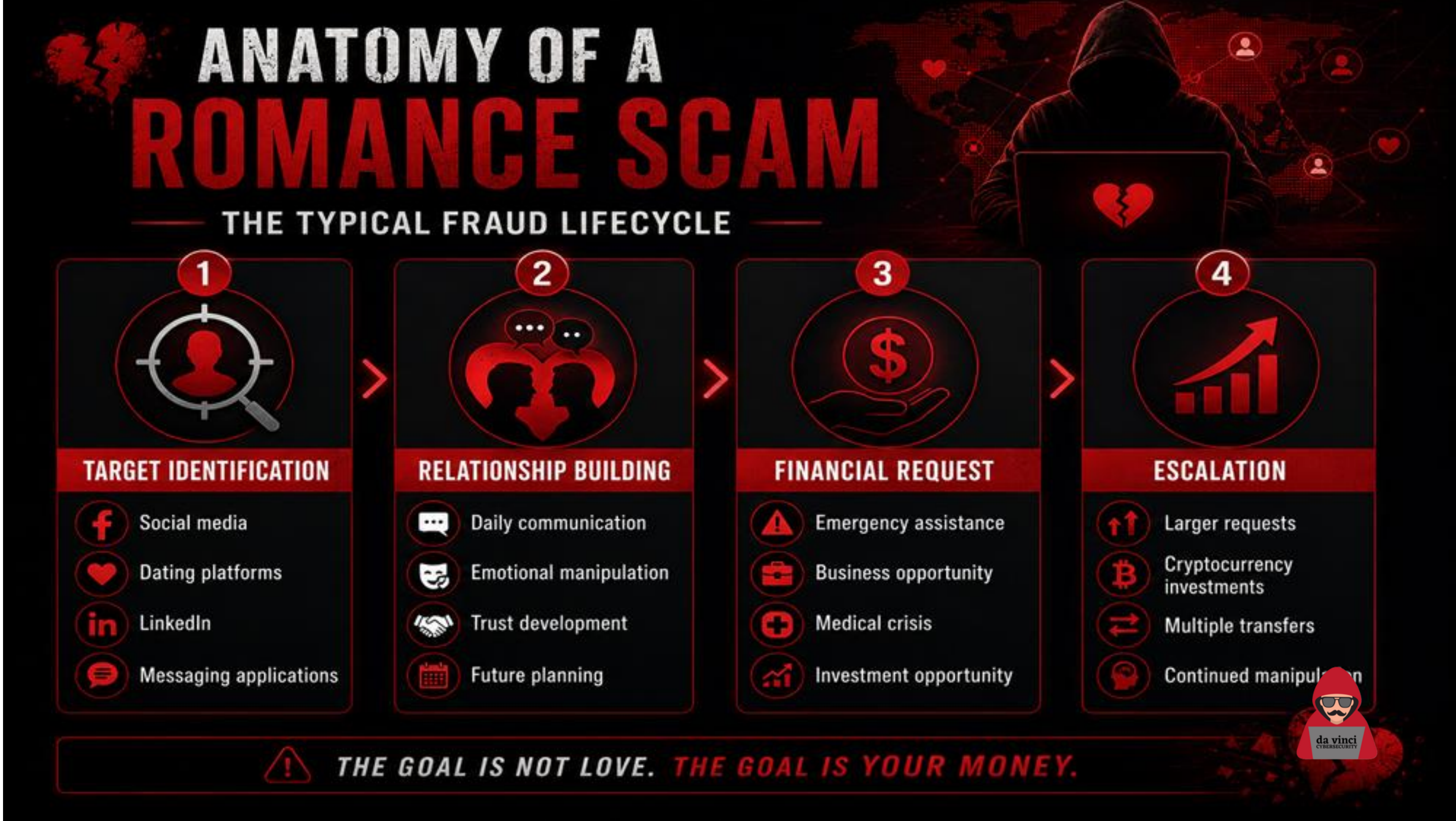
Global Impact

- Billions lost annually worldwide
- Victims span all age groups, especially the elderly
- Increasing use of cryptocurrency
- Organised criminal syndicates involved
- Significant underreporting due to shame

Investigator Focus

- Money laundering & mule accounts
- Human trafficking links in SE Asia
- Cryptocurrency abuse & AnyDesk duping
- Cross-border criminal operations
- Sophisticated deepfake & AI use

Romance scams are financial crimes disguised as relationships.


