

I'm a relationship coach and an expert on catfishing. Here are the top ten signs your online date is a con artist (and the one red flag you must NEVER ignore)

By DR MAIRI MACLEOD

If Valentine's was a washout for you, with zero action happening anywhere from the letterbox to the bedroom, perhaps you're thinking about taking a deep breath and jumping into the online dating world.

But while many such daters do meet a loving partner, others find the whole process daunting, especially when a third of singles admit to lying online to impress suitors, with the worst using a sophisticated scamming technique known as catfishing.

This is when someone tries to lure you into an online relationship – perhaps to extract money, and often part of organised gangs – by pretending to be someone they're not.

As a dating coach and behavioural scientist, I can spot the telltale signs a mile off. There are still plenty of genuine chaps out there, but to avoid the out-and-out cheats, watch out for these warning signs...

Better looking than **George Clooney**

If his photo puts him outside your normal realm of experience, chances are the pic is from the social feed of a person who knows nothing about their image being used in this way. It may even be an **AI** invention.

Asks way too many questions

Be suspicious of requests for frequent and lengthy chats. Catfishers are always on the lookout for vulnerabilities – and the more you talk, the more you're likely to reveal.

They're keen to find out if you're lonely (you'll be more easily seduced) or widowed (you might be wealthy).

Has the same problems as you

One clever ruse is to mirror your experiences to gain your sympathy. For instance, revealing a hardship (a recent bereavement, perhaps) which closely resembles one you've had. If his story seems particularly painful, or strangely similar, ask yourself: 'Why is he telling me this so early on?'

Lives a very glamorous life

Catfishers often lie to appear more interesting. When his week has more excitement crammed into it than the average person sees in a year, get him to be more specific ('Tell me again, how do you know the Duke?'; 'Where exactly did you do your helicopter pilot training?'). Stay alert, as holes will appear in his stories.



Has no idea about Amandaland

Short sentences and grammatical errors could be a sign of catfishing in action. Many are based overseas, with a poor grasp of English.

If he's using ChatGPT, his messages will use flowery language or unusual phrases.

Drop some cultural references (what's his opinion on Amandaland, how excited is he about the celebrity version of The Traitors?). If he is UK-based and is genuine, he should be able to answer.

Saying he's working abroad for extended periods might be the truth, but this is also a common catfish tactic. Geographical distance provides him with an excuse for delaying any meetings.

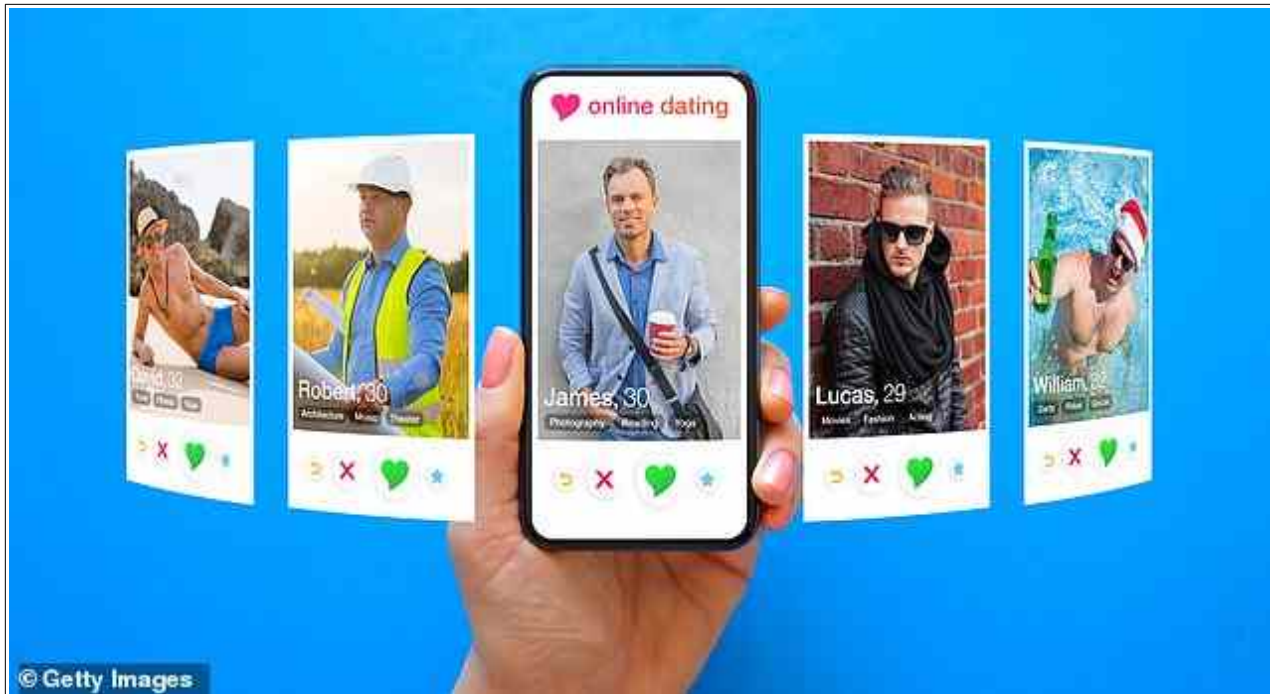
Their video-cam never works

If you've established a rapport, it's natural to want a video call. A video call can't protect you from a scammer, but at least you can see if he looks like the photo. Repeated excuses are red flags. Even if he's not a catfish, he's wasting your time.

He lovebombs you and calls you 'baby'

When you're being love-bombed, it's very easy to be swept off your feet and lower your guard. This is exactly what the catfisher wants.

Catfish strategies to watch out for include calling you 'baby' or 'honey' sooner than you'd expect, or planning your future together when you've barely exchanged several short messages.



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Quickly reveals his 'real' full name

Most people use a first name and reveal surnames only when you've built up a rapport. But if a scammer has stolen a fake identity, he'll be keen for you to Google the full name so you can feel reassured that he is who he says he is (when in fact he's not!).

Suggests 'going off the app' and texting

Many dating apps have software to pick out scammers by identifying catfish words and patterns of behaviour. That's why a scammer will urge you to take your chat 'off the app' and suggest WhatsApp or text instead.

He asks for money

No matter how tempting it might be to help, any request for money from someone you've met online is always a MASSIVE red flag. If he's begging for a loan or the price of his airfare to see you, never, ever part with your money!

Online masterclass with Dr Mairi: The 6 Secrets of Successful Online Dating Over 50, free for Inspire readers at www.datingevolved.com/masterclass