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Navigating the treacherous online scam minefield

KUALA LUMPUR: Fuelled by a global pandemic and social media, online fraud and scams are increasing and show no signs of abating, even as governments and communities step up efforts to increase public awareness.

The Bukit Aman Commercial Crime Investigation Department said Malaysians reported losses of RM650,329,897 involving sale, loan, investment, phone and love scams in 2022 – an increase from RM509,881,921 in 2021 and RM503,883,501 in 2020.

Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission chairman Salim Fateh Din said the number of cases remain high, with 12,000 reported between January and April.

A recent survey by Southeast Asian market research and data analytics firm Milieu Insight involving 2,500 respondents in five countries, including Malaysia, found almost half have been scammed.

The July 6 survey found the most common scams Malaysians fall victim to were buying and selling scams at 39%, investment scams at

► ‘It will never happen to me’ mindset makes internet users careless and vulnerable, say experts

36% and phishing scams (35%), where unsolicited messages are received via email or other platforms disguised as communication coming from a legitimate source.

The survey also found victims shared a common belief on scams.

“The thought of ‘it will not happen to me’ is one of the greatest challenges. We often underestimate the risk of falling victim to scams,” said Milieu Insight assistant marketing director Sonia Elicia.

Experts said such a mindset, that only stupid, greedy and naive people would fall for a scam, makes it difficult for people to develop and practise good and safe habits online.

Scams are now very sophisticated and intricate, so it is not surprising if one falls for it, Bernama reported.

Online safety experts said there

are many common mistakes people make that could leave them vulnerable.

They cited three main areas that people are careless about when online – photos, locations and personal security.

The experts said people must be careful when using the check-in feature on social media or enabling location-sharing in their social media settings when they post something.

Security Matters (SecM) director of operations Ivan Lai said many social media users, especially the younger generation, like to share locations when travelling or trying out a new restaurant or hanging out.

“If they want to post their location, they can do it after they leave the place (to be safe),” he said.

He advised users to turn off

location-sharing for the app or to use a virtual private network to mask the location.

Elicia said in Malaysia, a lot of scams happen by luring victims into phoney websites that take their money and sell them nothing.

They are also lured into providing personal information that is used for identity theft or tricked into clicking on links and downloading malware.

“Chief among these are surveys or contests that request personal information and ‘catfishing’, in which the scammer poses as someone else and befriends the victim, intending to take money, personal information or other valuables.”

She added that the top platforms or ways Malaysians get scammed are through social media sites such as Facebook and TikTok, usually involving identity theft.

To identify scam calls, online safety experts recommend using caller ID apps such as Whoscall and Truecaller.

The free versions of both apps collect phone numbers that have been identified as scam numbers.