ANATOMY OF A
ROMANCE SCAM
THE TYPICAL FRAUD LIFECYCLE
1
TARGET IDENTIFICATION
Social media
Dating platforms
LinkedIn
Messaging applications
2
RELATIONSHIP BUILDING
Daily communication
Emotional manipulation
Trust development
Future planning
3
FINANCIAL REQUEST
Emergency assistance
Business opportunity
Medical crisis
Investment opportunity
4
ESCALATION
Larger requests
Cryptocurrency investments
Multiple transfers
Continued manipul
THE GOAL IS NOT LOVE. THE GOAL IS YOUR MONEY.
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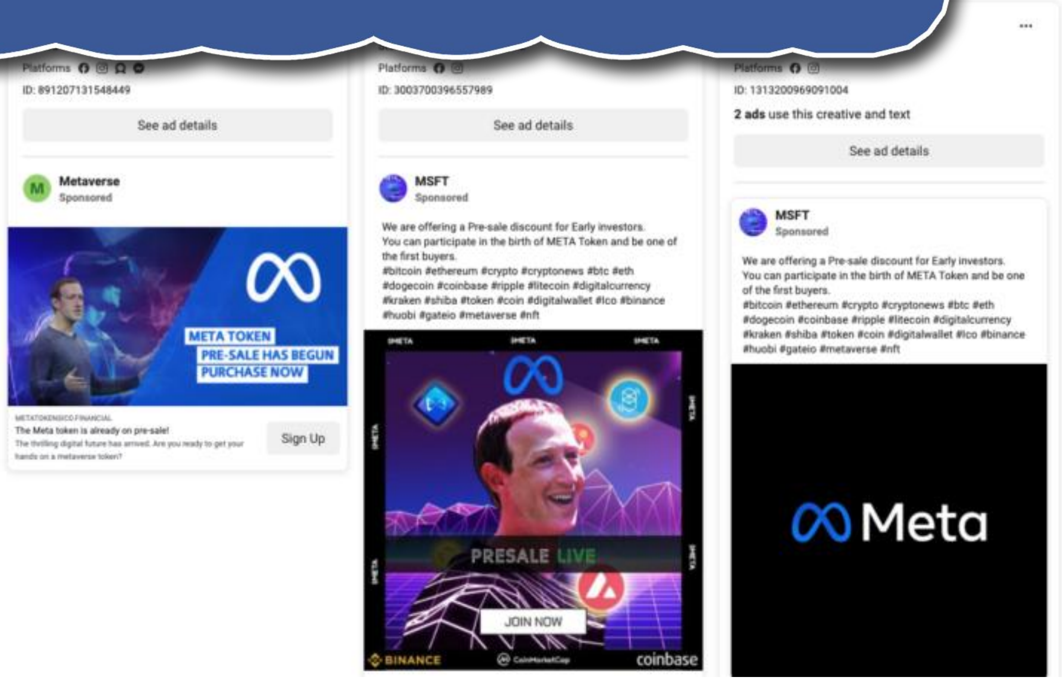

