

STANDING on his doorstep chatting to the man who had come to buy his mobile phone, Shabbir Awan had no sense that he was in imminent danger. But when his attention was momentarily distracted, the 'buyer' sprinted off with the iPhone 6 without paying for it.

Without thinking, 30-year-old Shabbir chased the thief down the respectable Essex street. He caught up, but then saw that the man had a knife. As his assailant lunged the blade towards his chest, Shabbir instinctively put his hands up — which perhaps saved his life.

The man then sped off in a getaway car with the phone, leaving his victim, who'd advertised his mobile on the classifieds website Gumtree, bloodied, shaken and needing 20 stitches in one of his fingers, which had been slashed from top to bottom.

Shabbir spoke out this week following the news that another Gumtree user was killed last weekend after trying to sell his Apple laptop on the site. Three teenagers had offered to buy 28-year-old teaching assistant Michael Adegbite's MacBook for £200, but instead stabbed him to death after trying to steal it.

by Antonia Hoyle

A Mail investigation has shown that these are far from isolated cases. Police at the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau say they receive 250 crime and fraud allegations a week connected to Gumtree, which was founded in 2000 and hosts up to two million adverts a month.

Meanwhile, recent research by the Citizens Advice Bureau found that one in six products or services bought through Gumtree was a scam or potential scam.

'Gumtree is unquestionably one of the favourite and most prolific resources used by criminals,' says Chris Emmins, co-founder of KwikChex, an online investigations and authentication business. 'It is inherently dangerous for consumers — both buyers and sellers — and the utmost caution is required when using it.'

Mr Awan, who works for a finance company,

bought his iPhone 6 for £700 earlier this year but decided to sell it when his wife became pregnant with their second child.

'We wanted to free up some cash for a new buggy and baby clothes,' he says.

He advertised it on Gumtree for £550, having used the site before to sell a TV and a bicycle.

Once an advert, with a set price, has been posted on Gumtree, potential buyers contact the seller then generally go to their house to pick up and pay for the goods.

But while sellers have to be registered, buyers aren't required even to provide the site with their names and addresses, so no one knows who they are.

'Anonymity and the ease of setting up false identities is the root of the problem,' says Chris Emmins. 'It means criminals are rarely held accountable for their actions.'

Five days after posting his advert, Shabbir received a call from a man calling himself Adam. 'He said he wanted to come and look at the phone that evening,' says Shabbir.

At 8pm, 'Adam' turned up at Shabbir's house in Ilford, Essex. 'He was in his late teens or early 20s,' says Shabbir.

He gave the buyer his phone to inspect but, as the pair talked, Shabbir's two-year-old daughter wandered out into the hallway. As her father ushered her away, the buyer ran off with the phone.

Shabbir gave chase. 'As I caught up with him, he turned and stabbed me with a sharp object I can only assume was a knife,' he says.

Instinctively, he put up his left hand to protect himself and the middle finger caught the full force of the blade.

'It felt like my finger was exploding and there was blood everywhere,' says Shabbir.

Before he had a chance to catch his breath, a royal blue Saab passed. The back door opened, the thief dived in and the car sped off.

A witness called 999 and the police, who arrived two minutes later, took a



Attacked for an iPhone:
Shabbir Awan needed 20 stitches

statement. 'They said such incidents were common and lots of people were victims of robberies when they tried to sell on Gumtree,' says Shabbir, who was taken to King George Hospital in Ilford to have his injuries treated.

A fortnight later and his stitches have been removed, but he is still taking antibiotics and is reliant on prescription painkillers. His psychological scars are greater still.

'I've always known there were unscrupulous people operating on Gumtree, but I never imagined one would turn up at my house and rob and stab me,' he says. 'Had I not instinctively put my hand up, this man would have struck my chest and I could have been killed.'

'I haven't felt safe since — for days afterwards, I couldn't sleep. I will never buy or sell anything on Gumtree again.'

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Dark side of website millions use to buy and sell second-hand goods

Stabbed. Ambushed on a travellers' campsite. Robbed of life savings. All after using Gumtree



buyers are, too, as John Godwin, 36, discovered last November when he was ambushed by two people he believes were planning to rob him after he responded to their advert.

John had answered an ad by a woman named Joanna, who was selling an iPhone 6 for £420.

'I'd sold three of my own phones and a camera on the site before, so I thought it was a good way of getting a bargain,' says John, who works as a photographer.

'When I called Joanna, she sounded respectable and gave me her home address in Kent from which to collect the phone that evening.'

However, when John, a father-of-one, drove from his London home to the postcode that 'Joanna' had given him, there were no houses in sight. Instead, he was surrounded by darkness punctuated by the shadows of caravans.

