

These heartless scams take advantage of Covid-19 in China

Many crooks see the Covid-19 epidemic as an opportunity to lure many 'prey' and profiteering from the bewildered, frightened psychology.

Chen Xiaobai, a graphic designer from Changsha, Hunan (China), started running a WeChat team in early February 2020. The group is named Victim of online mask fraud. The group has about 170 members, all of whom were tricked into trying to buy masks online when the Covid-19 broke out.

Phishing is not new, but the fear revolves around Covid-19 and the scarcity of masks offers a huge opportunity for bad guys in a country with 800 million Internet users. China has 1.4 billion people but its daily mask production capacity is only 22 million, resulting in a serious shortage. Many people have no choice but to go to private channels like the WeChat group to buy masks.



Artwork: Internet

Chen opened the WeChat group after she became the victim of a crook on the first day of the Chinese New Year holiday. News of the epidemic began to spread, the 21-year-old girl eagerly wanted to buy a mask for her family. Because every online shopping platform was out of stock, Chen went on Weibo and was offered a stranger by the seller. After completing the exchange on WeChat, she transferred 1,000 yuan (3.3 million) to this person via the application to buy 100 masks and never received the goods.

Chen said that despite knowing the risks, she still trusted him by calling through WeChat and speaking in the same hometown. She was even more confident after he posted on WeChat that he would donate a mask to Wuhan. 'Why would a philanthropist cheat on another,' Chen said.

As of February 24, more than 7,500 Covid-19 scams with amounts to more than 192 million yuan (\$ 28 million) have been reported in the Mainland, according to China's Ministry of Public Security and Tencent. WeChat operating company. Of these, 96.9% are related to masks. In Hong Kong, hundreds of people also fell into the trap of an organized gang on Facebook.

Responding to the South China Post in the morning, six victims - including Chen - said they were tricked into wanting to buy masks for their families. In some cases, they want to donate masks to medical staff.

Alan Lin, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, said: 'Social media makes people think that they know and trust each other, but it also tends to make people skip or forget to verify important information. '

Lin is the founder of Hubei United, a volunteer group that opened in January 2020 to help NGOs and individuals verify medical supplies and access people in the Hubei 'mind'. , donating masks for them. He argued that the convenience of Internet platforms allowed scams to take place on a larger scale than before.

Even very cautious ones find opportunities on unorthodox channels due to special circumstances. That is the case of Steve Mo, manager at a construction company in Changde City, Hunan. He wanted to buy a mask to give back to workers so he spent 300 to buy masks on WeChat.

Chinese businesses often close during the Chinese New Year, but this year, the holiday lasts longer than usual due to the Covid-19 epidemic. From mid-February 2020, representatives of the National Development and Reform Commission said businesses should be equipped with disinfectants, temperature gauges and masks before reopening.

Mo said he didn't know where to go to find a mask. Instead of 300 masks, the 44-year-old man received two soaps of soap, similar to everyone in the WeChat group. That made him angry and worried because he did not know if he could buy enough masks for workers in time.

Mr. Mo said: 'Although 600 yuan is not a big problem, mask fraud takes place so widely that they become a social problem'.

In addition to fraud on e-commerce platforms, China also witnessed hackers using malware and phishing attacks on people seeking Covid-19 information to increase. According to the Xinhua News Agency, the National Computer Virus Emergency Response Center found hackers taking advantage of topics like 'new corona virus' to trick people into clicking links in emails, WeChat groups, and compromising personal information. personal documents on the computer.

Michael Gazeley, co-founder and CEO of cybersecurity firm Network Box, says hackers are 'unconscionable'. They do not care about the disease, but in fact, the more confusing the situation is, the more people click on the link before prompting and from there, the more money hackers make.

Network security service provider Trustwave illustrates a case in which the recipient receives an email that appears to be from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) with a link about new Covid-19 cases. However, when clicked, the victim was redirected to a page that required entering the Outlook username and password. Some brave people have followed and given scammers their information.

According to Gazeley, about 30 to 35% of users share identities for different services. Therefore, if trapped, everything of the victim will be seriously affected, from bank accounts to network security.

To combat such scams, China's Alipay app provides tools that help users determine whether a QR code is real or deceptive. WeChat also closed dozens of accounts that were fraudulent and asked people to report illegal accounts.

Chen hopes to use social media to raise people's awareness about phishing scams. She opened the group because many people asked for advice after she shared her experience. However, she warns such a support group is at risk. 'Because it is the only person who manages the group, it is difficult to know if each member is a real victim or looking for an opportunity to cheat others,' she admits.

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