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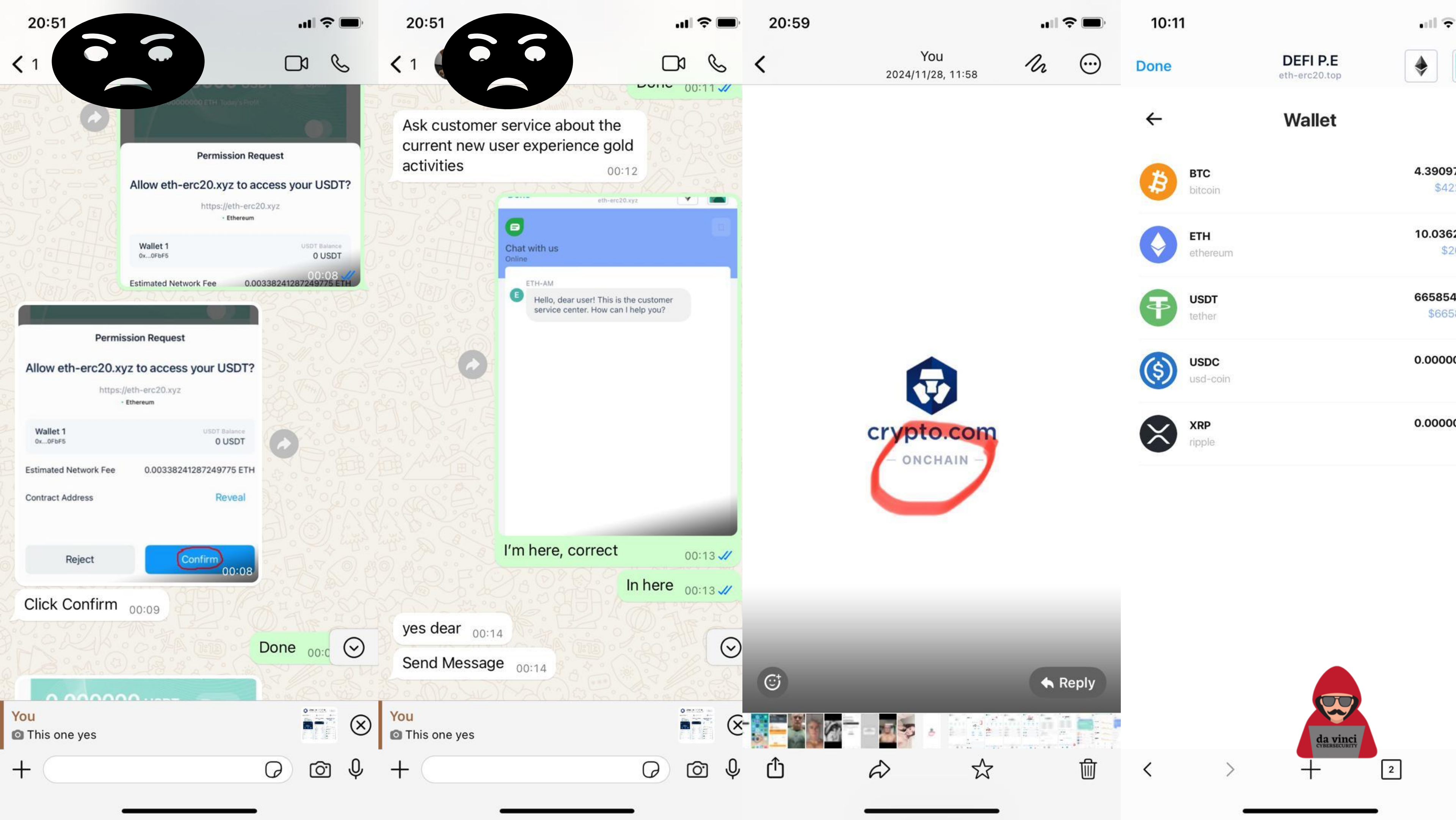
20:51
Permission Request
Allow eth-erc20.xyz to access your USDT?
https://eth-erc20.xyz
Ethereum
Wallet 1
0x...0FbF5
USDT Balance
0 USDT
Estimated Network Fee
0.00338241287249775 ETH
00:08
Permission Request
Allow eth-erc20.xyz to access your USDT?
https://eth-erc20.xyz
Ethereum
Wallet 1
0x...0FbF5
USDT Balance
0 USDT
Estimated Network Fee
0.00338241287249775 ETH
Contract Address
Reveal
Reject
Confirm
00:08
Click Confirm 00:09
Done
You
This one yes
20:51
00:11
Ask customer service about the current new user experience gold activities 00:12
eth-erc20.xyz
Chat with us
Online
ETH-AM
Hello, dear user! This is the customer service center. How can I help you?
I'm here, correct 00:13
In here 00:13
yes dear 00:14
Send Message 00:14
You
This one yes
20:59
You
2024/11/28, 11:58
crypto.com
ONCHAIN
Reply
10:11
Done
DEFI P.E
eth-erc20.top
Wallet
BTC
bitcoin
4.39097
ETH
ethereum
10.0362
USDT
tether
665854
USDC
usd-coin
0.00000
XRP
ripple
0.00000
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The Criminal Organisation Behind the Scam

TYPICAL CRIMINAL NETWORK STRUCTURE

Scam Centre Manage-ment	Script Operators	Money Mules & Crypto	Launderers	The Reality

MODERN ROMANCE SCAMS ARE HIGHLY ORGANISED CORPORATE ENTERPRISES.