As he sat in his car wondering what to do, a battered red Ford Fiesta drove up. A girl in her mid-20s, wearing a tight-fitting vest and leggings, and a 6ft 5in man also in his 20s, wearing a tatty vest and tracksuit bottoms, emerged.

'The woman said she was Joanna, but her English accent had been replaced by an Irish brogue,' says John. 'The man seemed to be her

boyfriend and looked like he weighed around 20st. It dawned on me that I was on a travellers' site.'

When John asked 'Joanna' if he could see the iPhone, she ignored him, while her companion walked round to the passenger side of his car and tried to force the door open. 'Fortunately I'd locked it, but he started clawing at the window, trying to pull it down,' says John.

'I realised that rather than wanting to sell me an iPhone, this was a set-up, and these people were planning

'It was a set-up... I drove off as fast as I could'

to rob me of the £420 cash I had brought with me.

'I put my foot on the accelerator and drove off as fast as I could.'

John didn't report the pair to the police because he didn't think it was worth it. 'But I've learned never to buy anything on Gumtree again, and would advise anyone who does to get as much information about

the buyer as possible before deciding whether to proceed with a face-to-face meeting.'

In an increasingly digital age, crime doesn't have to involve violence. 'Scammers are swindling people out of hundreds of thousands of pounds by posting false products and services online,' explains Gillian Guy, chief executive of Citizens Advice.

'Con artists are preying on those still trying to get back on their feet from the recession.'

Billie Gianfrancesco knows this only too well, having responded to a bogus job advert on Gumtree. Within minutes, thieves had emptied her bank account.

'I didn't suspect for a second that anyone on the site would target people looking for a job,' says the 25-year-old, who is now a senior account executive for a communications company. 'I am appalled and frightened that someone could



Scammed out of £1,000: Billie Gianfrancesco

to receive a response within hours. 'I was told my application had made it to the next stage of the process which required me to download and fill in a form,' says Billie.

But when she tried to download the document on her laptop, the screen ground to a halt. 'I couldn't fully open or close the document. The internet wouldn't open and I couldn't shut any programs down,' she says. 'I assumed my laptop was at fault and decided to take a screen break without thinking more about it.'

Half an hour later, she returned to her laptop and decided to check her bank balance before continuing with the job application.

The home page of her Nat-West bank account looked exactly the same as usual, but a message popped up to say there was a security problem with her account and she needed to reset all her passwords.

'I was frustrated by the inconvenience more than anything else,' she says.

Billie changed all her account details, but still couldn't access her account.

So she logged on using her boyfriend's computer — only to discover the £1,000 she'd saved for a deposit on a flat had been taken.

She believes the job application form contained a virus which allowed hackers to access her account.

'I cried hysterically, convinced I would never get the money back,' says Billie. 'As soon as it happened, I knew I'd been the victim of online fraud and that it had happened after applying for the job through Gumtree. I foolishly hadn't bothered to check anything about my potential employer — but neither had Gumtree, and they should be more thorough.'

Fortunately her bank, Nat-West, reimbursed her stolen £1,000. 'I was too embarrassed to go to the police or tell Gumtree at the time,' says Billie. 'But I now believe they should be taking far more steps to stop hackers targeting job-seekers, who are often financially and emotionally vulnerable.'

'I'll never use Gumtree again and would urge everyone else to avoid it, too.'

A spokeswoman for Gumtree told the Mail they can't verify the 'genuine nature' of every user, but added: 'We ensure we comply with the law. We use a range of advanced technology to identify suspect ads and react to non-genuine sellers.'

She said that buyers can remain anonymous because, 'similar to any classifieds buying model, anyone answering an advert wouldn't need to show their proof of identity'.

Gumtree insists safety is of paramount concern: 'Our top priority is the security of our users. We work relentlessly to keep criminals off our site and encourage anyone who falls victim to a crime to report it immediately to the police and Gumtree.'

'Our dedicated safety team will investigate it and take action, working with the authorities to help secure convictions and blocking offenders from our site.'

Job-seekers should 'meet prospective employers in person and research the company through independent sources beforehand,' the spokeswoman continued.

'We provide a range of advice guides via the Gumtree website on how to find a job safely. If you have any doubts about an employer or an advert, we always recommend contacting the Gumtree team straight away.'

'Millions of people use Gumtree every month and we are pleased to say the vast majority have a safe and successful experience.'

Sadly, however, it seems there is a sizeable minority who don't.

Pictures: JOHN GODWIN/JNVSUALS

have accessed my bank account in this way.'

Billie was looking for work in May 2012 after graduating from university. 'I was broke and desperate for work,' she says.

After applying unsuccessfully for hundreds of graduate positions, she turned her attention to Gumtree — the second largest UK listings site for jobs — instead. Spotting an advertisement for an office administration job on the minimum wage, she applied and was delighted