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Don't believe all you read online

Scammers prepared to exploit photos and use fake accounts to snare victims

GEORGE TOWN: Several photos of Penang state executive council members dining with principals of a purported investment scheme were good enough to convince an engineer to part with a few thousand ringgit.

The engineer said a few friends told him they had invested in the scheme, which promised 400% returns.

He invested RM8,000 and is still waiting for his money after two years.

"My friends told me state exco members cannot publicly show that they are in the investment scheme.

"Now that I think back on it, I can't understand why I didn't double check.

"My friends showed me the pictures and I believed that the politicians were also in the scheme.

"When you are in a group and many people confirm that these exco members are in the business, you tend to believe it too," said the engineer, who only wanted to be known as Jerry, 35.

It was a different story for freelance model Najihah (not her real name).

After wrapping up a photo shoot in August, she had received messages from friends congratulating her, while some questioned why she was featured in an advertisement on a popular e-mail service website for housewives to make money from home.

"They sent me a screenshot of the advertisement and my heart sank. Sure enough, the

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advertiser had used one of my Instagram photos," she said.

When Najihah clicked on the advertisement, it brought her to a website which claimed that it could help Malaysian housewives make money from home by doing data entry jobs.

She said her friends advised her to report the matter to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and the police, but she did not act immediately as she was bogged down with work.

"When I checked a few days later, the advertisement was gone. I didn't press the

issue further, but I did change my Instagram page setting to private from then on," she added.

Universiti Sains Malaysia associate professor in criminology Dr P. Sundramoorthy said he became a victim when his name was used for a fake Instagram account.

"I don't use Instagram but about three years ago, there was suddenly an account of me making strong comments about traffic matters on the campus as the university's director of security," he said.

Sundramoorthy lodged a police report and the campus' security team managed to trace the fake account to a student, who was subsequently suspended for a semester.

"The student was good at hiding himself online, but he made a mistake in one of the fake posts that led us to him," he added.

Sundramoorthy said when victims fall prey to such impersonations, they need to own up to some degree of gullibility.

"When celebrities endorse products, they are paid by the millions before you see their faces in advertisements in mainstream media or on billboards or posters at malls.

"Advertising agencies abide by strong industry codes and need to see legal proof of such endorsements before they design the ads.

"The trouble is that in the online world, this is not so regulated," Sundramoorthy added.

Scammers have been known to use names

and photos of tycoons, including Tan Sri Vincent Tan and AirAsia Group chief executive officer Tan Sri Tony Fernandes.

In June, Tan warned the public to be wary of an investment scam using his name, which claimed that he invested US\$250mil (RM1bil) in a project called "The Formula".

"I would like to categorically deny that I have made any investment in this project or that I am in any way involved in it.

"There is absolutely no truth to this report, which I believe has been put out by unscrupulous persons to deceive the public," he said in a statement.

In 2016, Fernandes, who was wrongfully accused of endorsing an advertisement on get-rich-quick schemes, clarified that he had nothing to do with it.

The schemes put up on social media showed Fernandes revealing his "secret" of making as much as US\$300 (RM1,250) per day from home.

For online advertisements, the MCMC has introduced the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Code.

Part 3(b) of the code states that no advertisement should mislead by inaccuracy, ambiguity, exaggeration, omission or otherwise.

Should anyone find such an ad, a report can be filed with the MCMC and the advertiser may face among three penalties: a warning, a fine of up to RM50,000 and/or be required to remove the advertisement.