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https://youtu.be/5XfCVk2gZCY?si=P0CRTplEjMTwl4XR

Victim Targeting Methodology

HOW VICTIMS ARE SELECTED

High-Value Indicators

OSINT Used by Criminals

CRIMINAL OBJECTIVE: IDENTIFY EMOTIONAL VULNERABILITIES AND FINANCIAL CAPABILITY.

Social Engineering & Psychological Manipulation

THE HUMAN ATTACK SURFACE

Techniques Used

Psychological Triggers

INVESTIGATOR CONSIDERATION: VICTIMS OFTEN REMAIN ATTACHED POST-FRAUD DISCOVERY.

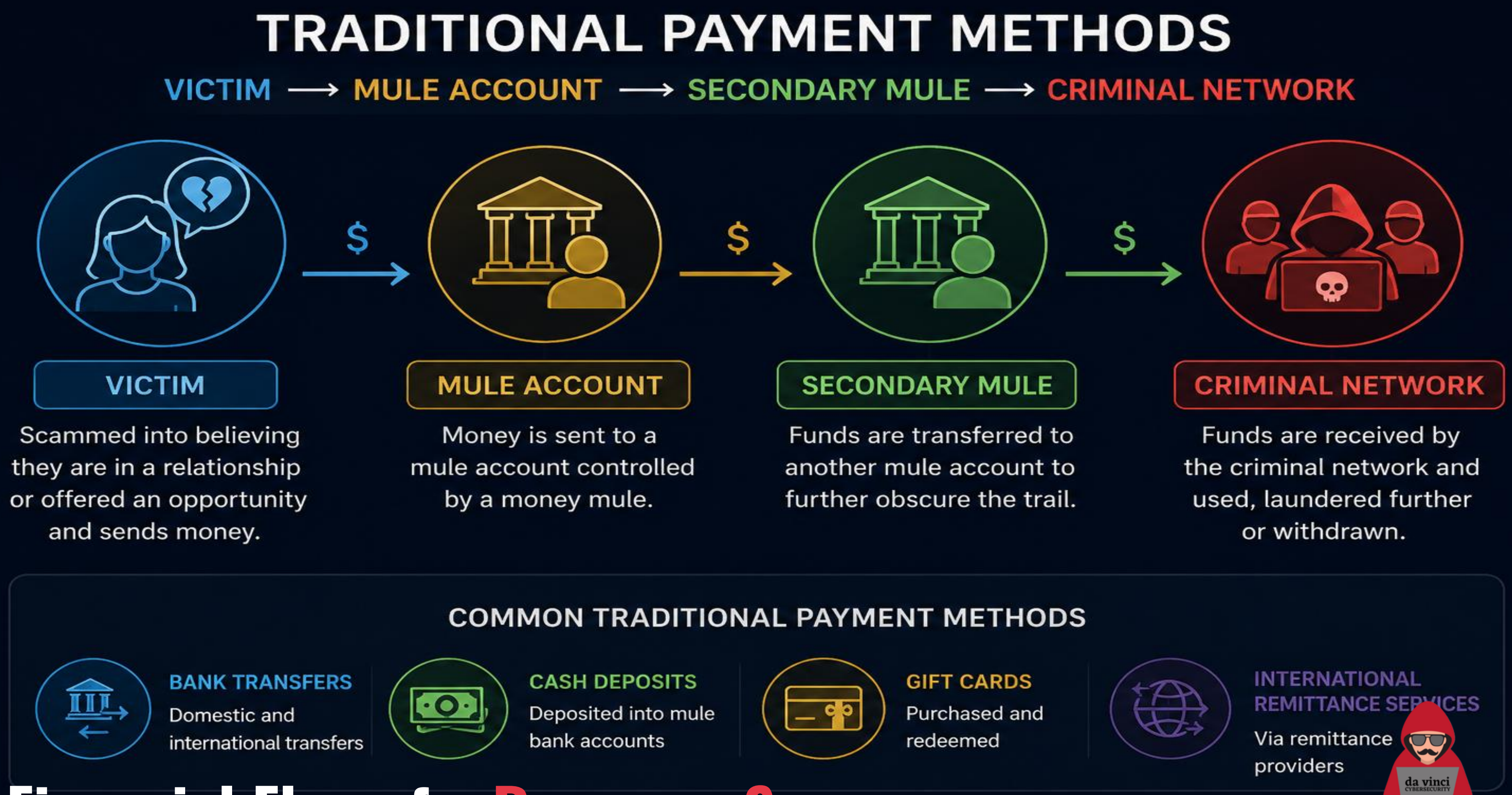
Digital Infrastructure Used by Criminals

