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Books

Do You Know Who Your Scammer Is?

Carlos Barragán ’24SOA explores the phenomenon of romance scams — and the growing industry behind it.

By
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|
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Across Lagos, Nigeria, thousands of young men work as romance scammers, using the internet to woo overseas victims under assumed identities and collectively raking in millions of dollars along the way. For his first book, *The Yahoo Boys*, journalist Carlos Barragán ’24SOA embedded in one of the city’s slums for months, getting to know four of the scammers (nicknamed after their yahoo.com email addresses) in an effort to better understand the humans behind the catfish.

This project started when your own mother fell victim to a romance scam. Can you talk about how it evolved into a book?

After my parents divorced, my mother met someone on Tinder that she believed to be an American soldier stationed on a mission in Syria. He promised to come to Madrid to meet her, and even to ship her gold bars that he had discovered in a terrorist stash. She became invested in the relationship, but my brothers and I figured out relatively quickly that it was a scam, and we used an app to trace her scammer’s emails to an IP address in Lagos.

This happened in 2015, when I was still a teenager. I didn’t even know that I wanted to be a reporter yet, let alone imagine that this might be a topic for an investigative project. But it did stay with me. My mother and I have always been close, but after she was scammed, there was friction between us. I couldn’t understand what she

was going through, how she had let it happen, and the depth of the loneliness she must have been experiencing.

By the time I was in my mid-twenties and working as a reporter in Spain, I got the idea to travel to Nigeria to try to find her scammer. I didn't find him, but in my search, I started spending time with some of the "Yahoo Boys" and realized that there was a story there. I wanted to know who they were, how they manipulated their victims, and why.

You profile four of the Yahoo boys in your book. What do they have in common? What led them to become scammers?

I decided to focus my research specifically on Ikotun, a very poor neighborhood in Lagos. All of my subjects live in an environment where extreme poverty is a part of daily life. Three out of the four of them come from broken families. They grew up in an environment where the word future is not used very often.

It was a choice to focus on this neighborhood: Scamming is prevalent across Lagos, and there are scammers who come from wealthier neighborhoods and more comfortable families. But I was interested in the way that the extreme poverty in Ikotun contributed to the rise of scamming there. For many of these men, I think it does feel like the only option.



Carlos Barragán (Ana Luis Andrade)

You only focus on romance scams in your books, and yet even within that category, there are a variety of different techniques that scammers use.

Right, they all have their specialties, and they essentially learn the trade from other scammers — even using recycled scripts. It's almost darkly comic to ask them about it, because they talk about scamming as if it's a job or college major. Like, instead of "I study civil engineering," it was "I'm a celebrity boy," or "I'm a blackmail boy." One thing to remember is that the rate of success for romance scams is actually very low. So they're trying these techniques on hundreds of people at a time. And it's always evolving. Once people become aware of a particular scam, it of course becomes less successful and the Yahoo boys have to come up with new ones. I finished my research in February 2025, and I'm sure many of the techniques have changed even since then.

One of your subjects, Chibuike, is a celebrity scammer — he impersonates professional wrestler Cody Rhodes to pursue a relationship with an Irish woman. Over the course of four years, he ends up scamming her out of

around 78,000 euros. It seems like it would take an incredible amount of delusion to believe that a celebrity is not only pursuing you, but also needs your money. How are celebrity scams so prevalent and successful?

You're absolutely right. For a long time, I couldn't wrap my head around some of the stories that I was hearing, and certainly celebrity scams were a part of that. But in some senses, celebrity scams are actually the origin story of Nigerian scams, which date back as early as the 1940s, when a 14-year-old boy posing as a Nigerian prince was soliciting money from gullible foreigners. The Nigerian prince trope resurfaced as an early internet scam as well — a wealthy prince had his fortune tied up and needed money to access it, with promise of financial returns for the victims. Those scams tapped into a sense of Western and even racial superiority. The idea that only you, as a white man, could save even Nigerian royalty,

I think there are still some elements of that in celebrity romance scamming today. People want to feel indispensable. If a celebrity needs their money, that's more enticing in some ways than a regular person needing their money. But I also think that a lot of it has to do with the complete confusion that a lot of people, particularly older people, still have around the internet. People don't understand the rules of the internet; in some ways it's still a totally new world. Whereas they could never imagine talking to Brad Pitt or Cody Rhodes in the real world, there's a sense that on the internet, maybe it *is* possible. And, of course, with extreme loneliness comes extreme delusion.