THE TECHNOLOGY BEHIND ROMANCE SCAMS

Communication Platforms

Infrastructure

EMERGING THREAT: DEEPFAKE VIDEO CALLS ARE INCREASINGLY USED TO ENHANCE CREDIBILITY



Financial Flow of a **Romance Scam**

The Rise of Crypto Romance Scams

WHEN ROMANCE MEETS CRYPTOCURRENCY

Common Narrative

Victim is introduced to:

- Cryptocurrency trading
- Forex trading
- Investment platforms
- Wealth creation opportunities

Scam Promise & Reality

The Hook:

"I want us to build our future together."

The Reality:

The investment platform is controlled by the criminals. This model is often referred to as **"Pig Butchering"**.

PIG BUTCHERING SCAMS INVOLVE LONG-TERM GROOMING TO MAXIMIZE FINANCIAL EXTRACTION

Crypto Romance Scam Flow

FOLLOWING THE CRYPTOCURRENCY

- **Victim**
  Fiat Ingress
- **Legitimate Exchange**
  KYC Verification
- **Victim Wallet**
  Personal Custody
- **Fake Investment Platform**
  "The Pig Pen"
  Controlled by Criminals
- **Criminal Wallet**
  Aggregator
- **Layering Wallets**
  Obfuscation Layer
- **Mixers / Bridges**
  Cross-Chain Ops
- **Cash-Out Points**
  P2P / OTC / Dark Web

Common Assets: • Bitcoin (BTC) • Ethereum (ETH) • USDT / USDC • Tron Stablecoins

Blockchain Investigation Techniques

HOW INVESTIGATORS TRACE CRYPTO PROCEEDS

Evidence Sources

- Exchange records
- Wallet addresses
- Transaction hashes (TXIDs)
- Device artefacts (IP logs, selfies)
- Chat communications (Telegram/WhatsApp)

Blockchain Analysis

- Cluster analysis (Co-spending)
- Attribution analysis (Entity tagging)
- Wallet mapping (Visual flow)
- Flow tracking (Hop chains)
- Exchange identification (VASP discovery)

KEY QUESTION: CAN WE IDENTIFY WHERE THE CRYPTOCURRENCY ENTERS OR EXITS REGULATED ENVIRONMENTS?

Redacted

Money Laundering Through Cryptocurrency

CRIMINAL LAUNDERING TECHNIQUES

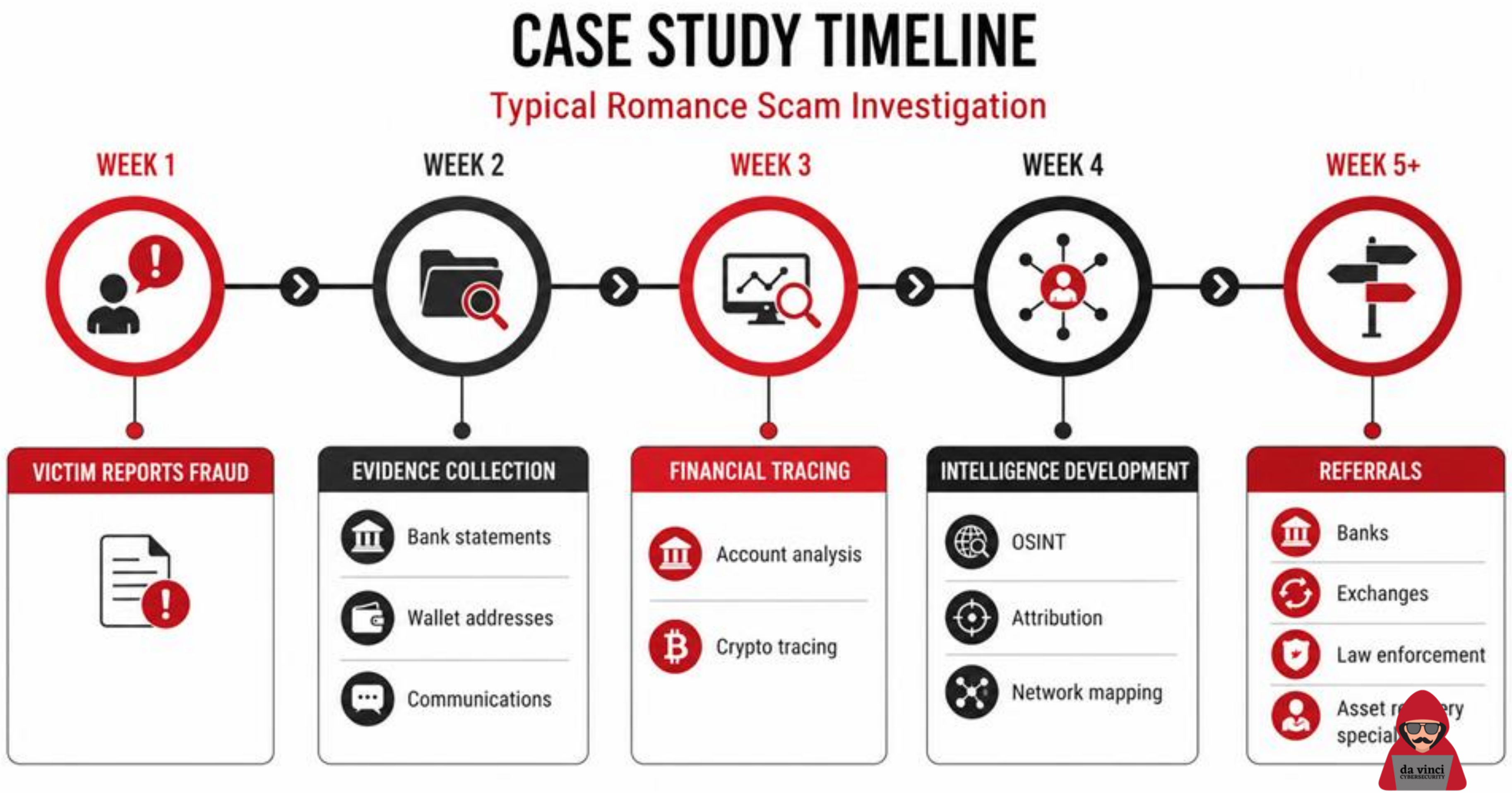
Layering Methods

- Multiple wallets
- Cross-chain bridges
- Decentralised exchanges
- Mixers
- Stablecoin conversions

Cash-Out Methods

- Exchanges
- OTC brokers
- Peer-to-peer markets
- Crypto ATMs
- International mule networks

INVESTIGATOR FOCUS: THE OFF-RAMP IS OFTEN WHERE IDENTIFICATION OPPORTUNITIES ARISE.



CASE STUDY TIMELINE
Typical Romance Scam Investigation
WEEK 1
WEEK 2
WEEK 3
WEEK 4
WEEK 5+
VICTIM REPORTS FRAUD
EVIDENCE COLLECTION
Bank statements
Wallet addresses
Communications
FINANCIAL TRACING
Account analysis
Crypto tracing
INTELLIGENCE DEVELOPMENT
OSINT
Attribution
Network mapping
REFERRALS
Banks
Exchanges
Law enforcement
Asset r ery
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Indicators Financial Investigators Should Watch For

RED FLAGS & BEHAVIOURAL MARKERS

Banking Indicators

- New overseas beneficiaries
- Multiple transfers to unknown parties
- Frequent international payments

Crypto Indicators

- First-time crypto purchases
- Large USDT purchases
- Transfers to unknown wallets
- Transfers linked to investment platforms

Behavioural Indicators

- Secrecy
- Emotional attachment
- Resistance to intervention
- Repeated losses

Building a Unified Defence

DISRUPTING ROMANCE SCAM NETWORKS THROUGH COLLABORATION

- Financial Institutions
- Crypto Exchanges
- Investigators
- Law Enforcement
- Private Sector

Romance scams are sophisticated financial crime operations. Follow the money. Follow the blockchain. Follow the network.

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