Romance scams feel particularly dirty because they're so personal. What did you learn about the victims of these scams? What do they have in common?

I think there's a stereotype of a scam victim as a poor, elderly white woman. And certainly there are many of those. But what I learned is that there are a large range of people impacted. Typically scam victims *are* older; they're not fully native with technology and don't entirely understand the rules. But both women and men are regularly scammed — men are just less willing to admit to it — and it doesn't necessarily have to do with class. There are a wide range of income brackets being scammed.

What the victims have in common is often past trauma: a divorce, the death of a loved one, an accident that left them unable to work. And they're lonely and seeking

connection. It’s no surprise that romance scams skyrocketed during the pandemic. In many ways, it’s an incredibly sad crime: the intersection between extreme poverty and extreme isolation. As Chibuike says in the book, “You just need to find time to give them attention. If you give them attention, you’ll get the money.”

How did the scammers feel about their victims? Did they get attached? Did they feel empathy for their victims?

I am often asked if they felt guilty for what they were doing. And the answer is probably, but as Biggy (one of the Yahoo boys profiled in the book) says, “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.” When you’re a criminal, there are certain questions that you can’t ask yourself. Having said that, I don’t think these young men are psychopaths, and I do think some of them had their own moral qualms. When I asked them about their victims, they would often tell me that they did have feelings for them. Chibuike would tell me that he was in love with his Irish victim while at the same time he was destroying her life. I didn’t buy it, but I do think that maybe part of him bought it. That it was what he needed to tell himself. I also think that when so many people are doing it, it becomes less a question of the morals of each individual scammer and more about the societal problems contributing to the exponential rise of scamming.

If it’s a societal problem, and it does seem to be, how do you fix it?

That is certainly *the* question in Nigeria. It’s a huge debate there. The rise in scamming is caused by an economic crisis that impacts everyone there. It’s not a coincidence that the peak in scams was during the pandemic, which was the worst economic downturn in Nigeria in generations, one that left massive unemployment and widespread starvation.

It’s interesting to compare scamming with drugs — in many low-income communities in the United States and Europe, a lot of young men are involved in selling drugs. What results is the ability to change their lifestyle, which becomes hard to walk away from. What’s the incentive to take a minimum-wage job that would do nothing to improve your life when selling drugs or scamming foreigners *does* have that potential? In both cases, I think it’s difficult for these young men to see and understand the consequences of their actions.

The only way to combat the rise in this kind of criminal activity is by improving larger socioeconomic conditions, which is of course not an easy solution.

Many of the Yahoo boys justify their actions by arguing that they are boosting economic conditions in Nigeria by bringing in foreign money. Is there any truth to that?

I only focused on one neighborhood, but yes, it is clear that the scam money is impacting the neighborhood. When you see a Lexus or a BMW in Ikotun, the money for that car obviously came from the US. I talked to a boutique owner who said that she would have to close her store if the scam money slowed down. Eighty-five percent of her business comes from Yahoo boys. And it does trickle down. Money from scamming is putting food on tables in Ikotun. It's paying for school fees. Does that justify what they're doing? I don't think so, but it would be disingenuous to pretend that it doesn't benefit the neighborhood economically.

But in the long term, scamming is hurting the long-term prospects for these boys. They spend their most productive years scamming and doing drugs. Then suddenly they're thirty and have no education and no skills and no future. It's not a long-term plan.

After spending time with the Yahoo boys, what is your advice for avoiding a scam?

When people talk about avoiding scams, I think they often focus granularly on the techniques — avoiding requests from people claiming to be celebrities, or soldiers, or very attractive strangers — and missing the bigger picture. The loneliness epidemic is driving people to seek connections however they can. After researching this book, I've found myself spending less time online and more time in the real world, and maybe that's an answer.

But I also think that the younger generation has a responsibility to the elderly, to make sure that they understand the rules and norms of the internet. My brothers and I tell my mom to text us with anything that seems out of the ordinary.

And above all: Never send money to someone you haven't met in person. No exceptions.

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